

Feature Article: DI501-2

PRACTICAL HERMENEUTICS: HOW TO INTERPRET YOUR BIBLE CORRECTLY (PART TWO)

by Thomas A. Howe

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 26, number 1 (2003). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Two factors affect how we interpret the Bible. They are our preunderstanding and presuppositions and the principles of communication and understanding. Our preunderstanding includes anything and everything we understand, believe, or assume before we study the Bible. Like a pair of glasses, we see everything through our preunderstanding, which does not mean that it is impossible to be objective. The universal aspects of our preunderstanding make objectivity possible, at least in principle. Because we have these universal aspects in common with the biblical authors, correct interpretation is also possible. We need to be aware of our preunderstandings, however, to guard against incorrect interpretation. We also need to submit our preunderstanding to biblical truth in order to let God's Word correct any false ideas that are peculiar to us as individuals. Two principles of communication and understanding that govern the way all people communicate are "the universal nature of truth" and "the unity of human nature." The fact that truth is objective and the laws of logic are inescapable indicate that truth is the same for everyone — that is, truth is universal. The fact that humanity is one race with one kind of mind means that it is possible to understand universal truths written in biblical times, even though the cultural expressions of those truths may differ.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation. In this two-part series, we are examining the principles that lead an interpreter to the correct meaning of the biblical text. In part one, we looked at the grammatical-historical approach to interpretation and stated the first three of five factors that should be considered while interpreting the Bible: *the original languages of the Bible*, *the historical/cultural settings of the Bible*, and *the kinds of literature of the Bible*. In part two, we will focus on the last two factors: *the preunderstanding and presuppositions of the interpreter* and *the universal and particular principles of communication and understanding*. We usually do not think about these last two factors when we study the Bible, but they always affect our interpretation. While discussing these factors, it will be necessary to use a few technical-sounding words, but I will explain them as clearly as I can.

THE PREUNDERSTANDING AND PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE INTERPRETER

Have you ever wondered how two people can look at the same passage of Scripture and yet come up with completely different interpretations? The reason for this sometimes has to do with the differences in their preunderstanding and presuppositions. The words "preunderstanding" and "presuppositions" refer to the point of view, the perspective, the background, and the assumptions of the reader. A truism has developed among those who write and theorize about hermeneutics. This truism says, "Everyone comes to the Bible with his or her own preunderstanding." At first glance, it certainly seems true that

everyone has his or her own way of looking at things. Some people are atheists. Others are Christians. People come from various cultures, and because cultures often differ, people often differ about what they think is important and how they understand the world and life. The way a person thinks about the world, along with his or her values and tastes, helps form that person's perspective. This kind of perspective has been called a "worldview," which is simply the way a person *views* the *world*.

Preunderstanding and Perspective. When it comes to interpretation, a person's worldview is often referred to as his or her "preunderstanding." People's preunderstanding includes anything and everything they understand before they study the Bible. In the American education system, people are taught many things about science, art, math, language, as well as other topics. As a result, most American adults have a basic idea of how the world works. These ideas are part of the preunderstanding they bring when they study the Bible. Most American adults also have learned a certain set of values from their parents and have a basic understanding of right and wrong. This also forms part of their preunderstanding.

People from another culture, however, may not have the same understanding of the world as we have or hold the same values as we hold. Some aspects of their preunderstanding may be different from ours, which also affects how they interpret the Bible.

A person's preunderstanding can be compared to a pair of glasses. Imagine a man who can see only by wearing a special pair of glasses. He sees everything through these glasses, and without them he could see nothing. What if these glasses were tinted so that everything in the world appeared to be colored red? This person would understand all of reality as being reddish, and to him this would seem to be absolutely normal. In fact, the red tint would be so much a part of his way of understanding the world that he might not even be able to grasp that the world is not colored red no matter how much a person tried to convince him otherwise. He may not be able to conceive of another kind of world.

Preunderstanding is similar to this. Everything that we think about, read about, and learn about is filtered through our preunderstanding. Our preunderstanding includes all that we believe, know, feel, and assume to be true. It includes our education, training, disposition, language, culture, history, and everything that makes us what we are. When preunderstanding is discussed in relation to claims about what is true and what is false, often the term "presuppositions" is used. Presuppositions are particular things we suppose to be true and form the basis of other beliefs. All these beliefs together, along with the other aspects we mentioned, form our preunderstanding.

Preunderstanding and Objectivity. Have you ever heard someone say, "There's no way to tell whose interpretation is correct"? Many people have concluded that because everyone has his or her own way of looking at the world — his or her own worldview or preunderstanding — that this precludes anyone from having an objective view. The term "objective" usually means that no bias or particular point of view affects one's understanding of something. Some believe the term "objective" to mean *neutral*. The claim that someone can be totally objective, or neutral, recently has been characterized as "the view from nowhere."¹ It seems obvious that no one can have a view from *nowhere* because everyone is *somewhere*. Since everyone views the world from some point of view, the argument is often made that no one can have a neutral or totally objective perspective.

At first sight this seems to be correct, but there is a fatal flaw in this reasoning. When someone claims that no one can be objective, that person is actually assuming that his or her claim is true for everyone. A claim that is true for everyone, however, is an objective claim. What this person is really saying, therefore, is: "It is objectively true that no one can be objective." The statement contradicts itself and therefore is false. On the other hand, if it is true that no one can be totally objective, then the person making this claim is not being totally objective. If the claim is not totally objective, then it doesn't apply to everyone, and we don't need to pay any attention to it.

The fact of the matter is, objectivity is not only possible, but it is also unavoidable. Even the critics of objectivity think that you, as a reader, can objectively understand their objections to objectivity. The reason it is important to establish that objectivity is possible is that without it there could be no communication. There would be no way to know whether we had correctly understood what was said or whether our preunderstanding had entirely distorted it.

Objectivity and Perspectives. Some aspects of our perspective are peculiar to us as individuals or as people who live in a particular culture and who use a particular language. Tastes and customs, for example, are part of our preunderstanding but are peculiar to us or to our culture. Other aspects of our preunderstanding, however, are the same for everyone at all times and in all cultures. We will consider some of these, but let's look particularly at one aspect of our perspective that is the same for everyone.

In the literature on preunderstanding and presuppositions, everyone states that an interpreter comes to the Bible with his or her own perspective. Everyone, in fact, says that to claim that you can come to the Bible without your own preunderstanding is self-defeating. If you say you are going to come to the text objectively, then this, too, is part of your preunderstanding, so you haven't really left your preunderstanding behind.

As impressive as this claim sounds, however, it is actually the perfect example of objectivity. People who discuss these matters and conclude that there is no objectivity come from all kinds of perspectives. Some are atheists. Others are Christians. Some do not believe in absolute truth, and others do. If, however, all of these people, who come from these different and sometimes contradictory perspectives, all arrive at the same conclusion by observing the same data, isn't this precisely what is meant by objectivity?

If these people can all arrive at the same conclusion, and if they can all claim this conclusion is true for everyone, then there must be something about the preunderstanding of all of these people that is the same. It must be something that is not peculiar to any particular person's worldview or preunderstanding. If, however, something is not peculiar to a person's own preunderstanding but is the same for everyone and is not affected by any particular worldview, then it is neutral. In other words, it is objective.

Preunderstanding and Interpretation. It is possible, therefore, at least in principle, to have an objective perspective, at least in part. As interpreters, then, we need to discover what these objective aspects are and use them in evaluating our interpretations and comparing our interpretations with others. The more we rely on these universal and neutral aspects to test our interpretations, the more likely we are to arrive at the correct understanding of the text. How do we do this?

Be Aware of Your Own Preunderstanding. A person's preunderstanding has a profound effect on his or her interpretation of the Bible. Atheists, for example, come to the Bible with the preunderstanding that the God of the Bible does not actually exist; therefore, when they read about the miracles of Jesus, they must interpret these passages as myth or folklore, or as the exaggerations of enthusiastic followers who want to promote their religious agenda. Because atheists assume that there is no God, they cannot interpret these passages as literally true.

We must become aware of our own preunderstanding in order to guard against incorrect interpretation. Faithful students of God's Word ought to be able to say what they believe about God: who He is, what is His nature, and what are His attributes. For example, do you believe God is omnipresent (present everywhere)? Do you believe God is omniscient (all knowing)? Do you believe that God is omnipotent (all powerful)? Do you believe He is holy, righteous, and loving? All of these beliefs influence the way you interpret the Bible, and you ought to state them up-front as part of your preunderstanding. You should do this with all the doctrines of the Bible. If you have a certain belief, you ought to express it so that you are aware of what you believe and why.

You may not have a particular belief about every single point of doctrine, however, and that's all right. In fact, one reason you study the Bible is to learn what it is you should believe. If you don't have a particular belief, say, about eschatology (the end times), or if you are just not sure what to believe, then this, too, is

part of your preunderstanding. People often think they don't have a particular belief about some doctrine, but when they start to express what it is they do believe, they discover that they really do have some idea of what they believe about that doctrine. Other times people think they know what they believe, but they soon find out that they really aren't sure, or they discover that they really can't support their belief from the Bible. All of this makes up your preunderstanding. You should be aware of what you believe and of that about which you are uncertain.

Submit Your Preunderstanding to the Bible. The reason you should become aware of your preunderstanding is so that you can submit it to the truth of the Bible. As I pointed out above, there are some aspects of our preunderstanding that are the same for everyone, no matter from what culture they come, whether they are atheists or theists, whether they believe the Bible or don't believe it. If aspects of our preunderstanding are universal, then it must be true that aspects of the preunderstanding of the authors of the biblical books are universal. This offers a connection between the modern interpreter and the ancient text. Part of the task of the interpreter, then, is to look for the universal aspects of the text. Because the Bible teaches universal truth and there are many aspects of our preunderstanding that are the same for everyone, it is possible for the Bible to correct those aspects of our preunderstanding that are peculiar to us and may be contrary to the truth. If we don't know what these peculiar aspects are, it is more difficult to allow the truth of God's Word to correct them.

A good example of the truth of the Bible correcting our preunderstanding is the experience that every Christian has had — conversion. Before you were born again, you did not believe that you were a sinner in need of salvation.² This was part of your preunderstanding. When you heard the Gospel, however, the truth of the Word of God, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, convinced you that you were a sinner and that you needed salvation. The truth of God's Word replaced your incorrect preunderstanding. There is more to the experience than this, of course, but being born again is certainly not less than this. Part of the conversion experience is coming to accept the truth about you, about God, and about your need for His righteousness.

The experience of growing as a Christian is the same. Many times you have read the Bible and learned something new, or the truth of the Bible altered your understanding. Perhaps someone, a pastor or a teacher, helped you understand a passage that you previously did not understand. All of this is part of the process of changing your preunderstanding. This experience is possible because there are universal principles of communication and understanding. Let's look at some of these principles.

THE UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING

Certain principles govern the way people communicate. Some of these principles are universal: they are the same for all people at all times regardless of their language, ethnic background, culture, or point of view. By understanding these principles, we can study the Bible with the knowledge that it is possible to discover the correct meaning of the text.

The Universality of Truth

Whether someone is willing to admit it or not, everyone believes there is truth and that truth is absolute. Some people call themselves relativists. A relativist claims that there is no absolute truth, but even the relativist believes relativism is absolutely true. Truth, however, is not something that is based on a particular point of view. If a statement is true, it is true whether it fits your point of view or not. Someone once said to me, "There's no such thing as truth." I responded, "Is that true?" It made no difference what this person's point of view was. Even when he tried to deny truth, he could not help but claim that his denial was true. The fact is, there is absolute truth, and this truth does not change just because someone doesn't like it or agree with it, and it does not change depending on one's worldview. Truth is the same for everyone at all times.

Because there is absolute truth, it is possible for you to read the Bible and find absolute truth; indeed, that truth will change the way you think and what you believe.

An important aspect of the notion of absolute truth is what is called the *law of noncontradiction*, often simply referred to as the law of contradiction. This is an aspect of our preunderstanding that is the same for everyone. The law of noncontradiction is a rule of logic that says, "A statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense." If, for example, I say, "I am at the beach," then this statement is either true or it is false; it cannot be both. I cannot both *be* at the beach and *not be* at the beach in the same sense. I could say, "I am at the beach (in my daydream)" and "I am not at the beach (physically)," and both statements can be true, but not in the same sense. The law of noncontradiction is an undeniable fact that applies to everyone. Without it there would be no way to tell the difference between what's true and what's false.

The fact that truth is absolute and the law of noncontradiction is undeniable indicates that truth is universal. To claim that truth is universal means that when there are conflicts, say, between science and religion, we cannot say that these are two separate areas of thought that employ different ways of understanding the world so that the principle of noncontradiction does not apply.³ When two claims contradict one another, one must be true, and the other must be false. When people want to communicate, they must do so on the basis of the universality of truth, or communication is not possible.

The Unity of Human Nature

Another principle of communication is the fact that human nature is the same for *all* people at *all* times in *all* cultures throughout history. This is perhaps best summarized by the following observations:

1. The human race is a single biological species, renewed generation after generation by the reproductive determinations of a single gene pool; hence, humans are one in nature — that is, in specific nature. All individual members of the species have the same species-specific properties or characteristics.
2. The human race being one, the human mind is also one. The human mind is a species-specific property found in every individual member of the species, the same in all, being subject to variations in degree. This precludes the notion that there is, within the human species, a primitive mind that is characteristically different from a civilized one, or an Oriental [Eastern] mind that differs in kind from an Occidental [Western] one, or even a child mind that differs in kind, not just degree, from an adult mind.⁴

These two observations assert that human nature is the same for everyone despite the reality of cultural diversity. It is obvious that the Bible was written in certain periods of history, in certain historical situations, and in cultural contexts quite different from our own. The principles of the unity of human nature and the universality of truth, however, demonstrate that there was not a "Hebrew" mind or a "Greek" mind or an "ancient" mind so that truth among those cultures at that period of time was somehow different than truth today. Humanity is one race with one kind of mind, and therefore the truth of the relation between God and humans is the same for us today as for the men and women of the Bible. The differences, then, between those ancient cultures and our modern culture are not in the nature of humanity or of truth, but rather in the social and cultural expressions of the same truths.

John 13 provides a good example of a cultural expression of a universal truth. In this passage, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. "You call Me Teacher and Lord," He said, "and you are right; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:13–14 NASB). Later, Paul talked about the institution of the Lord's Supper: "In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'" (1 Cor. 11:25 NASB). In both places, John 13 and 1 Corinthians 11, we have the record of Christ's command to do what He did. Today, many churches regularly observe and participate in the Lord's Supper but do not observe or participate in footwashing. Some denominations practice footwashing, but it is not a generally held practice.

This raises the question: Why practice the one but not the other? We can answer this question by looking back at the context in which Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and thus discover what He said was the meaning, or significance, of this act:

And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher, and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (John 13:12–17 NASB)

What was it that Jesus did to them? He humbled Himself, took upon Himself the form of a servant, and served His disciples. In that culture, the washing of feet as Jesus did it was a task relegated to the lowest of menial slaves. Only in an expression of great love would someone wash the feet of another of equal or lower status. This was a preview of the very self-sacrificing love that Jesus was about to display in dying for us on the cross. Jesus instructed the disciples to display and exercise the same kind of humility and self-sacrificing love for one another as He had and would exercise toward them. This humility and self-sacrificing love toward His disciples was graphically illustrated in the act of washing their feet.

In our modern culture, the act of washing someone's feet does not have the same meaning as it did in the disciple's culture. What we must do, therefore, is take Jesus' teaching on the need for an open demonstration of humility and self-sacrificing love and apply it accordingly in our culture. What is the lowest, most humbling act that we can perform for one another that will demonstrate our humility and self-sacrificing love for one another? In the local church, one of the best ways to do this is to set aside our own desires and esteem others better than ourselves. Churches have been split and the cause of Christ has been damaged because stubborn people were not willing to set aside their own opinions, their own preferences, or their own wants for the benefit of the unity of the body. That doesn't mean we should not oppose those things that are clearly wrong, but we should not allow our own tastes or our likes and dislikes to become points of dispute and division. It is demeaning and humbling to yield to the likes and dislikes, the wants and preferences, of others, but, it is an outward demonstration of humility and self-sacrificing love for the brethren to yield their own rights for the benefit of the body.

The idea here is that we need to understand the passage in its original context, grasp the universal truth presented there, and apply that truth in our contemporary cultural setting. We observe the Lord's Supper because the same activity holds the same meaning in our culture as it did in theirs. For 2,000 years the church has practiced the same observance, which demonstrates the same meaning. We do not, however, practice the observance in exactly the same way they did in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day they did not sit in pews, they did not drink Welch's Grape Juice, and they did not eat crackers; instead, they reclined on one elbow, they drank real wine, and they all ate from an actual loaf of bread. In the way we observe the Lord's Supper we have translated the particulars of the ritual into our own culture, but the meaning is the same: to remember what Jesus has done for us.

Some aspects of our preunderstanding are universal, and some are peculiar to us as individuals and as members of a particular culture. It is because truth is universal and human nature is the same for all human beings that it is possible to discover truth in God's Word that can change the way we think and can change our lives. Good principles of interpretation can uncover the universal truths that mold us into the image of Christ.

NOTES

1. Thomas Nagel popularized this expression in *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
2. I am using the term "believe" here in the biblical sense of "believing unto salvation" (John 3:18; 20:31; Acts 16:30–31; Eph. 2:8). A person can *understand the fact* that he or she is a sinner in need of God's salvation, but that is different than *believing it to be true* (i.e., trusting God for salvation; placing one's faith in God). Believing it to be true is what it means to be saved.
3. Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: MacMillan, 1990), 118.
4. *Ibid.*, 113–14.