



Article  
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## 1:9 Alliance: Hermeneutics

Editor's Note: You can also [listen to a podcast interview](#) with Joel Van Hoogen released in conjunction with this article.

### Joel Van Hoogen

The Bible itself invites a hermeneutic that seeks the authorial intent of Scripture's writers, pursued through an understanding of the historical and grammatical contexts of their words. This has been the traditional evangelical Protestant approach to the Bible. A firm grip on the Word of God is required to guide others in sound doctrine. An emerging generation of leaders and pastors must commit to biblical exegesis and faithful expositional preaching if we are to faithfully advance and steward the doctrines and Christ-centered distinctives historically upheld in the C&MA. Their hold on the Bible must begin with a confident and committed hermeneutic that enables them to hold out the original intent of those who wrote it.

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Exegesis is the practice of that science. The goal of interpretation is to discover the meaning the author gave through his words. In essence, proper interpretation provides the author with the courtesy of taking his writing as he intended it. We interpret the author literally. This doesn't mean that our understanding of every word or phrase the author employs is accepted as it first appears. Instead, it means we construe words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and discourses according to the common sense dictated by the historical and grammatical context of the writer. Historically, we do all that we can to put ourselves into the times and culture of the author and those to whom he wrote. From this perspective, we can best understand what was written. Along with this, we strive to comprehend grammatical constructions. This means we appreciate the nuances and the literary form the author used to communicate his thought. In this way, the author's meaning is allowed to be what the context most naturally dictates.

All of this applies to interpreting any author or, for that matter, any person that we would engage in conversation. But then there are unique assumptions we add to our search for understanding when approaching the Bible. In the Bible, we are not merely interpreting the words of men — but the Word that God spoke through those men. This is the Word of God. Because God's voice is found in the whole of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16) as well as in every word of it (2 Pet. 1:21), all 66 books of the Bible embody his revelation. Therefore, as the Word of God, we may assume its consistency and cohesiveness. Though God used multiple human authors through varied times, it is his Word and holds no contradictions. Any seeming contradiction may be attributed to faulty interpretation. Moreover, we anticipate a harmonizing of the voices of many writers into the divine voice. God arranges the contributions of many human authors to complement the whole and provide to his people one congruent revelation.

The evangelical Protestant hermeneutic provides the measures by which anyone may confidently unfold Scripture's meaning. This same hermeneutic reminds us that only the regenerate student of Scripture grows in intimate knowledge of and loving submission to God and his Word. For the believer, the Divine Author of Scripture lives within them, implanting the truth of his Word deeper and deeper into their souls (John 14:18-23).

## The Submissive Hermeneutic

This hermeneutic has a direct application. God has spoken to us by his Word, and we must submit to that Word. Our first act of submission is to apply a hermeneutic that seeks the authorial intent of those through whom God spoke. Scripture cannot be cited against Scripture but instead Scripture interprets itself. We are to give precedence in our exegesis to the clear passages of Scripture to help us understand those passages which are less clear. Therefore, with any given Scripture, we are to prefer the interpretation which best harmonizes all the relevant data of Scripture when understood in historical and cultural context. This is the foundation of Scripture interpreting Scripture. While more could be said, no less is tenable.

## Correcting Relativism

This hermeneutic corrects popular, relativistic, and self-centered human thinking. We cannot impose personal subjectivism upon the biblical text. Rather, we submit our subjective thoughts and feelings to the text of Scripture. Any suggestion that the Scripture's meaning may change relative to the individual – that it may mean one thing for one person and a contradictory thing for someone else – is to be rejected.

## Challenging Preferred Outcomes

This hermeneutic challenges any scholarship directed towards preset ideals. God is capable of plainly communicating his truth to his people, and he has. The Bible should be taught by faithful instructors who search out and bow before the intent of the authors. We cannot impose personal preferences upon the biblical text no matter how noble they may seem. Neither should such preferences be imposed upon our observations of the historical and grammatical contexts of the text. Any scholarship which is motivated to discover a preferred

outcome is to be rejected. Along the same lines, any appeal to the complexities or mysteries of Scripture in order to impose the supposed authority of designated experts is to be rejected.

### **Confronting Cultural Bias**

This hermeneutic confronts revisionist readings of the past and idealistic projections of the future based upon assumptions of cultural superiority in the present. The Bible is not a document through which to impose the narrative of our present cultural biases. The command of Scripture, properly interpreted, is as binding on the church today as it was on the day the last letter of the New Testament was written. It was brought forward amid cultures that were tainted by sin, and it has been and is received by sin-tainted cultures still. And yet it presents the believer, in every age and culture, with the only rule for faith and practice. The story of the Bible reveals a work of redemption that is now and not yet. Because God spoke through the words of human agents, the fulfillment of the promise of Scripture will be congruent with the original intent of the authors of Scripture. Any proposal of the moral and redemptive trajectory of the text that does not include or contradicts the authorial intent found in its original expression is incongruent and is to be rejected.

As stewards of God's Word, we are not to speak for ourselves or prostitute his message to serve our own agendas. Instead, we apply proper hermeneutics in disciplined exegesis so that we may speak for him according to His purposes.

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