

A detailed line drawing of a lightbulb, centered on the page. The bulb is unlit, with its internal filament structure visible. The drawing is done in a dark, fine-lined style.

SEEING CHRIST IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE

*Hermeneutics at Westminster
Theological Seminary*



Edited by Peter A. Lillback with contributions from
POYTHRESS | DUGUID | BEALE | GAFFIN

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Biblical Hermeneutics

VERN S. POYTHRESS

Biblical hermeneutics has played an important role in nearly all the teaching I have done over the years at Westminster Theological Seminary. My desire is to train students to interpret the Bible faithfully, so I am continually dealing with the interplay between broader principles of interpretation and particular texts. Every year I teach an MDiv-level course called “Biblical Hermeneutics: Old and New Testaments.” That means I am always thinking about and discussing hermeneutics; it is a background framework when I am considering a particular passage of Scripture.

Presuppositions for Hermeneutics

Cornelius Van Til was right in teaching that there is an antithesis in principle between the thinking of Christians and non-Christians, covenant keepers and covenant breakers. Presuppositions—one’s basic commitments—make a difference in how one approaches any subject. Van Til’s principles have had a big influence on my work in hermeneutics. One always has to think through what difference the antithesis Van Til speaks of makes in the arena of hermeneutics.

First, there is a difference particularly when we consider the

interpretation of Scripture. Christians should treat the Bible in harmony with its actual character: it is the Word of God. Non-Christians do not share this commitment. This makes a difference because we must pay attention to the intention of the author if we are to interpret his work correctly. The Bible has human authors, of course, but its main author is God himself.

This thinking about authorship provides us with a good start in working through the distinctiveness of biblical hermeneutics. But there is more to it than that. Christian presuppositions and the work of regeneration make a difference in principle in *every* sphere of life, not merely on the central question of the authorship and authority of Scripture. So we must think through how we should differ from the world in our view of truth, our view of meaning, our view of history, our view of language, and so on. The Bible requires a “special” hermeneutic because it is a special book, the Word of God. But by its instruction the Bible should also transform our ideas about *general hermeneutics*, that is, the issues concerning interpretation of non-inspired human writings.

Based on Christian presuppositions, we engage in transforming the very idea of what texts are and what interpreting texts means. All texts whatsoever live and move and have their being in the presence of God, the God of truth and power and beauty. Does that imply that we can learn nothing from non-Christians? Van Til emphasized not only antithesis, but also *common grace*. Unbelievers have many truthful insights in spite of their corrupt hearts. But the challenges for evangelicals are mostly in the other direction. Evangelical scholars are disposed to use hermeneutical procedures originally developed on the basis of non-Christian presuppositions. They make minimal changes to these procedures, of course, to avoid directly denying the possibility of miracles or the divine authority of Scripture. But minimal changes are not enough. We ought to be rethinking the entire process of interpretation on the basis of sound presuppositions.

Hermeneutical Circularity?

When people hear about using the Bible to transform our ideas about hermeneutics, it can be disturbing to some of them. The process sounds circular. The circle begins with the Bible. We use the Bible to derive hermeneutical principles. Then we use hermeneutics to interpret the Bible. And so our interpretation of the Bible depends on itself! How can we be sure that we have it right? To make the process more complicated, we can add a third stage to the circle, namely, systematic theology. We use the Bible as our source for systematic theology, which is supposed to be a summary of what the Bible teaches. Then we use systematic theology as a presupposition for hermeneutics. And then hermeneutics guides how we interpret the Bible. In this process, we never leave behind our initial use of the Bible, which might be flawed.

Instead of this picture, some people would prefer not a circle but a line. They advise us first to establish sound hermeneutical principles. Then interpret the Bible. Then form a systematic theology. Only in this way can you be sure of your foundations and be sure that you are not departing from a flawed starting point.

Ah, but it is not so simple. There is no way to form sound hermeneutical principles in a vacuum, apart from religious commitments. You are either for God or against him. And even if you are for him, you need growth and sanctification. You are not perfectly pure, your mind is not perfectly pure, and your hermeneutical preferences are not perfectly sound. That is the nature of life in a fallen world.

Therefore, we praise God for his provision. He has sent Christ precisely for the purpose of rescuing us out of this fallen world:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13–14)

As one aspect of this redemption, he has given us the Scriptures for our purification:

Sanctify them in the truth; *your word* is truth. (John 17:17)

Thus, we need the Bible as the guide to enable us to transform and purify our hermeneutical principles. The circle from the Bible to systematic theology to hermeneutics to the Bible is not a vicious circle, but a spiral of growth and progress, guided by the work of the Holy Spirit in illumination.

Does the dynamism of growth imply that everything is uncertain? A postmodern skepticism might tempt us to draw a veil of uncertainty over everything and to bolster the idea of uncertainty with the label “humility.” But here again the Scriptures offer a useful corrective. The Bible says that its central message is clear and that God has in fact designed his Word with skill. Scripture helps those who begin in darkness by leading them into the light:

The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the *simple*.
(Ps 19:7)

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
(Ps 119:105)

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
(Prov 4:18)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have *the light of life*.” (John 8:12)

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. (John 12:46)

Human Authors

Let us consider one area of discussion in hermeneutics: how do we analyze the human authors? The presuppositions of the world will tell us that the human authors of the Bible were merely men of their times. How could they be otherwise? So, interpretation must proceed wholly by fitting those authors into their social and historical environments. Anything else is alleged to be a denial of history or a denial of humanity.

But the authors of Scripture received the aid of the Holy Spirit. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, they inwardly wanted to do whatever God wished to do. And the Spirit is God himself, who is the source of infinite creativity. His presence and his special work in inspiration do not make human beings less than human. Rather, he transforms sinful humanity toward humanity as God originally designed it. More than that, the authors' humanity is transformed into the image of Christ, who is the perfect man, the last Adam. This transformation took place in a measure even in the Old Testament, because the Holy Spirit even then was the same Holy Spirit who is one with the Father and the Son. He acted in mercy and grace toward human beings on the basis of the atonement that Christ was yet to accomplish in the future.

This presence of the Holy Spirit has implications. If an interpreter tries to eliminate the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, he might claim that an Old Testament passage merely reflects its Ancient Near Eastern environment and a human author caught in that environment, an environment that itself is purely human, without the presence of God.

But that kind of reading is certainly wrong. God is sovereign over the Ancient Near Eastern environment, along with all other environments. He reveals himself in general revelation through all environments, so interaction is natural between what God says and the environment in which he says it. This natural interaction extends also to the human authors whom God raised up to be the bearers of his Word. As we observed, the Holy Spirit did not transform these men into that which was less than humanity; rather, he moved them in the direction of the fullness of humanity as God intended it to be. But that fullness of humanity is not something that we can equate with our most prosaic pictures of flat and one-dimensional communication.

In the end, communication through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is uncontrollable by mechanical calculation. We will know humanity fully only at the end of the process of our *own* transformation, when we will be conformed to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

The Part and the Whole

Another issue that arises with regard to hermeneutics is the relation of each part of the Bible to the whole. God caused the Bible to be written over a period of more than a thousand years. As Lord of history and Lord of revelation, he spoke “at many times and in many ways” through the prophets (Heb 1:1). Theologians call this process “progressive revelation.” God did not say everything at once. The earlier communications take into account the limitations in the understanding of people at earlier times. The later communications build on the earlier. What is implicit in the earlier often becomes explicit in the later. The climax to this process of revelation comes in Christ: “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1:2).

Taken together, these communications from God have a mar-

velous unity centered on the divine purpose of redemption and re-creation. Yet there is also a lot of diversity—diversity of human authors, diversity of genres, diversity of stages in redemptive history, and diversity between the comparatively small beginnings and the climactic ending. How do we handle this unity in diversity and diversity in unity?

We can start with some simple principles. God is one God. He is consistent with himself. So the earlier and the later harmonize, as do the poetic song and the historical narrative and the proverb and the prophetic vision. At the same time, God as Lord of redemption and Lord of history unfolds his purposes gradually, and we need to listen respectfully to the intentionally sparse communications at earlier points.

Communication has depth. A single human speaker can unpack an opening statement further on in his speech and provide illumination that gives new depth to its meaning. Even human communication is not always one-dimensionally flat and shallow. Human writing can suggest depths or allude to implications without spelling them out. Or it can spell out these matters in additional communication, perhaps at a later time or in a sequel. How much more so when it comes to divine communication!

So no simple formula is going to provide all the answers to interpreting divine communication at earlier and later times. The most basic principle is the principle of knowing God. God is deep, infinitely deep. Is he also inaccessible? No. God made us and has come to us to save us in Christ. His words are therefore accessible through the mediation of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Christ whom the ascended Jesus has poured out on his people (Acts 2:33). Knowing God is truly the path of “the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov 4:18). Or, as Jesus says, “I am *the way*, and *the truth*, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Recommended Reading From Vern S. Poythress

God-Centered Biblical Interpretation. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999.

In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach.

Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.

Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible.

Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

“Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning: Gains and Losses From

Focusing on the Human Author, Illustrated by Zephaniah

1:2–3.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 3

(2014): 481–99.

Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for

Biblical Interpretation. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.



From left to right: Iain M. Duguid, G. K. Beale, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Vern S. Poythress



“I rejoice in the privilege that I have had in teaching hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary for more than thirty-nine years. Our present approach to hermeneutics, as represented by these essays, continues to express what Westminster had stood for from the time of its founding in 1929. At the same time, we are endeavoring to build on the foundation. I commend these essays for expressing a healthy, biblically sound, and doctrinally sound approach, which rests on the infallible Scripture, the very word of God. I hope that such hermeneutics will continue to honor the name of Christ and the divine integrity of Scripture for future generations.”

—VERN S. POYTHRESS

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