

## Hermeneutics

How rightly to interpret a passage of Scripture (bottom of the trunk of the tree)

\*\*we will sometimes see significant overlap from category to category

How to avoid merely asking: “What does this passage mean to me?” (modern Bible study method)  
Also, the WSM method.

- a) Medieval Quadriga (“fourfold method”) – with origins very early in church history (2<sup>nd</sup> century)
  - i) Every passage has a
    - (1) Literal meaning – plain and evident meaning
    - (2) Moral meaning – instructs people how to behave
    - (3) Allegorical/spiritual meaning – reveals the content of faith
    - (4) Anagogical/eschatological/heavenly meaning – expresses future hope
  - ii) Thus, a passage about Jerusalem might be about
    - (1) The capital of Judea and the central sanctuary of the Jewish nation
    - (2) The soul (“central sanctuary”) of man
    - (3) The church (the center of the Christian community)
    - (4) Heaven (the final hope of future residence for the people of God)
  - iii) A success of the Reformation: rein in abuses that arose from centuries of using this quadriga
- b) Different genres of literature in the Bible
  - i) Poetry, Epistles, Historical writings / other narratives, Parables, Prophecies, etc.
- c) Some vocabulary
  - i) *Meaning* – the principle the author consciously intended to convey by the words used
    - (1) Does meaning belong to the author, to the text, or to the reader?
      - (a) Author – author controls what was meant
      - (b) Text – text is a living work of art, unconstrained either by the author or the reader. As if the text just materialized.
      - (c) Reader – text itself is dead until the reader actualizes it.
        - (i) The one positive of this view is to help us understand that readers don’t come to texts with blank slates. They do bring their own (mis)understandings and backgrounds to texts like the Bible.
  - ii) *Implications* – inferences in a text of which an author may or may not have been aware but that nevertheless legitimately fall within the principle he willed
    - (1) “Even as a miner does not create gold within the ground, the interpreter does not create the implications in a text’s meaning. Both miner and interpreter seek to discover what is already there.” Robert H. Stein
  - iii) *Significance* – how a reader volitionally **responds** to the meaning of a text
    - (1) Meaning belongs to the author; significance belongs to the reader
  - iv) Implications + Significance – often called “application,” but “application” is often used in an unclear fashion. Sometimes when people say “application,” they mean implications, sometimes they mean significance.
  - v) *Hermeneutical circle* – the whole text helps us understand the meaning of each individual word or part of the text; in turn, the individual words and parts of the text help us understand the whole.
    - (1) Note: this concept affects point d) i) and ii) below.

- d) Gives us tools to be accurate readers of the Bible
  - i) *Grammatical-historical method* – the meaning of a text is the author’s intended meaning; the author’s intention can be derived most accurately by observing the facts of history and the rules of grammar *as they apply to the text being studied.*
  - ii) *Grammatical-historical-canonical method* – “the near context, the larger biblical-theological plot structure, and the canonical horizon are together brought to bear on the interpretation of texts.”
  - iii) Genres/textual elements – different rules for different types of texts
    - (1) Story/Biblical narrative
      - (a) Historicity, context, narration, authorial comments/summaries, plot elements, characters, repetition, discourse/dialogue
    - (2) Covenants/Laws (we’ll cover this in much more detail in the lesson on Biblical Theology)
      - (a) Parts: Preamble, Historical Prologue, Stipulations, Provision for continued reading, List of witnesses, Blessings and curses, Ratification ceremony
      - (b) Principles
        - (i) God’s covenants are unilateral and gracious (not between equals)
        - (ii) The stipulations are not to be understood as requirements in order to initiate a positive relationship with God. They presume an already existing covenantal relationship
    - (3) Poetry
      - (a) Hebrew parallelism
        - (i) Synonymous
        - (ii) Antithetical
        - (iii) Step/climactic
        - (iv) Chiastic
      - (b) Much use of picturesque, figurative language
    - (4) Psalms: Two common approaches
      - (a) Types: Lament, Thanksgiving, Psalms of Zion, Royal Psalms, Entrance Psalms, Hymns to God, Wisdom Psalms, Trust Psalms, Penitential Psalms, Imprecatory Psalms
        - (i) This can be ambiguous and many psalms could be categorized multiple ways
      - (b) Canonical setting
        - (i) Book 1: 1-41: David’s Rise to Power through Affliction
        - (ii) Book 2: 42-72: David’s Reign to Solomon
        - (iii) Book 3: 73-89: Solomon to the Destruction of the Temple
        - (iv) Book 4: 90-106: Exilic Reflection on Yahweh’s Past Deliverance of Israel
        - (v) Book 5: 107-150: Hope for Yahweh’s Future Deliverance
    - (5) Proverbs
      - (a) A short, pithy saying that expresses a wise, general truth
    - (6) Prophecy
      - (a) Forthtell and foreteller of divine truth
      - (b) Judgment prophecies are conditional
        - (i) See Jonah (cf. the governing rule in Jeremiah 18)
      - (c) Language of prophecy is often figurative
      - (d) Different horizons of fulfillment (Isaiah 7)
    - (7) Idioms
      - (a) Love/hate; “bowels of compassion”; “apple of one’s eye”; “our hearts melted”
    - (8) Parables
      - (a) Generally teach one basic point
      - (b) Don’t interpret allegorically unless the biblical author or Jesus does (e.g. sower/seed)

- (9) Overstatement and hyperbole
  - (a) Exaggeration is neither imprecision nor falsehood
  - (b) Matt 23:24 – “straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel”
    - (i) Not only is this exaggeration (one cannot literally swallow a camel), but it is also a Hebrew pun (gnat=*galma*; camel=*gamla*)

(10) Epistles

- (a) Parts: Salutation, Thanksgiving and/or prayer, Body, Exhortation/Instruction, Conclusion
- (b) Grammar, meanings of words, logical relationships within the letter are extremely important.

e) Summation - Truth that the author intended us to know

- i) Realizing that there may be horizons of meaning that the Holy Spirit intended that the human author would never have known (meaning vs. implications).
- ii) Reminder: Hermeneutical circle – the details shape the big picture, while the big picture affects how we view the details. We’ll talk about this much more in the lesson on Biblical Theology.

See especially:

Stein, Robert H. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*  
Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*

Additional Reading:

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*