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a **Grace Notes** course

## Hermeneutics

Source Materials:

**“Hermeneutics: the Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation”**  
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**“A Syllabus of Studies in Hermeneutics”**, Rollin Thomas Chafer

### HERM001

adapted for Grace Notes training by Warren Doud

Grace Notes

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# Hermeneutics

## A Grace Notes course

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### Lesson 1 - Preface and Introduction

This Bible study course is designed to acquaint the serious student of the Word of God with equipment that will help in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

We are going to begin with an introduction to the various schools of hermeneutical thought and then proceed to the various principles that are used in the Protestant system of Biblical interpretation.

The approach that will be used is based on the personal belief of the author that the Scriptures are totally and completely inspired by God and that He communicates to His people that which He desires them to know.

We will not only explore the basic principles of interpretation, but will also consider some specialized areas such as symbols, types, parables and prophecy.

Please begin and end this course with prayer, praying as you go. Seek to know God's Word for He has promised that you can (Matt 7:7-8; James 1:5), but more than just knowing God's Word, seek to know Him (Phil. 3:10) in a more

personal and intimate way for many have known His Word, but did not really know the Father (John 5:39-45).

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible published by the Lockman Foundation.

This study course was derived from class notes gleaned from Dr. Dale Carnagey of Tulsa Seminary of Biblical Languages in the fall of 1978, our textbook, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, by Bernard Ramm (Baker Book House, 1970), and Drue Freeman personal teaching notes.

#### Introduction

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a *science* because it is guided by rules. The *art* is in the application of the rules.

The primary need of hermeneutics is to determine the meaning of the Word of God. Since all doctrine rests upon interpretation, we must have correct interpretation to develop correct doctrine.

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Hermeneutics seeks to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers. The best way to accomplish this bridge is through a thorough knowledge of the original languages, ancient history and comparison of Scripture with Scripture. An extensive knowledge of geography and culture is also invaluable.

The step of faith that we must make is the inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). This establishes the boundaries for correct understanding of the Word.

We also must seek to determine the true text. This discipline is called *textual criticism*. *Lower criticism* seeks to determine the author and date of the writing. So called "*Higher Criticism*" is a liberal approach to Scripture that does not accept complete inspiration of the Bible.

There is a need for intellectual honesty and education. One may have the rules memorized, but may not be able to apply them, or may seek to apply them in a biased manner. The objective of the interpreter is to read out of the text (exegesis) not to read one's own viewpoints into the text (eisegesis). One way to become as objective as possible is prayerfully and thoughtfully consider any and all alternatives in a given passage.

Interpreters should approach the text in humility, meaning that the interpreter must be teachable and realize that he should never stop learning. Interpreters must also recognize that inspiration (which comes from God) is infallible, but personal illumination is not.

#### The Qualifications of an Interpreter:

1. One must be a Believer because correct interpretation requires the work of the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor 2:14-16
2. One must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Eph 5:18
3. One must possess a desire to know. Matt 7:7-8
4. One must be seeking to correctly interpret God's Word. 2 Tim 2:15

5. One should have some spiritual education over a period of time. 1 Tim 3:6

#### Introduction by Rollin Chafer

Biblical Hermeneutics receives scant attention in the modern theological curriculum. Even before the time of the virtual abandonment by liberal seminaries of the idea that the Scriptures are the authoritative source of Christian dogmatics, the study of Hermeneutics was relegated mostly to the department of Old Testament. At the same time, it too often degenerated into an arbitrary classification of favorite interpretations which were dictated by accepted creedal dicta, rather than by the application of the laws governing logical interpretative procedure. It seems certain that the thought that Hermeneutics as a science has to do with the mastery and the applicability of the laws governing interpretation was too often forgotten.

Terry does indeed draw a distinction between Hermeneutics as a science engaged with the study of the governing laws, on the one hand, and Hermeneutics as an art concerned with the concrete application of the laws, on the other hand; but the latter seems to me to be but another description of exegetical praxis. In the closing words of his first chapter Terry senses this when he says: "For if ever the divinely appointed ministry of reconciliation accomplish the perfecting of the saints, and the building up of the body of Christ, so as to bring all to the attainment of the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph 4:12, 13), it must be done by a correct interpretation and efficient use of the word of God. The interpretation and application of that word must rest upon a sound and self-evidencing science of hermeneutics."

Perhaps no widely quoted hermeneut has more consistently emphasized the essential fact that Biblical Hermeneutics is, first of all, a study of the laws which govern sound Biblical interpretation than the late M. Cell  rier, Professor in the Academy of Geneva,

Switzerland, whose Manuel d'Hermeneutique Biblique was in large part made available to American readers in a translation and revision by Elliott and Harsha, published in 1881. In the first four chapters of his work he reiterates and emphasizes this definition at the beginning of each section as though he were seeking to combat an erroneous conception of the science: "Hermeneutics is the science which furnishes the true principles of interpretation."

We must insist again that Hermeneutics is not a collection of favorite interpretations gleaned here and there from a bibliography of interpretative writings. A hermeneut is one who, through familiarity of the laws governing sound procedure in the interpretation of the Scriptures, is thereby enabled to test any and all interpretations of the Word of God presented to him. Apart from this thorough understanding of the governing laws he must be dependent upon the opinions of other men.

The necessity of being guided by sound laws is sharply brought out by Lockhart in the second chapter of his Principles of Interpretation, wherein he lists fifteen axioms, one of which is here cited: "The true object of interpretation is to apprehend the exact thought of the author." On this Dr. Lockhart comments: "It is not the privilege of any interpreter to impose his own thought upon the words of an author, nor in any way to modify the author's meaning." The moment that one allows himself this privilege he ceases to be an interpreter and becomes a collaborator with the author. To essay this role with the Spirit Author of the Scriptures should give pause to a larger number of careless interpreters than is daily evident.

Several standard works on Hermeneutics describe the relative place this science occupies in Theological Encyclopedia and Methodology. One of the most concise statements is made by Cellérier and is as follows:

"(a) The Christian divine, called to expound and interpret the Word of God, ought first to explain the history, the circumstances, and the form of

the Bible. This is the first object of Introduction, or Isagogics. [This is often called the Higher Criticism, and the student should keep in mind that there is a vast field of constructive higher criticism as well as the destructive variety. The term, "higher criticism" should be used with qualifying adjectives].

"(b) He must, in the second place, determine, as nearly as possible, the true and original text; and endeavor to disengage it from the numerous variations with which eighteen centuries of citations and transcriptions have encumbered it. This is the object of the Criticism of the Text." [Often called the Lower Criticism].

"(c) Before attempting the explanation of the phrases and ideas of the Bible, a third test, and the most important of all, is necessary. The theologian should understand the principles, according to which they must be explained. The exposition of these principles receives the name of Hermeneutics."

"(d) After these three successive processes have been finished, the Biblical interpreter enters upon his work. He reads, he analyzes, he develops, he comments on the Holy Word, line after line. He no longer constructs a science; he practices an art-Exegetics: he accomplishes a task - Exegesis."

Although the word Exposition is often used as a synonym for Exegesis, in popular usage it is more often used to represent the popular platform presentation of the results of exegetical study.

In the field of Biblical interpretation there are two principal methods of procedure:

- (1) that which functions inductively within the sphere of the Scripture testimony; and
- (2) that which approaches the Scriptures wholly or partly from without, and which is deductive in method.

It was a favorite classroom saying of the late Dr. B. B. Warfield that "all theologies divide at one point - does God save men or do they save

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themselves?" As truly it may be said that all systems of Bible interpretation divide at one point-is the Bible a self-interpreting book or does it require a humanly contrived system of interpretation in order to be understood? In other words, does the Bible contain its own hermeneutical laws which are sufficient, and capable, when rightly understood and followed, of guiding the student to a correct interpretation of its own disclosures: or is it deficient in such interpretational provisions, and therefore dependent upon the resources of human reason to supply that lack?

Intelligently or unintelligently, Bible students in general follow the principles of one or the other of these alternative systems, either wholly or in part. It is a startling fact that many students who assert their belief that the Bible is revelation from God, divinely inspired, accept the latter alternative without realizing its logical implications. To hold that human reason-and how often the phrase occurs in connection with this or that interpretation, "it is not reasonable in the light of present-day knowledge"-is the final arbiter, even in moot questions, leads to definite experimental results in the student himself and eventually leads to the conclusion that it is admissible to accommodate particular Scripture passages to harmonize with extra-Biblical hypotheses.

Writing concerning the work of the students at the Harvard Medical College, Jerry McQuade said: "Psychologists classify men into two types-the type which accepts whatever is told to them as a predigested compendium of all that they should know, and never ask any further questions; hence quietly pass into oblivion, and the type, which feels the impulse of life and the thirst to ask why, wherefore, whither, how; hence etch deep on the tablet of time for the ages to come."

There are two groups of theological students which may be classed under Mr. McQuade's first type. The first group comprises those who accept without question what they are taught

by heterodox teachers. The members of this group, with few exceptions, become ministers of mere human righteousness, and therefore tools of Satan.

The other group represents those who, professing orthodoxy, also follow the line of least resistance and adopt without question interpretative teachings, furnished in predigested form, which may or may not have been formulated in accordance with sound laws of Biblical interpretation. Failing to gain a first-hand experience in the application of the fundamental principles of Biblical hermeneutics by which they may test the Scripturalness of all teachings, the members of this group become mere echoing mouthpieces of other men's theological and creedal opinions, a state which is intolerable to an honest student, and one which is destructive of self-respect, intellectual and spiritual.

In schools of theology, as in other technical institutions, here and there are found students who may be classified under Mr. McQuade's second type, diligently seeking the Biblical "why, wherefore, whither, how," of every teaching, not content with the rumination of predigested theological dicta. Bringing to their task believing hearts and a dependence upon the illumination of the Spirit Author, they truly prepare to "etch deep on the tablet of time." Moreover, as in the case of no other class of technicians their work is peculiarly preserved to shine not only during time but in eternity.

Biblical interpretation, in contrast to the systems dictated by human reason, is inextricably bound up with intelligent and acceptable Christian service. There is no appeal to human reason in Paul's word to Timothy: "The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits. Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things" (2 Tim 2:6, 7). It is indeed true that the Lord gives the understanding, but he imparts this richly to those who, with believing hearts, heed that further injunction to Timothy: "Study to

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shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (v. 15).

## Lesson 2 - Historical Schools - Allegorists

### General

An "Allegory" is a symbolic representation. There were schools of interpretation that took the literal words of Scripture and assumed that they were symbolic of deeper spiritual truths. While there are some obvious symbols in the Word of God such as in Ezekiel 1, it would be a human assumption to claim that all of Scripture is symbolic and that the literal has no significant meaning.

### Greek Allegorical Schools:

The Greek Allegorical Schools were concerned only with their own writings, but their method of interpretation was adopted by both Jews and Christians. Their philosophical and historical traditions which were stated by Thucydides and Herodotus were always at odds with their religious traditions which were stated by Homer and Hesiod. They relieved the tension by allegorizing the religious.

### Jewish Allegorical Schools:

The major writers for the Jewish Allegorical School were Aristobulus (160 BC) and Philo (20 BC - 54 AD). Philo tried to reconcile the Hebrew faith with Greek philosophy. These allegorists claimed that the literal was for the immature.

The Jewish Allegorists developed Canons (a regulation or standard) for allegorical interpretation that told them when they were to interpret in this manner. If they found a statement that was "unworthy" of God, or statements that either seemed to contradict or in any way presented a difficulty, they felt free to interpret allegorically. Also, if the record itself was allegorical in nature or they ran into grammatical peculiarities or symbols they turned to allegory.

### Christian and Patristic Allegorists:

The Christian and Patristic Allegorists believed that the Old Testament was a Christian document but considered it to be full of parables, enigmas, and riddles. They also ignored the historical connections of scripture and believed that Greek philosophy was to be found in the Old Testament.

One of the major writers was Clement of Alexandria (c.150 A.D.) who claimed that there were five possible meanings. The Historical meaning which concerned the actual event; The Doctrinal meaning which included moral and theological teachings; The Prophetic meaning which was concerned with predictions and types; the Philosophical meaning which sees meaning in objects and historical persons; and the Mystical meaning which involved deeper moral, spiritual or religious truth found via symbols.

Origen was a student of Clement who sought to escape the crudities of lay people by taking everything symbolically. He tried to make scripture acceptable to philosophers. Origen's approach was threefold in that the Literal meaning was the Body of Scripture, the Moral sense was the Soul of Scripture, and the Allegorical sense was the Spirit of Scripture. He believed that true exegesis was Spiritual (allegorical) exegesis.

Jerome (347-420) translated the Bible into Latin and that translation is called the Vulgate. It has been the only official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church since the Council of Trent in 1545. Jerome suggested that the Apocrypha be put in Bible.

Augustine sought to develop a theory of signs. A sign is a thing apart from the impression that it presents to the senses and which causes of itself some other thing to enter our thoughts. He based his position on 2 Cor 3:6 which says "who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Augustine's requirements for proper

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interpretation were: 1) an interpreter must be a believer; 2) the literal meaning and historical setting must be held in high regard; 3) Scripture has a double meaning, therefore the Allegorical method is proper; 4) recognize that there is significance in numbers; and 5) the Old Testament was a Christian document and Christ should be sought there. Augustine believed that true exegesis had to consult the meaning of the writer, then the “analogy of faith” which is found in the true orthodox creed and add love, which is spiritual intuition.

Some of Augustine’s other teachings were: 1) that one had to pay attention to the context; 2) if the interpreter is insecure in his basic beliefs, he can’t be part of the orthodox faith; 3) that one must not try and make the Holy Spirit a substitute for the tools; 4) that the obscure passage must yield to clear; and 5) that one must also note progressive revelation within its historical context (some say that he failed to apply this point himself).

Roman Catholic School:

The Allegorism of Roman Catholicism employed a “spiritual” or “mystical” interpretation of the Word. In general, the Roman Catholics combined Typology and Allegory and sought the Moral Interpretation. They believed that the literal and historical interpretation is the foundation of the study of the Bible, but that the “spiritual” or “mystical” meaning, which is beyond the literal, is what we should really seek.

The Roman Catholics use the Latin Vulgate (a Latin translation by Jerome from the Hebrew and Greek) as though it were the original text. The Catholic interpreter accepts what The Church has said about various matters as unequivocal truth. They believe that The Church is the official interpreter since The Bible is not given to the world but deposited with the Church. Also at the heart of their beliefs is that the Christian *Deposit of Faith* is in the Catholic Church. Therefore, no passage of Scripture can be validly interpreted in a manner that conflicts

with the Roman Catholic Doctrinal system. Their view of the “analogy of faith” is to compare a particular interpretation with Church Dogma.

The Roman Catholic “Guide to Interpretation” is that interpretation:

- must be solely about faith and morals.
- is not bound by national or scientific matters.
- must bear witness to Catholic tradition.
- must have a unanimous witness by the Church Fathers.
- is to be explained by unwritten tradition when the passage is obscure.
- follows the “Principle of Development” meaning the doctrines of the New Testament were ‘seeds’ and not complete units in themselves.
- also follows the “Principle of Implication” which is called “Epigenesis” meaning that doctrines grow, develop and change.

**Exercises for HERM001**

1. Why is the study of Hermeneutics both a science and an art?
2. What is the primary need of Hermeneutics?
3. What is the best way to bridge the gap between my mind and the mind of the writer?
4. What is the "step of faith" that I must take to begin to interpret the Scripture?
5. Is my interpretation infallible? Explain.
6. Do I fit the qualifications for an interpreter? If not, why?
7. What is an allegory?
8. What is the major assumption of the Allegorical School of thought?
9. From which Allegorical School did both the Jews and Christians get their foundation?
10. How did the Jewish Allegorical School originate?
11. How do Allegorists view Literalists?

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12. What were the five possible meanings of Scripture according to Clement of Alexandria?
13. What were the body, soul and spirit of Scripture according to Origen?
14. Evaluate the basic teachings of Augustine.
15. Discuss the basic hermeneutical system of Roman Catholicism.