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THE ESSENCE OF SOUND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS **The Grammatical-Historical-Contextual Approach**

Ray Mondragon, Chafer Theological Seminary

Hermeneutics is fundamental to all communication in every area of life. In theology, the Grammatical-Historical-Contextual (G-H-C) approach to hermeneutics is the foundation for not only the pretribulation rapture position but for all accurate eschatology as well. Only through the consistent application of this hermeneutical approach to the Bible from Genesis to Revelation can we gain an accurate understanding of God's intended meaning.

In fact, Dispensational Theology in its entirety is a product of this conservative hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of Scripture. All non-dispensational theologies like Covenant Theology must depart from this approach if they hope to maintain their theology.

Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation. As a science, it contains well established principles that guide interpretation. As an art, it takes skill and experience to fully utilize all proven hermeneutical principles. These principles are not mechanical formulas that can be plugged into a communication to derive an accurate interpretation. Instead, they are broad standards to guide us in gaining a proper, literal understanding of the author's meaning.

In short, hermeneutics involves well-honed skills used precisely and deliberately without the contamination of preconceived ideas or desired results.

The Universal Nature of Hermeneutics

Though we will be focusing on applying hermeneutics to Scripture, its essence and essential principles can be seen in almost every area of study.

1. Literature

In the study of literature, a key rule of interpretation is ascertaining the author's intended message without adding personal interpretations. A revealing illustration of **misinterpretation** comes from analyzing modern reinterpretations of the works of the renowned British novelist Agatha Christie.

Christie was famous not only for her clever plot twists but also for the high moral standards of her characters (with the exception of the one with a penchant for murder, of course). After Christie's death, her daughter upheld Agatha's high moral values in all adaptations of her novels; however, when Christie's grandson took over the management of her literary properties, he allowed significant

reinterpretations of her works. In fact, *World Magazine* described as a “literary crime”¹ his allowing the addition of homosexuality, blatant immorality, and offensive language to her works.

What was his justification for allowing TV adaptations to fundamentally change her works? “If Agatha Christie is to be as popular in the 21st century as she was in the 20th, we have to be open-minded about *interpreting* stories in modern ways.”² Rather than seeking Christie’s intended meaning, he allowed editors to inject new meanings. They grossly distorted Christie’s words, ruining the flow of her thoughts and distracting from her clever plot revelations. Through a failed hermeneutic, they turned one of the great writers of the last century into a clone of every mediocre writer of this century.

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters not only in fiction but all literature!

2. Law and Government

A second example of hermeneutical **misinterpretation** is found in the area of law and government. The main function of the Supreme Court is to interpret the United States Constitution. Currently, two competing hermeneutical approaches vie against each other. First, the progressive approach sees the Constitution as a living and active document that should be updated and modernized by reading ideas into it and/or modifying the existing words to fit current political agendas. In short, those who follow the progressive approach alter the text of the Constitution to make it say what they want it to say.

The second approach to the Constitution, the conservative one, seeks to understand the framers’ intended meaning and interpret the text literally in terms of their original intent. Using this approach, they evaluate current legal issues to determine their adherence to the Constitution. This method is known as the originalist, intentionalist, textualist, or constitutionalist approach.

In a 2008 lecture, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas summarized these two approaches.

Let me put it this way; there are really only two ways to interpret the Constitution—try to discern as best we can what the framers intended or make it up. No matter how ingenious, imaginative or artfully put, unless interpretive methodologies are tied to the original intent of the framers, they have no more basis in the Constitution than the latest football scores. To be sure, even the most conscientious effort to adhere to the original intent of the framers of our Constitution is flawed, as all methodologies and human institutions are; but at least originalism has the advantage of being legitimate and, I might add, impartial.³

Those progressive justices who have used a bogus hermeneutic to misinterpret the Constitution have, at the same time, changed America’s vibrant economy, secure voting system, dominant power, and overarching freedoms into facsimiles of the tyrannies of every failing banana republic in history. Their attempt to remove all divine principles from American governance has led to unparalleled lawlessness and immorality, graphically proving the importance of a correct hermeneutic even in judicial decisions.

¹ Gene Edward Veith, “No Mystery,” *World Magazine*, August 13, 2005, p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³ Clarence Thomas, “2008 Wriston Lecture: Judging in a Government by Consent,” Manhattan Institute, transcript of lecture from October 16, 2008; <https://manhattan.institute/event/2008-wriston-lecture-judging-in-a-government-by-consent>.

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters not only in interpreting the Constitution but in all law and government!

3. History

As with literature and law, **hermeneutics** is at the heart of all history. Since no time machine allows us to go back in history to observe and record events, our understanding depends on the traces those events have left behind. While physical artifacts such as pottery, weapons, architectural remnants, and paintings are helpful in recreating past events, the best traces are the written documents produced by eyewitnesses to the events themselves.⁴

In their attempt to reconstruct past events, historians rely heavily on written records, including those etched in stone. They make numerous assumptions about every piece of evidence, every remaining trace of an event. The validity of their conclusions hinges on the reliability of the traces, the sufficiency of the data, and the historian's skill at **interpreting** them.

Are all historians free of biases and hidden agendas? Of course not. History, then, becomes one man's **interpretation** of the past. Often, his bias for or against God affects his conclusions. Historians who discount the divine origin of the world, the fall of Adam, the Genesis Flood, and the Tower of Babel employ a hermeneutic that inevitably distorts history to promote their own pagan beliefs.

The absurd, easily disproven, but popular theory of the big bang, which posits that nothing exploded and became everything, is an example of a hermeneutic misrepresentation that has hijacked both common sense and credibility as it works to push God out of the minds of gullible mankind.

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters in the interpretation not only of ancient history but even modern events!

4. Science

A fourth example comes from science. Scientific breakthroughs exploded during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries when many Christians filled laboratories and manned microscopes and telescopes. In more recent time, a secular, materialistic hermeneutic, known as methodological naturalism, has ruled in the corridors of science, handicapping true advancement.

Modern science has two major branches, traditional observational science (physics chemistry, biology, zoology, etc.) and, a modern addition, historical science (historical geology, archaeology, criminology, etc.). Observational science makes observations about the natural world in present time and interprets that data through repeatable experimentation. Historical science works with the limited remains, the traces, of the past and tries to interpret events through them. Its conclusions are not repeatable or provable.

⁴ Mondragon, Ray, *Science: Is God Shouting*, True Grace Books, 2024, 13-15.

Often, scientists in both branches make faulty interpretations and come to wrong conclusions in their search for truth, necessitating new, more intense study when confronted by new information and more modern equipment. The defining characteristic of science is change, not set laws.

Regardless of a scientist's desire to be objective, his worldview influences his conclusions. For instance, a Christian scientist interprets (or at least should) the world according to existing data, including the historical and scientific accounts contained in Scripture.⁵

Evolutionary, secular scientists exclude the Creator from all scientific studies, relegating Scripture and the supernatural to the status of myths. Scriptural information is ignored while unproven and unprovable evolutionary theories are considered scientific laws. Many scientific advances have been thwarted because of materialistic scientists' blindness to divine reality.

The Covid pandemic illustrated the extreme measures modern man uses to curtail the free interpretation of facts. Governments around the world reviled and even imprisoned scientists who disagreed with their propaganda about both the non-fatal Covid virus and its deadly "vaccine." Many patients died because leaders refused to allow the free interpretation of scientific data and the implementation of proven antidotes.⁶

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters in making life or death decisions in science!

5. Personal Life

A fifth example of the power of a correct hermeneutic comes from the area of personal life. As odd as it may seem, an understanding of basic hermeneutics has the potential to build up and even save marriages. A major key to a fulfilling marriage is learning to discern the intended meaning behind a spouse's communication. Poor communication often leads to major problems, even divorce. Too often spouses wrongly **interpret** each other's words, actions, and other forms of communication, especially if the intended meaning is missed. A husband who isn't certain his wife would prefer a new microwave oven to a night on the town for her birthday isn't using the correct hermeneutic! Neither is a boss who doesn't know if an employee will respond better to an increase in power or a wage hike!

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters in all personal relationships, even in the deepest of relationships!

⁵ Ibid, 23-43

⁶ Ibid, 56-119.

The Correct Use of Hermeneutics in Theology

Hermeneutics is fundamental to all communication in every area of life. Theology is no exception.

The challenges of a proper hermeneutic in theology are similar to those in literature, law, history, the sciences, and relationships because all have the same goal, namely, to discern the author or speaker's intended meaning. Thoughtful questions elicit accurate understanding.

- What was the author's intended meaning in this piece of literature?
- What was the framer's purpose for this section of the Constitution?
- What does this trace data from the past reveal about this historical event?
- What is the best understanding of reality presented in this scientific data?
- What is the intended meaning of another's personal communication?

An accurate understanding of God's intended meaning for Scripture depends on applying a correct hermeneutic to its interpretation. The passage of time and extensive research have revealed the Grammatical-Historical-Contextual (G-H-C) approach to be the best hermeneutic for scriptural study because those who use it gain eyes to see God's plan and purpose for individuals, families, and nations throughout history.⁷ This exegetical process skillfully applies grammatical, historical, and contextual principles to arrive at God's, not the interpreter's, meaning.

Though many refer to this hermeneutical system as the Grammatical-Historical approach without including contextual, all who use it successfully also emphasize context. G-H-C is often called the literal approach, literal not in the sense of excluding metaphorical language but in seeking the literal and intended meaning of the original author.

G-H-C is the foundation for accurate evaluations of all events, both past and future. When consistently applied to the prehistoric events of Genesis 1-11, G-H-C reveals that

1. The universe was created by our Creator God, not by evolution, including theistic evolution.
2. The universe is approximately six thousand years young, instead of many billions of years old.
3. The Genesis Flood was worldwide (universal) rather than local and certainly not mythological.

Though evolutionary theory clearly distorts our understanding of ancient events, eschatology is the subject of the most severe misinterpretation today. Why? Misuse of the G-H-C approach has hindered our understanding of future events, which only omniscient God Himself can reveal to us. When we distort His revelation about the future by including our unfounded opinions as divine truths, we inevitably distort His intent for all Scripture.

Dwight Pentecost emphasized the importance of using a correct hermeneutic in evaluating eschatological passages, writing, "The basic difference between the premillennial and amillennial

⁷ Recordings of the entire Chafer Theological Seminary course on "Hermeneutics and Bible Study Methods" can be accessed from my website at <http://www.forhisglorynm.com/index.php/seminary-courses/hermeneutics-and-bible-study-methods-2020>.

schools and between the pretribulation and posttribulation rapturists are **hermeneutical** [emphasis added], arising from the adoption of divergent and irreconcilable methods of interpretation.”⁸

When the G-H-C approach is applied to the Book of Revelation and other eschatological passages, we find

- a pretribulation rapture of the Church rather than any other rapture position
- a premillennial coming of Christ rather than either an amillennial or post-millennial coming
- a clear distinction between God’s programs for Israel and the church

The G-H-C interpretation of future events validates the pretribulation rapture position as well as all other accurate eschatology. In fact, Dispensational Theology in its entirety is a product of this conservative hermeneutical approach. All non-dispensational theologies, including Covenant Theology, must abandon this correct hermeneutic if they hope to preserve their theologies because the Bible, when consistently interpreted, doesn’t support them.

Absolutely, the primary Author of all Scripture is the Holy Spirit, whose meaning is the only one that matters. The G-H-C approach is dedicated to elucidating His meaning in its entirety with no added opinions or preconceived ideas.

The Goal of Biblical Hermeneutics

In studying Scripture, you and I must determine the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning, not inject our preferred meaning into a passage. Only His meaning matters. This fundamental principle undergirds all proper biblical hermeneutics.

From the beginning, in Genesis 1, God clearly indicated His desire that we interpret His words literally, that we use a literal hermeneutic when we study them. “And there was evening and there was morning, **one day**.” Genesis 1:5. How could God be any clearer! One evening and one morning equal one literal twenty-four-hour day. When He mentions a day, He expects us to understand He means a normal twenty-four-hour day, the same day everyone around the world has been observing since the beginning of time.

For emphasis, in Genesis 1:14, He expanded on this literal interpretation of time. “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and they shall serve as signs and for seasons, and for days and years.’” Again, God expects us to understand literal signs, seasons, days, and years. He leaves no wiggle room for us to add millions or even billions of years between those days and years. If we do, we are writing our own history of time, not accurately interpreting His truth.

To insure we understand that He expects us to use a literal hermeneutic when we study His words, in Genesis 2, He repeats His literal description of that first week of creation, adding details—not billions of years, but more literal details of His creative acts. He practically hits us over the head with our need to interpret His word literally and logically, not fancifully by adding our own opinions and allegories.

⁸ Pentecost, J. Dwight, *Things to Come: A Study In Biblical Eschatology*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1958, 1.

God always knew Satan would try to distort His words and so, starting with the first two chapters in Genesis, He taught us to use a literal hermeneutic. He expects us to study, accept, and respect each of His words as literally accurate.

Simply put, a correct hermeneutic will show that every one of His words, not just the principles they explain, can and should be understood literally unless He explains otherwise in the text.

We shouldn't be surprised that, from the very beginning, Satan has made an issue of our interpretation of God's words. In Genesis 3, at Eve's temptation at the fall of mankind, the serpent raised doubts about God's Word with his question, "Indeed, has God said...?" (Gen. 3:1). He challenged not only God's words but Eve's interpretation of them. How different our lives would be if she, in turn, had challenged Satan by using sound hermeneutics! Instead, because she didn't, we have sin and death.

Just as Eve should have worked to understand God's meaning and warning, so we should work to discern the meaning intended by the authors of every word of Scripture. Since God Himself inspired His human authors to craft specific messages for specific audiences, God, through the Holy Spirit, is the second but primary Author of Scripture. He inspired each human author to write the message that He wants all mankind to understand.

The Grammatical-Historical-Contextual (G-H-C) approach to hermeneutics accepts and defends the full doctrine of inspiration, meaning that the entire canon of Scripture, every one of the words in every one of the sixty-six books and only those books, is divinely inspired. God sovereignly controlled the entire writing process, using human authors in all their humanness without compromising their personal traits and volition. Verbal inspiration means the very words they chose to use are Holy Spirit inspired, not just the ideas expounded by them.

Charles Ryrie wrote of inspiration,

Biblical inspiration may be defined as God's superintending human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His message to man in the worlds of their original writings in the Bible. God superintended but did not dictate. His superintendence was sometimes very direct and sometimes less direct but always active, so that He guarded the writers from writing inaccurately.⁹

Since God is the ultimate and final Author of Scripture, we hold to the inerrancy of Scripture in the original writings. Our hermeneutic assumes the high view that Scripture is the greatest and most important form of communication the world has ever received. In seeking to discern the minutest scrap of meaning behind every bit of His message to us, we use a hermeneutic that sets sound parameters that ensure we arrive at God's meaning for every word in Scripture. That is the essence of a sound biblical hermeneutic.

Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters, especially in interpreting spiritual truth!

⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997), p. 42.

The Essential Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics

A proper hermeneutic must be based on biblical assumptions, on a reality tied to God as ultimate reality. As Creator, God is the source of all truth because He is truth. His intent is to communicate truth to those He made in His image. Hermeneutics helps us accurately understand His communication.

Let's briefly describe the essential principles of the G-H-C approach.

1. The Linguistic/Grammatical Principle

The linguistic/grammatical principle determines the meaning of a biblical passage based on the laws of grammar and the **conventions of language**. Roy Zuck's hermeneutics textbook Basic Bible Interpretation summarized this principle, saying, "Each biblical writing—that is, each word, sentence, and book—was recorded in a written language and followed normal grammatical meanings, including figurative language."¹⁰

The linguistic principle has a biblical foundation. It is based on the way the divine Author communicates to the mind of the reader through the use of language. It is based on the doctrine that God has an omniscient intellect and desires to communicate His perfect thoughts to mankind through language.

We know that language originated in God because He spoke the entire creation into existence in Genesis 1. He then built language into mankind as a crucial aspect of His image. He created us with the capacity to use language to understand His thinking. Because God transfers His thoughts effectively through language, the G-H-C approach accepts the full inspiration and inerrancy of the entire canon of Scripture.

God also gave those made in His image the ability to observe, process, organize, and communicate the information He built into His revelation through His inspired human authors. That means that every word and every aspect of language in Scripture is important.

This language capacity has well established conventions that effectively transfer God's thoughts to mankind. Why did God craft language so carefully? Not only is He perfect in every way, but He knew His communication had to make sense to His ancient spokesmen so they could communicate it accurately to their hearers or readers. Then, every word had to be preserved accurately in the canon of Scripture, which had to make sense during every century of its subsequent transmission and in every language used to transmit it. Only omniscient and omnipotent God could accomplish that daunting task!

The linguistic principle examines words, sentences, paragraphs, and literary structures to determine the meaning of any biblical text from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. This principle utilizes the meaning of words (lexicography), the forms of words (morphology), the relationships between words (grammar and syntax), the unfolding of ideas (literary structure), and every other convention of language used in every culture.

¹⁰ Zuck, Roy B., *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, Victor, 1991, 61-62.

God chose to utilize the Hebrew language (most of the Old Testament), the Aramaic language (small portions of the Old and New Testaments), and the Greek language (most of the New Testament) to communicate His thoughts. Because accurate translations of the Scriptures from these original languages communicate His thoughts well, an understanding of the original languages, while helpful, is not necessary. That said, familiarity with the original languages invariably increases accuracy of understanding.

In every language, the sentence is by definition a single complete thought; therefore, we should describe the grammatical aspect of the G-H-C approach as sentence-by-sentence rather than verse-by-verse exegesis. One complete sentence often continues through several verses. Verse locations were added to the inspired text for convenience in the sixteenth century and are not inspired.

To be even more precise, we should describe this exegesis as paragraph-by-paragraph since by definition a paragraph is a complete unit of thought. Every sentence in a paragraph contributes to that unit of thought.

Strictly speaking, verse-by-verse exegesis destroys the continuity of the sentence and the idea it encapsulates. I realize that when we speak of verse-by-verse exegesis, we, in reality, are describing sentence-by-sentence or even paragraph-by-paragraph exegesis.

How does this linguistic principle work itself out in actual Bible study? After isolating each sentence in a paragraph or unit of thought, we should identify its subject/s and main verb/s. Because the subject and verb contain the essence of the idea of the sentence, they should be the priority of our study.

By definition, a sentence must have at least one subject and one verb. Every other word in the sentence simply tells us something more about the subject and verb. Figure out the meaning of the subject and verb, and you've figured out the heart of the passage. Understand the supporting words and their relationship to each other, and you've added the God-inspired details. Study those words in the rest of that author's writings and then in all Scripture, and you've begun to grasp the divine principles that help you understand the divine character and plan.

Yes, a good hermeneutic begins with the study of one word in one sentence in one paragraph in one book by one author in a book by many authors under the guidance of one Author. No wonder knowing God and His complete plan for us is impossible but utterly fascinating and rewarding at the same time!

2. The Metaphorical Principle

As part of the grammatical portion of G-H-C, the metaphorical principle demands we allow the biblical author to determine when metaphorical language is used and interpret the passage according to the appropriate **metaphorical conventions**. Metaphorical language is any word or phrase used to communicate something beyond its literal, natural meaning. E.W. Bullinger defined it as "a word or a sentence thrown into a peculiar form, different from its original or simplest meaning or use."¹¹

The metaphorical principle is based on the fact that when God created man in His image, He made him complex with multifaced characteristics. Every human has aesthetic, emotional, and imaginative

¹¹ Bullinger, E.W., *Figures of Speech used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, reprinted by Baker books, 1968

attributes. He can express himself through creative means that require non-literal, non-concrete language. Given the wealth of metaphorical language in Scripture, the metaphorical principle provides necessary guidance in interpreting all non-literal language.

The importance of metaphorical language and thus its proper interpretation was captured by W. MacNeile Dixon.

“If asked what has been the most powerful force in the making of history ... I should have answered ... figurative expression. It is by imagination that men have lived; imagination rules all our lives. The human mind is not, as philosophers would have you think, a debating hall, but a picture gallery ... Remove the metaphors [i.e., figurative expressions] from the Bible and its living spirit vanishes ... The prophets, the poets, the leaders of men are all of them masters of imagery, and by imagery they capture the human soul.”¹²

We can see the extensiveness of metaphorical language in Scripture by glancing through the 1104 pages of E.W. Bullinger’s book on figures of speech.¹³ He lists about two hundred categories of figures of speech with over eight thousand examples from Scripture. The table of contents alone is 28 pages long. This old resource is still the most helpful I know.

A quick look at one type of metaphorical usage, symbolic language, can help us understand how to interpret all metaphorical language. We’ll make our point by looking at the symbolic language used in science and mathematics. In a physics context, Albert Einstein’s well-known formulation of $E = MC^2$ uses symbolic language.¹⁴ In English, his formula means energy (E) equals (=) mass (M) times the speed of light (C) squared (superscript 2). As an engineer, I’ve known the meaning of Einstein’s formula for almost as long as I can remember. You, as theologians, however, may need to have the symbols explained. You may even need to do a bit of studying to feel comfortable explaining them to others.

The same is true in geometry. You may recognize the symbolism of $A = \pi R^2$, but do you remember that this formula calculates the area (A) of any circle with a certain radius (R) squared (superscript 2) multiplied by the constant value of π (3.14159 or 22/7)? Again, you might need to do a little digging to understand it well enough to explain it to a seventh-grade homeschooler. My point is that even in technical areas, symbolic language has specific assigned meanings.

In the case of Einstein’s famous equation, we seek the meaning that Einstein assigned to each of the symbols. Likewise, we seek the meaning accepted in geometry for the symbols for the area of any circle. If we ignore reality and assign our own ideas, we may well come up with a triangle or heptagon—or, more likely, a blob. We are not free to assign our own desired meaning to any set of symbols. We cannot impose any other meaning to these scientific and mathematical symbols than those assigned by the scientists/mathematicians who depend on their uniformity.

¹² Zuck, page 143 quotes W. MacNeile Dixon (professor of English at University of Glasgow) as cited by George S. Hendry in “Biblical Metaphors and Theological Constructions”, Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 1979, 258

¹³ Bullinger,

¹⁴ This is Einstein’s formula for the conversion of mass into energy, a nuclear chain reaction (explosion). The E represents the amount of energy resulting from the conversion of a mass (M) of material into energy, multiplied by the speed of light (C) squared.

So, also, in interpreting the metaphorical language used in Scripture, we must seek the author's intended meaning and nothing else. We do not have the freedom to give metaphorical language flexible, spiritual, or allegorical meanings. We must accurately interpret all theological symbols so they have the meaning God desires. If we don't, we may well be teaching a spiritual blob, one that defies correct hermeneutics and distorts God's Word.

Usually, an author of Scripture specifically indicated his use of metaphorical language to his readers. For example, our resurrected Lord uses two symbols in Revelation 1:12-16, stars and lampstands. Then He goes on to give the interpretation of the symbols in verse 1:20, angels and churches. In other places the use of metaphorical language is not as evident but an understanding of figures of speech is helpful. In our culture we use common figures of speech very frequently. An example of one is hyperbole or exaggeration. Is Jesus using hyperbole when He condemns the scribes and pharisees with "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"¹⁵ We use euphemisms to express more mild or vague words to convey something more offensive, as do writers of Scripture. We commonly refer to death as "passing" or "sleep" as does Paul in 1Thessalonians 4:13. In Genesis 4:1 and many other passages sexual relations are referred to as "knowing" someone. The context clearly indicates they were not just shaking hands.

3. The Historical Principle

The historical principle in G-H-C means that the **historical setting** of a biblical passage contributes to its meaning. According to Zuck, "Each biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical, geographical situation for a specific purpose."¹⁶ This principle focuses on the historical peculiarities of a passage.

As with the linguistic principle, the historical principle also has a biblical foundation. The Bible recounts the story of God's plan and purpose for His universe, especially as related to mankind. His plan extends from eternity to eternity. Thus, every word in Scripture is tied to the history recounted in it. The entire Bible could be considered a comprehensive meta-narrative, containing many individual narratives, all interrelated historically.

Since the nature of history is interpretative, it is important to understand Scripture's perspective on history, most particularly each passage's relationship to history. As we study a passage, we can be sure its meaning will be consistent with its historical background. Many passages contribute information about that history. Entire books of the Bible set forth parts of that historical meta-narrative.

To utilize the historical principle, we must first attempt to identify the human author of the book (some are anonymous) and his initial audience. What kind of person was he, and what was his historical situation? Next, we should try to ascertain the occasion and date of the writing of the book by focusing on any historical references in any passages. Our purpose is to discern the significance of words to the initial readers in their particular historical setting.

¹⁵ Matthew 23:24

¹⁶ Zuck, 64.

Application of the historical principle helps elucidate differences between the Old and New Testaments. For example, the extensive expansion of the ministry of the Holy Spirit recorded in the Book of Acts is difficult to understand without a thorough grounding in the Holy Spirit's revelation in the age of Israel.

A grounding in the transitional nature of the Book of Acts from one historical dispensation to another is also needed for correct understanding. Such a study resolves doctrinal discrepancies between a charismatic (Pentecostal) interpretation and our more biblically oriented interpretation of those Acts passages. The gifts of tongues and prophecy, for instance, were important at the beginning of the Church Age to authenticate God's chosen leaders and the church doctrines they introduced. Some events were transitory after the establishment of the church and the completion of the canon of Scripture, which included those early church leaders' divinely inspired writings.

An understanding of historical changes clarifies nearly all dispensational differences from one divinely established era to another. Lack of historical understanding, that is, ignorance of God's perspective on history during that specific time period, is a sure formula for theological confusion.

4. The Cultural Principle

The cultural principle is similar to the historical principle in that the **cultural setting**, like the historical setting, contributes to and expands the meaning of the passage. According to Zuck, "The Bible is affected and influenced by the cultural environment from which each human writer wrote."¹⁷ To properly understand a passage of Scripture, we need to understand the culture that influenced it.

The biblical foundation for this principle is the truth that God created mankind to have relationships. He did not intend us to be alone or isolated. God instituted divine institutions to give guidelines for inter-human relationships, such as marriage between one man and one woman and relationships within families and society. These relationships have worked themselves out differently in different cultures at different times.

Since cultures often differ dramatically, even between cities, we must be especially aware of the influence of the area's geography, politics, sociological norms, legal oddities, economy, military, and religion on the meaning behind a passage.

Our modern American culture has few similarities with the many diverse cultures that influenced Scripture. For example, we can miss some implications of some of the economic descriptions by not knowing the value of the first century currency, talents (Matthew 25:15-30), drachmas (Matthew 17:24), denarius (Revelation 6:6), or the widow's two copper coins (Lk 21:1-4). We must understand cultural differences, or we will misunderstand a passage and thus develop a distorted theology.

Since we live in a very different time and culture than the people in Scripture, we need to bridge the historical and cultural gaps that exist between them and us. We do that by applying both the historical and cultural principles.

For example, differences in the synoptic gospels are best harmonized by observing the cultural differences in each Gospel's audience during that specific timeframe. Matthew's gospel reflects the

¹⁷ Zuck, 64

Jewish culture of its predominantly Jewish audience of the first century. Mark's gospel reflects the Roman culture of its mainly Roman mindset audience. Luke wrote to a Greek or Gentile audience and reflected those cultural elements.

Every biblical author wrote to a particular audience, often incorporating the unique elements of that culture in his writings. The Book of Job in the Old Testament, for instance, best fits within a patriarchal time frame and culture. If we try to impose our understanding of a New Testament Greco-Roman culture—or even our own modern American culture—on Job, we distort much of its teaching.

Any time we examine a passage, we should add an understanding of distinctive cultural influences to our understanding of historical differences. If we fail to address all these distinctions, we will fail in our interpretations of Scripture. We must think as the author thought if we are to fully appreciate his teaching.

5. The Contextual Principle

The contextual principle of G-H-C dictates that the context of a biblical passage is the **final determiner** of meaning. As Zuck summarized it, “Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.”¹⁸ All meaning of terms, sentences, paragraphs, and eventually theology is determined by its context.

Let's begin by looking at context in its most elemental form, the word. What is the meaning of the English word “trunk”? Does it refer to a part of a car, the appendage of a large mammal, part of a tree, or a type of box? You cannot be certain until you examine the context. In the G-H-C approach, this contextual part of hermeneutics answers the questions, “What did the author mean when he chose this word, and what concept was he trying to unfold for his original readers and then for us?”

The Lord structured the human mind so that we think in a sequence of individual words and ideas. We express those thoughts in an arrangement, not in isolation. Since God is the source of pure logic as well as ideas, He communicated His thoughts in a logical and meaningful way to his original authors. The context of any word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, and book is contained within a larger set of ideas that relate to each other logically.

Context provides the flow of thought within sentences, books, and finally the entire canon of Scripture.

The principle of context demands we discern the relationship between each word, sentence, paragraph, and book, thereby accurately finding the Lord's intended meaning for them all. Scripture does not communicate through randomly selected, isolated ideas, much as most of us enjoy quoting our favorite verses. Most misinterpretation results from a failure to discern some level of context within a book within the entirety of Scripture.

Contextual circles surround every word of Scripture. The passage under study is called the specific context. The passages surrounding that specific context form the immediate context. The entire book containing the specific passage is the broad context. The remote context includes all pertinent information in other books of the Bible.

¹⁸ Zuck, 65.

The context closest to the passage being studied generally has the greatest influence on its meaning. The farther the context is from the specific passage, the less weighty its influence.

Various types of context influence meaning. The most basic context type is textual, meaning the location of the passage in the broader biblical text (the immediate, book, and remote contexts). The historical context includes the issues mentioned in the historical principle (#3 above) while the cultural context involves all the cultural elements in the cultural principle (#4 above). Finally, the theological context of a passage determines its position in God's plan.

How does context work? Let us look at an example from two different textual and theological contexts. Though Romans 3 and James 2 contain identical terms like faith, works, and justification, they seem to contradict each other. Why? The contexts are different. The Romans 3 passage is found in a textual context dealing with soteriology; therefore, the justification by faith apart from works is before our holy God for eternal salvation. It is a justification by faith alone in Christ alone apart from any works on the believer's part.

The textual and theological context in the Book of James is different; therefore, the meaning is also different. The textual context of the entire book of James is the living out of practical Christianity. Specifically, James chapter 2 deals with experiential sanctification, not soteriology, with a justification before men that requires the display of good works and not just claims of faith. Before men, faith is dead and unseen if not displayed with visible good works. The meaning of justification in this context is radically different from the Romans context.

Thus, two problematic Scriptures are easily reconciled when studied through their contexts. Similarly, context is the key to unlocking other seemingly contradictory passages. When we study passages from the author's point of view, apparent theological problems are often resolved.

The Conclusion

To be entirely accurate, we should rename this hermeneutical approach the Grammatical-Metaphorical-Historical-Cultural-Contextual approach (G-M-H-C-C) but for simplicity's sake, we'll stick with Grammatical-Historical-Contextual or even Grammatical-Historical or even more simply, the literal method of interpretation.

Without the Grammatical-Historical-Contextual approach to hermeneutics, the entire Pre-Tribulation Study Group could not exist or be defended. It is foundational not only for this study group but also for sound biblical interpretation as a whole. Without it, we cannot accurately understand the Word of God. For that reason alone, we need to continually remind ourselves of hermeneutics' essence and principles.

Today, I've given you an introduction to hermeneutics. If you desire greater understanding, I encourage you to go online and take my entire Chafer course.

One last reminder: Yes, a correct hermeneutic matters!