

Accurately Handling God's Word

“Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah; so he asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30).

Philip met an Ethiopian man traveling on a lonely, dusty road. Seated in his carriage he was reading—but not understanding—Isaiah 53:7-8. He needed an interpreter. God had one waiting on the side of the desert road. God is always on time. He had the right man, at the right time, and at the right place.

The Ethiopian asked, “Was Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?” Philip used this Scripture, and many others to tell this hungry soul the good news about Jesus. As they rode along, they came to some water, and the man asked, “Why can't I be baptized?” They stopped and Philip happily baptized him. The Ethiopian had an open heart, and was willing to ask the right questions. Philip was an obedient preacher prepared with the right answers. The questions asked, and the answers given in this story reveal an important process. Welcome to a lesson about “Hermeneutics.”

Herman Who?

You may be thinking “Herman, who?” We are not talking about Mr. Herman New Ticks but of a Greek word (“*hermeneuo*”) meaning “to explain” or “to interpret.”

Acts 14:8-18 is an amusing narrative about Barnabas and Paul. They prayed for a man who had never walked. God healed him. When the locals saw the miracle, they shouted, “The gods have come down in human bodies.”

They concluded that Barnabas was the Greek god, Zeus and Paul was Hermes because he was the “chief speaker.” Hermes (or Mercury) was the messenger of the Greek gods responsible for speech, writing, and directing traffic. Sculptures of Hermes stood at street corners to mark directions (much like traffic or roadway signs used today).

What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics refers to (among other things) correctly interpreting the Word of God. *Webster's Dictionary* defines “interpretation” as “an explanation produced by interpreting” or “the essence of meaning.”

Hermeneutical principles work hand-in-hand with other Bible study methods. They help us to accurately understand, preach and teach God's Word.

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:16, *NASU*).

Is Hermeneutics for everyone?

Hold on! You may be thinking, “This is a lesson for preachers and Bible teachers. I’m neither. Could I skip over this lesson?”

The answer is, “No!” Everyone needs to understand the Bible. God’s Word is accessible in thousands of languages so we can read and comprehend it in the language of the heart—our mother tongue.

The principles taught here will help you to study, understand, and apply God’s Word. The process of biblical interpretation is not difficult. Let me share a secret. You are already involved in interpreting God’s Word. That is right. We use hermeneutics often and may not even realize it.

Each time we open the Bible and read a passage we take up two roles:

1. Reader
2. Interpreter

As we examine a verse we immediately consider how it relates to us. Silently each reader asks, “How is this relevant to my situation? How does it apply to me?” If what we read does not apply we leave it behind.

Those who work among diverse language groups are familiar with interpreters. They explain the spirit and heart of what is said in a way local people can comprehend.

“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8).

Read distinctly	Read carefully and thoughtfully. Do not rush through God’s Word.
Gave the sense	Interpreted the words from the original into the language of the people.
Caused to understand	Explained the meaning.

As one missionary preached he noted something unusual. He would speak a few words and the interpreter would take much longer to interpret. The preacher looked at him and asked, “Are you interpreting what I am saying?”

The interpreter responded, “Yes, and I am greatly improving upon it.”

Preachers interpret God’s Word but should never “greatly improve upon it.” The Bible is complete—addition and/or subtraction are not permitted.

Misinterpretation and/or misunderstanding of Scripture abound. Extra-biblical teachings (false doctrines) are widespread. Wrong ideas lead people away from truth. Some doctrines are designed to gain popularity and acceptance. Always look for God’s approval and not that of men (2 Timothy 2:15). Beware of false teachers who twist scriptures to conform to their flawed thinking (Philippians 3:1-2; 2 Peter 3:16-17). A fundamental rule of interpretation is to never make the Bible mean what it never meant to the author (2 Peter 1:20). To make the Bible say something that was never intended is abuse, misuse, and exploitation. This is not pleasing to God (See Revelations 22:18-19; Galatians 1:8-9).

Here is some advice for those who preach and teach God’s message: “And remember why he is waiting. He is giving us time to get his message of salvation out to others. Our wise and beloved brother Paul has talked about these same things in many of his letters. Some of his comments are not easy to understand, and there are people who are deliberately stupid, and always demand some unusual interpretation—they have twisted his letters around to mean something quite different from what he meant, just as they do the other parts of the Scripture—and the result is disaster for them. I am warning you ahead of time, dear brothers, so that you can watch out and not be carried away by the mistakes of these wicked men, lest you yourselves become mixed up too. But grow in spiritual strength and become better acquainted with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:15-18, *TLB*).

Perhaps, you do not claim to be a preacher. Do not feel left out. Here is some guidance for you.

“Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds, about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth” (Ephesians 4:14, *NLT*).

John Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress* refers to the House of the Interpreter. This alludes to the House of God. People come to church anxious to hear God’s Word preached and interpreted for them. They want the Bible to be explained and applied in a way they can understand.

The Interpreter that Christian meets invites him into his house, and commands his man to light the Candle. In this we learn that the preaching of God’s Word brings illumination to the hearer.

“As your words are taught, they give light; even the simple can understand them” (Psalms 119:130, *NLT*).

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalms 119:105).

Once inside Christian sees the picture of a serious person hanging against the wall. This is what the picture looked like: “It had eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his lips, the World was behind his back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over its head.”

This is an ideal portrait of a preacher. He depends upon God for anointing, wisdom, and direction. The “best of Books in his hand” is a reference to the Bible. He preaches or teaches truth and translates the Word of God for people.

Study Questions

1. What is “hermeneutics”? _____

2. Is “hermeneutics” for everyone in the Christian community? Explain. _____

3. What two roles do we take each time we open our Bible and read? _____

4. What do we consider or ask each time we read a verse? _____

5. What is the job of an interpreter? _____

6. What three things do we learn from Nehemiah 8:8? _____

7. Some doctrines are designed for popularity. Whose approval should we seek in preaching?

8. What is the fundamental rule of interpretation contained in this lesson? _____

9. Write out Psalms 119:130. _____
