HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Toward an Evangelical Hermeneutic
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 2:15
Questions:

- How did people interpret the Bible during the “Dark Ages”?
- What changed at the Reformation?
- What are the basic principles of historical-grammatical hermeneutics?
- What are common interpretive mistakes that we should avoid?
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Outline:

A. History of Interpretation (cont.)
B. Principles of Historical-Grammatical Hermeneutics
C. Hermeneutical Fallacies
A. History of Interpretation (cont.)

4. Medieval Hermeneutics
5. Reformation Hermeneutics
6. Modern Hermeneutics
4. Medieval Church (600–1500)
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

100 B.C.  A.D. 100  A.D. 500  A.D. 1500  A.D. 2000

Ancient Jewish

NT Church

Early Church

Medieval Church
**Summary:** This period does not see positive development regarding hermeneutical method. With the rise of the institutional authority of the Church, the medieval period saw a gradual shift from the priority of Scripture to the priority of Tradition.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Jerome’s translation of the Scriptures into Latin (Vulgate) was the official Bible used by the Church. The original languages were rarely consulted, if at all.
Glosses, the commentaries of the medieval period, did not struggle with the text itself, but were merely marginal notes in the Scriptures taken from the Church Fathers. In essence, interpretation of the Bible was bound to what the early Church Fathers taught, not personal struggles with the text.
During this period, the average lay person was not encouraged to read the Bible at all for fear that heresy would be promoted. Eventually, tradition and the Scripture could only be interpreted by the teaching authority of the institution called the Magisterium.
Historical-Grammatical Hermeneutics

Council of Toulouse (1229 A.D.)

Canon 14. We prohibit also that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or New Testament; unless anyone from motive of devotion should wish to have the Psalter or the Breviary for divine offices or the hours of the blessed Virgin; but we most strictly forbid their having any translation of these books.
“It is evident from experience, that the holy Scriptures, when circulated in the vulgar tongue, have, through the temerity of men, produced more harm than benefit... eminently dangerous to souls... undermining the very foundations of religion.”

—Pope Pius VII (1800–1823)
In the late Middle Ages, Tradition as handed down through apostolic succession began to be promoted not simply as an interpretation/summary of Scripture (regula fide), but as a second avenue of revelation altogether, containing essential information not found in Scripture.
Four-sense hermeneutic of the medieval period

Jerusalem

- Literal: The ancient city
- Allegorical: The Church
- Moral: The faithful soul
- Anagogical: The heavenly city
The letter shows us what God and our fathers did.

The allegory shows us where our faith is hid.

The moral meaning gives us rule of daily life.

The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.
During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, dense ignorance prevailed concerning the content of Scripture: there were some doctors of divinity who had never read the Bible through its entirety.

— Henry A. Virkler

5. Reformation (1500–1800)
Summary: With the invention of the printing press (1450), history saw a great revival of the intellectual life and literacy among the common man. The church began to return to a study of the original biblical languages. People became less reliant upon the interpretations of the institutionalized Church for their understanding of Scripture.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

The subjectivity of the allegorical method and the eventual abuse of the authoritative method caused many people to return to the sources themselves (ad fontes—“to the sources”). With this return to the sources came a resurgence of the literal or historical-grammatical method of interpretation. There also came a great realization of the abuses of the institutionalized Church and hence came the Great Reformation.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

The Reformers believed that the Scriptures must be understood in their original historical, grammatical, and literary context. Martin Luther rejected the allegorical interpretation, calling it “dirt,” “scum,” and “obsolete loose rags.” John Calvin believed that allegory was an invention of Satan meant to obscure the plain and true meaning of Scripture.
The Reformers believed in the perspicuity of Scripture—that the most important doctrines of Scripture were clear enough for any layman to understand. This was in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic belief that the Scriptures have a hidden meaning that can only be found by the institutional Church’s magisterial authority.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

“It is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”

—John Calvin
1. Exegetical Statement
“What did it mean then?”
- Historical interpretation
- Grammatical interpretation
- Contextual interpretation
- Literary Interpretation

2. Theological Statement
“What is the timeless truth taught?”

3. Homiletical Statement
“How does it apply to us?”
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

6. Modern Hermeneutics (1800–present)
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Ancient Jewish

NT Church

Early Church

Reformation Church

Medieval Church

Modern Church

100 B.C.  A.D. 100  A.D. 500  A.D. 1500  A.D. 2000
Summary: The rise of rationalism caused people to begin placing reason above Scripture. No longer did Scripture interpret reason, but reason interpreted Scripture. Liberalism and the higher critical method challenged the historicity of Scripture—the very foundation of historical-grammatical hermeneutics.
Some retreated to fundamentalism, which downplayed the role of man in Scripture; many joined the liberals, while others sought to find Christ not in the Scriptures themselves, but through a subjective encounter with Him as they read the Scriptures (neo-orthodox). This paved the way for today’s full-blown subjective postmodern hermeneutic where the Scriptures mean whatever you want them to mean (reader-response).
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

To be sure, many evangelicals have carried on the tradition of the reformers in seeking the literal meaning of the Scriptures, but, sadly, to be evangelical these days does not say as much about one’s hermeneutical method as it should.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutical Gleanings from Church History:

• When inspiration is strongly believed, biblical docetism (ignoring or downplaying the human in favor of the divine) often becomes a factor.

• When inspiration is downplayed, exegesis without principles and application becomes standard.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• The only consistently reliable hermeneutic is that which takes the text at face value, looking to the authorial intent in the historical and grammatical context.

• Allegorical interpretation must be rejected, since it is purely subjective, having no hermeneutical guidelines by which to test the interpretation.

• Respect must be given to the rule of faith (regula fide).

• The Scriptures are to be interpreted in light of Christ (Christocentric).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>God</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>God-Man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|          | • Dominated by a search for a second deeper meaning  
|          | • Interaction with God brings correct interpretation  
|          | • Purely subjective  
|          | • Spiritual  
|          | • Allegorization  
|          | • Letterism  | • Finds no other meaning than the historical  
|          |       | • Interaction with the texts brings correct interpretation  
|          |       | • Purely objective  
|          |       | • Historical  
|          |       | • Higher criticism  | Spiritual meaning is found through a study of the original intent of the author, looking to history, grammar, and literature, keeping the writings in their context and letting them speak for themselves.  

HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

B. Principles of Biblical Interpretation
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• Christians are the only ones who can truly understand and submit to text through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

1 Cor. 2:14–16

“The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is understood by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.”
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Recognize your preunderstandings
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Theology
- Religious tradition
- Culture
- Family background
- Class
- Race/Ethnicity
- Sinfulness
- World Events
- Political beliefs
- Education
- Generation
- Emotional makeup
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• Keep the text in its literary context
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Book</strong></th>
<th><strong>Genera</strong></th>
<th><strong>Purpose</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Theological history of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</td>
<td>Narrative and Law/legal</td>
<td>Theological history of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 &amp; 2 Samuel, 1 &amp; 2 Kings, 1 &amp; 2 Chronicles, Ezra,</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Theological history of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah, Esther</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Emotional praises to God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Wise living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Obadiah,</td>
<td>Prophecy</td>
<td>Call Israel to repentance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Theological history of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romans, 1 &amp; 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,</td>
<td>Epistle</td>
<td>Didactic and pastoral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 2 Thessalonians, 1 &amp; 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>letters written to explain theological teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; 2 Peter, 1, 2 &amp; 3 John, Jude</td>
<td></td>
<td>for the Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelation</td>
<td>Apocalyptic</td>
<td>Message of hope for the church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Keep the text in its intentional context (authorial intent)
Jn. 20:30–31

“Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”
Theological Hermeneutics

Prov. 1:2–6

To learn wisdom and moral instruction, and to discern wise counsel. To receive moral instruction in skillful living, in righteousness, justice, and equity. To impart shrewdness to the morally naive, and a discerning plan to the young person. (Let the wise also hear and gain instruction, and let the discerning acquire guidance!) To discern the meaning of a proverb and a parable, the sayings of the wise and their riddles.
Rom. 1:15–16

“Thus I am eager also to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel . . .”
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

1 Jn. 5:13

“I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• Keep the text in its grammatical context
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Keep the text in its historical context
Historical issues to consider:

- Author: Who wrote the book?
- Date: When was it written?
- Audience: Who was it written to?
- Circumstances/Purpose(s): What was going on at the time? Why was it written?
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• Keep the text in its cultural context
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Political
- Geographical
- Economic
- Legal
- Agricultural
- Military
- Family
- Dietary
- Architectural
- Clothing
- Social
- Philosophical culture
- Religious
  - Judaism
  - Christianity
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Keep the text in its stylistic context
  - John: simple writing style, extreme use of esoteric concepts (light, dark, word, love, hate)
  - Paul: logical, passionate, and excited writing style
  - James: pastoral and often sarcastic
  - David: passionate and emotional
  - Luke: detailed and historical
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

• Keep the text in its context of revelation (progressive revelation)
Theological Understanding

Adam  Abraham  Moses  David  Isaiah  Matthew  Paul  John

OT

NT
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

C. List of Common Hermeneutical Fallacies
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL
HERMENEUTICS

– Preunderstanding fallacy: Believing you can interpret with complete objectivity
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Incidental fallacy: Reading incidental historical texts as prescriptive rather than descriptive
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

Prescriptive: Information that provides the reader with principles that they are to apply to their lives.

Descriptive: Incidental material that describes the way something was done but is not necessarily meant to encourage the reader in the same action.
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Obscurity fallacy: building theology from obscure material
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Word study fallacies: etymological root fallacy, illegitimate totality transfer, selective use of meaning
Etymological root fallacy:
Looking to the root etymology of a word to discover its meaning. The problem with this is that etymology can often be deceiving, such as in the English word “butterfly” taken from “butter” and “fly.” An etymological study of this word only confuses the current usage. The same can be said of the word “good-bye,” which is taken from the Anglo-Saxon, “God be with you.” When someone says “good-bye,” it does not necessarily (if ever) mean that they are calling a blessing of God’s presence to be with you.
Illegitimate totality transfer (ITT):
Bringing the full meaning of a word with all its nuances to the present usage. Take the Greek verb *phileo*. The UBS dictionary of the Greek New Testament lists these possible meanings: have deep feeling for; love; like (to do or be something); kiss. Some interpreters would commit an ITT by using all of the nuances that the word *phileo*, has when, in fact, it usually only carries one meaning that is determined by the context.
Have deep affection

To like

To kiss

phileo
Selective use of meaning:

This is like the ITT in reverse. Instead of the word carrying all the possible nuances, the interpreter will select which nuance he or she likes best, when, again, the context determines the nuance, not the interpreter.
To like

Have deep affection

To kiss

phileo
HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL HERMENEUTICS

- Eisegetical fallacy: reading theology into the text
Maverick fallacy: believing that you don’t need anyone but the Holy Spirit to interpret the text
Pastor Joe from the pulpit:
“Dear friends, I have a message for you from God’s word. I assure you that I have not consulted any commentaries, lexicons, so-called theologians, or any other outside resource that might be fraught with unfounded traditions. I have relied upon the Holy Spirit alone as I interpreted the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, rest assured, the message that I have for you today is from God alone.”
“The Church throughout the ages, constituted by the Holy Spirit, provides accountability; it offers the arena in which we can formulate our interpretation. Such accountability guards against maverick and individualistic interpretations.”

—Craig Blomberg

*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 86