

Lecture 2

Precommitments of the Interpreter

5 PRECOMMITMENTS OF AN INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

How you start and where you begin will greatly determine where you go and how you end.

1. COMMITMENT TO A HIGH VIEW OF SCRIPTURE. (MATT. 5:17-18; 2 TIM. 3:16-17; 2 PET. 1:20-21) IT IS INERRANT AND INFALLIBLE.

- a. What the Bible says, God says.
- b. What God says, we must say.

2. CONVICTION OF THE PROFITABILITY OF ALL SCRIPTURE. (2 TIM. 3:14-17)

- a. No one area of the Bible is any more inspired than another (i.e., The words of Jesus are no more authoritative than the words of Paul. The epistles are no more inspired than the genealogies of the Old Testament.) - (There is equal inspiration, but degrees of importance.)
- b. All interpretation and teaching, therefore, must be lashed to the Scriptures, not rooted in something else (e.g. reason, experience or tradition).

3. CALLING TO RIGHTLY DIVIDE THE WORD OF TRUTH. (2 TIM. 2:15)

- a. If you cannot say, “This is what God says,” you have nothing to say. You have no word apart from The Word.
- b. The purpose of hermeneutics is to make clear the meaning of a passage.
 - 1. What the author is saying is what we are after. We honor “authorial intent.”
 - 2. We hope to show what difference God’s Word should make in the hearer's life.
 - 3. What God wants the hearers to know is what will change their lives.

4. COMMITMENT TO DO SOME CLEAR, HARD THINKING ABOUT WHAT SCRIPTURE MEANS AND, HOW IT APPLIES (James 1:22-25).

- a. The interpreter must think hard and think well.
- b. The interpreter must be thorough and hard working.
- c. The interpreter must understand thinking, how thought processes work, the nature of thinking itself, and how those who hear you teach will hear you, understand, and incorporate truth.

**5. WILLINGNESS TO BE CONFINED TO THE INTENTION OF THE AUTHOR.
(2 TIM. 4:1-5)**

- a. What the Bible says through the divine/human authors is what the interpreter must pursue to understand and teach.
- b. If your understanding and teaching is outside the author's intent, it is outside the intent of the Holy Spirit and therefore outside the realm of divine authority.
- c. The assistance of a "hermeneutical triangle."

Figure #1

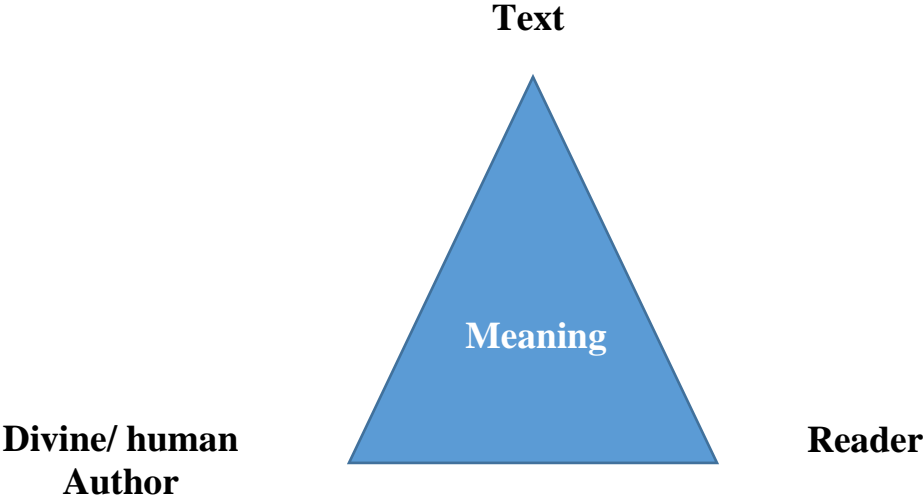
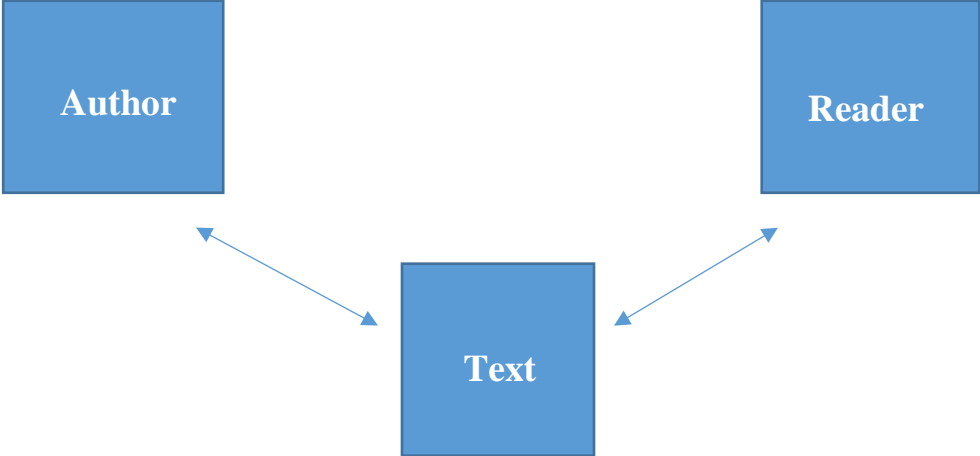


Figure #2



Observations from Bob Stein, “The Benefits of An Author-Oriented approach to Hermeneutics” (*JETS* 44/3 (Sept. 2001) 451-66). The full article may be accessed online as a PDF under the same title.

1) In all communication three distinct components must be present. These components are: the author, the text, and the reader. Linguists tend to use the terms: the encoder, the code, and the decoder. Still another set of terms that can be used is: the sender, the message, and the receiver.

2) At the beginning of the twentieth century the general assumption was that the author was the determiner of a text’s meaning. The text meant what the author of the text consciously willed to convey by the words he or she had written. Texts were understood as a form of communication, and in communication we seek to understand what the author of that communication seek to convey.

3) In the 1930’s, however, a movement arose called the New Criticism. This movement became the dominant approach toward literature in the universities until the 1970’s. This approach no longer sought meaning in what the author intended to convey, but in the text itself as an independent entity. Texts were interpreted as independent units in total isolation from their authors and the historical situation in which they were written. The New Criticism totally disconnects the text from the original author. It is as if texts magically appeared on the scene without father, mother, or author.

4) More recently we have witnessed a hermeneutic that seeks meaning, not from what the author consciously willed to say or from what the text means in isolation, but from the reader. This reader-oriented criticism argues that it is the reader who gives meaning to a text. The “written text in itself . . . is dead or in hibernation. The text only comes to life through the reader. He revives the text, he gives meaning to it.” A text is in effect an open reality that stimulates us to give meaning to it. [In fact every reading constitutes a new reading and can generate new meanings]

5) Stein argues against these approaches (as do we) and states, “Meaning,” as I understand it, involves a construction of thought. It is a property of thinking persons. On the other hand, a text is an inanimate object. It is a collection of symbols on papyrus, vellum, paper, stone, metal, etc. A text consists of unthinking, lifeless material. Being lifeless and inanimate, it does not have the ability to think. It cannot construct a thought or an idea. Thus a text cannot

“mean” anything, because it cannot intend or purpose anything. Whereas a text can convey the meaning of a thinking, willing person, it cannot possess meaning in and of itself, because it cannot think. To ask “What does this text mean?” is to ask of an inanimate object what it cannot do, that is, to construct a thought or idea. Authors and readers can think but not paper and ink, stone and groves, or papyrus and symbols. Thus I find it impossible to conceive of a text “meaning” anything. Usually what people are saying when they speak of the meaning of a text is “the meaning of the author that text conveys.” [Underlining mine]

6) With respect to the present reader-response emphasis it should be noted that this view is indeed a product of our time. It is interesting to note that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the miraculous nature of various biblical accounts was no longer accepted, scholars desperately sought to find meaning somewhere other than in what the author consciously willed to convey. Since critical scholarship did not believe in the historicity of narrative accounts containing miracles, it could not accept what the author consciously willed to convey by those accounts. In other words, it could not accept the author’s willed meaning.

7) Rationalism sought to reconstruct the event of the text to find out “what really happened.” In so doing, scholars hoped to discover in the “actual” event something that would prove “meaningful.”

8) One group sought meaning in the author’s accommodation to his reader’s mythological world view. According to this view, the author consciously sought to teach his readers moral truths through mythical traditions that his readers would believe but that he personally knew were untrue. This option encountered minimal success because it was obvious upon reflection that the Biblical authors truly believed what they were writing was true.

9) The question of where the meaning of a text is to be found is the major issue that faces Biblical scholarship today. This hermeneutical issue, however, affects far more than just Biblical scholarship. There is great debate today as to whether the constitution of the United States means what the original authors of the constitution meant or what the judges of the Supreme Court make it mean.

10) The greatest argument in favor of understanding the author as the determiner of a text’s meaning is that it is the common sense approach to all communication. One cannot have a meaningful conversation or even a serious debate about this issue without assuming this. [Underlining mine]

11) Much of the interpretative process that people perform almost unconsciously is based on the hermeneutical principle that the goal of interpretation is to arrive at what the author of a text meant.

12) Not only is the author-oriented approach to meaning the common sense approach to interpreting the Bible, I believe it is also the one that best fits an evangelical view of the Bible's inspiration. If we believe that the "meaning" of the Bible is inspired, where is this meaning to be found? [Underlining mine]

13) A popular expression often used to argue against the view that the author is the determiner of meaning is the "intentional fallacy." They argued that it is impossible for a person to climb into the mind of an author and experience what he was going through when he wrote. This is, of course, true. One cannot relive an author's "mental acts" while writing. However, we define the "meaning" of a text not as the process that an author went through in writing a text, but rather what the author consciously willed to convey by the words he or she has given us in the text.

14) *Meaning*. I define meaning as: "The paradigm or principle that the author consciously willed to convey by the sharable symbols he or she used." In this definition we should note that meaning is associated with the words of the author in the text. It is not concerned with the thought processes or mental acts an author experienced while writing the text.

15) Because the author willed this meaning at a particular time and place in history, this meaning can never change.

16) *Implication*. Implications refer to "Those submeanings of a text that legitimately fall within the paradigm or principle willed by the author, whether he or she was aware of them or not." Implications flow out of the paradigm of the author's meaning. As a result, we as readers do not create them but discover them. (Ex. Eph. 5:18 and Paul's prohibition against intoxication).

17) *Significance*. Significance refers to "How the reader responds to the willed meaning of the author." Significance involves the reader and his or her reaction to the author's meaning. In its simplest form, significance is the reader's "yes" or "no" to the author's meaning. Some will connect this insight to application. Stein states, "application" is a compound of the "elements" implication and significance.

18) *Subject Matter*. The term "subject matter" refers to "The content or 'stuff' talked about in the text."

The advantages of author-determined meaning: A summation

These include: 1) it is the common sense approach to all communication; 2) any special hermeneutic suggested for works of “literature” have the difficulty of defining what “literature” is and defending why literature should be treated differently than other forms of communication; and 3) the main argument against author-determined meaning, the “intentional fallacy,” confuses the willed meaning of an author with the process or “mental acts” which produced the work.



“Scripture is the foundation of the Church: the Church is the guardian of Scripture, When the Church is in strong health, the light of Scripture shines bright; when the Church is sick, Scripture is corroded by neglect; and thus it happens, that the outward form of Scripture and that of the Church, usually seem to exhibit simultaneously either health or else sickness; and as a rule the way in which Scripture is being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the church.”

-Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Quoting John Albert Bengel)

“The Church and the Scripture stand or fall together. Either the Church will be nourished and strengthened by the bold proclamation of her Biblical texts or her health will be severely impaired.” “Should the ministry of the [word] fail, one might just as well conclude that all the supporting ministries of Christian education, counseling, community involvement, yes, even missionary and society outreach, will likewise soon dwindle, if not collapse.”

-Walter Kaiser (pgs 7-8)

12 PERSONAL THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS FOR THE STUDENT OF SCRIPTURE

1. I must do more than quote a Scripture and then depart from it; in-depth study and understanding of the text is absolutely necessary.
2. The best way to teach biblical knowledge is to interpret correctly and apply personally what I have learned.
3. Both *kerygma* (preaching) and *didache* (teaching) are essential in gospel proclamation; Scripture and especially the New Testament does not maintain a clear distinction between the two.
4. Preaching and teaching God's Word is the primary responsibility of the pastor, but it is the responsibility also of every believer.
5. When biblical instruction is neglected, the people's morals become unclear and/or readily decline.
6. Throughout history God has used the dual elements of preaching and teaching to reform the church.
7. The content of Scripture must not be sacrificed for eloquence in delivery, though one can and should complement the other.
8. Since Bible study is waning, the laity must be trained how to study the Bible on their own as they imitate expository methods used by their preachers and teachers.
9. Faithful teaching equips and inspires people to work and witness.
10. Faithful teaching demands a high view of Scripture (verbal, plenary in its inspiration).
11. Faithful teaching encourages people to bring their Bibles to church; it encourages them to read passages to be taught beforehand and to study them afterwards as well.
12. Through faithful and comprehensive teaching, important problems will be handled in a systematic fashion; sharp and uncomfortable truths are more readily accepted when addressed from the Bible in the natural course of study.

THE BIBLE

This book contains: The mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners and the happiness of believers. Its doctrine is holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved and practice it to be holy.

It contains light to direct you, food to support you and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword and the Christian's charter.

Here, Heaven is opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened at the Judgment, and be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward faithful labor, and condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

*'Tis the Book that has for the ages
Lifted man from sin and shame;
That great message on its pages,
Will forever be the same.'*

Never compare the Bible with other books. Comparisons are dangerous. Books speak from earth; the Bible speaks from Heaven. Never think or say that the Bible contains the Word of God or that it becomes the Word of God. It IS the Word of God. Supernatural in origin, eternal in duration, inexpressible in value, infinite in scope, divine in authorship, regenerative in power, infallible in authority, universal in interest, personal in application, inspired in totality. Read it through. Write it down. Pray it in. Work it out. Pass it on. It is the Word of God.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

2 Tim 3:16-17

“Forever, O Lord, Thy Word is settled in Heaven.”

Psalm 119:89

“Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee.”

Psalm 119:11