

HERMENEUTICS FOR CHURCH MINISTRY

1. The Concept of Authorial Intent

What does a particular passage of Scripture mean? This can be determined by discovering what the human author of the passage wanted to say. This statement recognizes that the Holy Spirit worked through people to record God's message for humankind. The emphasis of this principle is on how God directed and controlled the human authors to communicate His inspired, inerrant Word.

To grasp the concept of authorial intent, we must first lay some groundwork. This involves probing two areas.

- One is to examine briefly the divine and human authorship.
- The second area is to focus specifically on the human authorship in order to explore further the important concept of authorial intent.

1.1 Divine Authorship. The Holy Spirit is the divine author of Scripture. This means that He superintended the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, thought processes, and vocabularies, they composed and recorded without error the exact words that God wanted written. Thus, the original copies of Scripture are inspired (i.e. originating from God) and inerrant (i.e. without error).

The primary assertion here is that God the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture. Though He used the thoughts, vocabularies, and experiences of the human authors to produce His infallible Word, the message remains distinctly His.

- 2 Timothy 3:16

In this verse Paul wrote, **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”** The apostle said that God was actively involved in the revelation of His truth to the apostles and prophets who wrote it down. Though human authors actually penned the texts, God took the initiative. He thus remains the Author of the Bible, which is why it is completely authoritative and reliable.

- 2 Peter 1:21

How God used people to produce the Bible remains a mystery. However, we learn from this passage that no prophecy ever **“had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** In other words, the human authors were more than just recorders of what God wanted said. The Spirit spoke through them and gave them the thoughts they uttered. Thus, God alone ultimately is

responsible for what is written in Scripture.

1.2 Human Authorship. Human authorship of Scripture means that God used people to put His thoughts into writing. Though the Holy Spirit is the sovereign agent in producing God's Word, the Lord in His infinite wisdom chose to work through specific individuals (such as Moses, David, and Paul) to record His message to humankind. This means that God used the thinking, talents, styles, life circumstances, and contemporary literary forms of the human authors. Rather than override these factors, He used them to communicate His timeless message.

1.3 Balancing the Divine and Human Authorship of Scripture. History has demonstrated the importance of keeping the divine and human authorship of Scripture in balance. In some cases, people have emphasized the divine side over the human. They have ignored such things as the human author's personal history, language, and style of writing, all of which are vital to consider when doing good exegesis.

Those who fail to take into consideration the human authorship of Scripture spout warped interpretations that miss the true meaning of the text. This, in turn, leads to an unsound application—e.g. the devotional approach to Bible study in which the reader randomly flips through Scripture and settles on a particular passage with no regard to its immediate or remote context.

In other cases, people have overemphasized the human authorship of Scripture and failed to recognize that the Bible is God's inspired and authoritative Word to His people. It's assumed that Scripture is just another piece of ancient literature that reflects an outdated and flawed view of life. Supposedly the Bible is a book filled with opinions, not divine truth—"It's great that the Bible works for you, but don't force it on me!"

2. Authorial Intent

There is no difference between what the human author said and what God said. The implication, of course, is that we must discover what a writer such as Moses, David, or Paul communicated in order to understand the message that God wanted to convey.

2.1 An Illustration: Rex Koivisto provides another illustration of authorial intent. He recalls the popular song entitled "Puff the Magic Dragon", which was written by the folk musical group Peter, Paul, and Mary. It's a tune about the imaginary world of a little boy who is growing into adulthood. However, many who heard that song in the 1960s believed that the magic dragon was marijuana that the user "puffed" on. They were convinced that the song writer's intent was to communicate a message about drugs. Koivisto then relates the following story.

Peter, Paul, and Mary had a thirty-year reunion tour, which was videotaped and later televised. Late in the programme, Peter Yarrow was about to lead the audience in singing "Puff" which had since its debut become a popular

American folk song. But he prefaced his remarks with an illuminating comment, to this effect—"Many people thought that this song was about drugs. But it never was. It was a simple song about a boy and his dragon, and the sorrows of leaving boyhood. I know. I'm Puff's daddy."¹

2.2 The Importance. Discovering an author's intended meaning is important for at least three reasons.

- First, it's critical to good exegesis.
- Second, it prevents certain common errors of interpretation (such as eisegesis, allegorization, and blunders associated with devotional reading).
- Third, it provides a more objective means for interpreting the Bible and validating one's explanation of the text.

2.3 Good Exegesis. The concept of authorial intent is important to good exegesis. This may be defined as "bringing out of the text the meaning the writers intended to convey and which their readers were expected to gather from it."² We can't discover what the text means unless we know what the authors meant by what they wrote. Thus, exegesis is based on authorial intent.

For example, pastors who want to know what the church can and can't do should seek to determine what Luke (who wrote Acts) and Paul (who wrote many letters) wanted to communicate in their writings. This can only be done by exegeting their works. The process involves carefully observing the grammar of the text, the author's use of words, the sequential development of the text, the history and culture behind a given passage, the literary backdrop, and so on.

2.4 Errors of Interpretation. The concept of authorial intent will help the interpreter to avoid certain common hermeneutical mistakes.

- The first one is eisegesis. People who argue that "You can make the Bible mean whatever you want it to mean" are referring to the practice of eisegesis. This is reading into the text ideas that are foreign to it.
- A second common error is allegorization. This involves searching for a deeper meaning in the literal statements of a text that is not readily apparent in the text itself. Supposedly God has placed some higher spiritual meaning in the passage, and it's up to the reader to discover it. This implies that the literal meaning of the text is not its true meaning. Of course, this is a completely subjective way of interpreting Scripture. If this approach is adopted, there's no way of validating the legitimacy of one's interpretation.
- A third common interpretive error occurs when one reads the text "devotionally". As one "devotionally" reads the Bible, he resorts either to

¹ Rex Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 160.

² F. F. Bruce, "Interpretation of the Bible," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (GR: Baker, 1984), 565.

allegorization or eisegesis. For instance, many read the text to discover “what it means to me” or “what I can get out of it” rather than to learn the true message being communicated by the passage.

2.5 Doing Church Subjectivity. These problems (as well as others) demonstrate the dangers of a subjective approach to interpreting Scripture and the need for some guidelines or controls in determining the true meaning of the text. Otherwise Bible students will make a passage mean whatever they want.

Authorial intent gives interpreters objective guidelines to follow, which ensures that their interpretation is valid. The goal is to determine precisely what the human writers meant when they penned a certain portion of Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this approach there is no subjectivity, for the Bible is allowed to speak for itself.

2.6 A Question. Could God intend a deeper meaning in Scripture than the author’s intended meaning? Stated another way, could the Bible have a second, fuller meaning that goes beyond the author’s original meaning?

The answer is yes. Though not the norm, it seems to be the case in some limited situations. For instance, sometimes a New Testament writer’s use and interpretation of an Old Testament passage might indicate that God may intend more than was clearly intended by the human authors.

Another example would be prophetic literature. For instance, did Isaiah fully understand all that he was prophesying about the Messiah in Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6? There’s a good likelihood he didn’t comprehend all that God intended, being unaware of what we know from what is revealed in the New Testament (see 1 Peter 1:10-12).

Let’s give some further consideration to 1 Peter 1: 10-12. Some have argued that God intended a fuller meaning than the one perceived by the Old Testament prophets regarding their prophecies of the sufferings and glory of Christ. In contrast, Peter indicated that they did have some awareness and understanding of the Messiah’s afflictions and exaltation. What they didn’t know was when and under what circumstances Jesus’ suffering would occur.

There is a great deal of subjectivity in trying to discover a deeper meaning in the text. Who decides when there is a fuller meaning, and how is that determined? In light of this uncertainty, it is best to say that each text of Scripture has a single meaning, though some may have related implications or sub-meanings.

God may have intended a fuller sense than that understood by the human author in some limited situations. However, we should view this as the exception rather than the rule.

3. The Hermeneutic of Patternism

All congregations everywhere must always follow the practices and patterns of the early church.

3.1 The Position. It is argued that God has a purpose for recording in Scripture the practices and patterns of the early church. They serve to help all Christians in the following centuries know how to conduct their church ministries. This information serves as a blueprint, or guide, that we can use to direct our churches today. Consequently, if we desire to replicate the exciting, expansive ministry of the early church, we need to follow its practices. In other words, we need to do ministry in the way they did it.

3.2 The Support. There are three proofs that are typically offered in support of the hermeneutic of patternism.

- First, Christ and His apostles established the New Testament church. They determined its structure, form, and ministries, and they did it as well as one could expect. It's thus presumptuous on our part to assume that we could do it any better today. Hence, we are wise to emulate what they did.
- Second, God blessed the early church and its ministries. Many people came to faith in Christ and the congregations grew remarkably. For example, the church in Jerusalem began with three thousand converts (Acts 2:41), and later the number of men alone grew to about five thousand (4:4). If we want God to bless us as He blessed them, then we must do ministry the way they did ministry.
- Third, Scripture teaches that congregations today must observe the biblical practices and patterns of the early church. According to such passages as 1 Corinthians 11:16 and 14:37, believers down through the centuries must follow the practices enjoined by the apostles in the early church.

3.3 The Evaluation. It's important that we carefully evaluate the hermeneutic of patternism.

- *Problem #1*. Patternism wrongly assumes that everyone in the early church shared the same practices and patterns. Regrettably, advocates of this view see the early church as homogeneous rather than made up of culturally distinct congregations.

In many other instances, individual congregations adopted their own unique practices and patterns. For example, the church in Jerusalem met daily (Acts 2:46), whereas the congregation in Troas met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Paul advised the widows in Ephesus to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14), whereas he encouraged those in Corinth to remain single (1 Cor. 7:39-40). The religious leaders at the Jerusalem Council urged Gentile converts to "abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols" (Acts 15:29), but Paul permitted the practice in the church in

Corinth.

- *Problem #2.* If all congregations everywhere are to follow the practices of the early church, which specific activities are normative? Are believers to follow the practices of the church in Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi, or Colossae? The Bible most likely doesn't record all the practices that were prevalent among the congregations of the first century A.D.
- *Problem #3.* We don't have much information on any particular congregation of the first century. This means that many church practices are not mentioned in the Bible. For example, we know that the Jerusalem church met every day and observed the practices recorded in Acts 2:42-47. However, it's not clear whether this routine continued indefinitely. The church in Troas met on the first day of the week and observed the Lord's Supper then (Acts 20:7). Yet it's not definite whether this pattern was true in every instance. The church in Corinth observed the Lord's Supper and used some of their worship time to exercise spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 11:20-34; 14:26-35). But it's unknown whether this paradigm remained in effect throughout the life of the church.

The hermeneutic of patternism advocates taking all the early church practices recorded in the New Testament and combining them to create a composite picture of how a typical first-century congregation operated. However, this approach fails to consider that some practices would conflict (such as meeting every day as opposed to meeting only once a week).

- *Problem #4.* If we must follow the practices of the early church, then *all* of them, not just *some* of them, must be imitated. Otherwise, we're just arbitrarily choosing the ones we like and discarding the rest. The following is a list of some early church practices. If we emulate some of these, then why not all of them?
 - Selecting a leader by casting lots (Acts 1: 15-26)
 - Practicing common ownership and generosity (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32)
 - Greeting one another with holy kiss (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14)
 - Abstaining from meats offered to idols (Acts 15:29; 1 Cor. 8:9-13)
 - Women praying with their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:5)
 - Prohibiting women from speaking in a corporate worship service (1 Cor. 14:34)
 - Baptizing for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29)
 - Anointing the sick with olive oil and praying for their healing (James 5:14-15)
 - Lifting up holy hands while praying (1 Tim. 2:8)
 - Supporting widows over the age of sixty (1 Tim. 5:9)
 - Taking collections in the church for the poor (1 Cor. 16: 1)
 - Gathering every day (Acts 2:46)

- Gathering on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2)
- Drinking wine besides water (1 Tim. 5:23)
- *Problem #5.* Just because the early church followed certain practices doesn't mean that believers today are mandated to do the same. There must first be a command, that is, a universal imperative. In the absence of this, the practice is not binding on churches today.

Proponents of the hermeneutic of patternism maintain that churches down through the centuries have remained similar in many ways. And despite the passage of almost two millennia, the goals and needs of the church are strikingly alike. Therefore, the practices and patterns evident in the early church allegedly should also be present in churches today.

But this line of reasoning rests on a false analogy. Despite some resemblances, there are also vast differences between the early church and the modern church.

- *Problem #6.* We must determine whether an author's intent for discussing a specific early church practice was to establish a precedent. For example, did Luke include Acts 2:26 to teach us that church leaders need to be chosen by casting lots? Obviously not! Did he include verse 46 to mandate that believers needed to meet together every day? The answer is *no*. Both of these practices (as well as many others) are incidental to the author's purpose and weren't intended to be normative.

Many of the passages concerning early church practices are descriptive in nature and thus not binding on congregations today. The author was simply reporting what took place, not mandating an unchanging practice.

- *Problem #7.* The hermeneutic of patternism fails to consider the dynamic nature of the church. The apostles were still on the scene and heavily involved in most of its practices. However, today's church is non-apostolic as the apostles are no longer present.

In light of this discussion, what should be our response to the practices and patterns of ministry evident in the early church?

- First, we need to recognize that incidental actions occurring among first century believers aren't mandates to be followed for the rest of time.
- Second, we are to discern what to observe and what not to observe.
- Third, we should consider whether there is a biblical principle behind an early church practice. If so, we may want to think about how we can apply that principle in a contemporary way.

Let's consider an example. In some cases, believers met everyday (Acts 2:46). On other occasions they gathered together on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). The timeless principle is that the church met for corporate worship (Heb. 10:25). We need to consider and emulate very much the enduring principles,

not the specific practices. That the church meets regularly (the principle) is far more consequential than where or when it meets (the ministry patterns).

4. The Hermeneutic of Principalism

The church is obligated to follow the principles, but not necessarily the ministry practices and patterns of the early church.

4.1 The Position. As noted earlier, we're not obligated to follow the practices of the early church. Nevertheless, we should know and apply the principles that characterize all churches, regardless of whether the congregations are ancient or contemporary. Applying biblical principles implies that we agree with what Scripture teaches, we allow God's Word to transform our thinking, and we let the truth influence the way we operate our church ministries.

This view is based on the premise that the principles of Scripture are normative for all churches everywhere. They are stated in propositional form and reflect the theological truth of Scripture, especially as it pertains to the church. These assertions are not framed as commands or imperatives, but rather as statements of being. Here's an example: the church *is* the body of Christ.

Truths about the nature of the church should affect how it conducts its ministries. For example, the church exists (in part) to reach the lost for Christ. This propositional statement should prompt the church to get involved in evangelistic activities. Here's another example. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are an integral part of the church. This theological truth should lead to the regular observance of these rites among believers.

Imagine collecting and organizing all this information about principles for doing ministry. The result would be a theology of the church, or ecclesiology. While the practices of congregations change and are non-binding, the propositional truths about the church remain the same. Because they transcend history and culture, they are normative and binding on all churches down through the centuries.

4.2 Some Examples. The following are some examples of ecclesiological principles that believers throughout church history should observe.

- The church's beliefs are based on Scripture (2 Tim. 3: 16-17).
- The church's purpose is to glorify God (Rom. 15:6; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31).
- The church's mission is to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15).
- The church is the body of Christ universal and local (Matt. 16:16-19; Acts 9:31; Gal. 1:13; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18).
- The church is to meet together regularly (Heb. 10:25).
- The church is to celebrate the ordinances (Matt. 26:26-29; 28:19; Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).
- The church is to discipline its people (Matt. 18: 15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5).
- The church is to teach Scripture (2 Tim. 4:2).
- The church is to evangelize the lost (Matt. 28:19-20).

- The church is to obey its leaders (Heb. 13: 17).
- The church is to pay its workers (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 5:18).

5. **Some Guiding Rules for Interpretation**

- A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers—e.g. John 2: 1-11 (Jesus turning water into wine).
- Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first-century hearers, God's Word to us is the same as His Word to them.
 - Gal. 5:16-26 (live out the fruit of the Spirit)
 - 2 Cor 6: 14 (do not be unequally yoked—not about marriage, but principle of unadulterated fellowship can be legitimately extended here because it is sustained apart from this verse)
- What Scripture sees as inherently moral are therefore absolute and abiding for every culture.
- Determine the cultural options open to the biblical writers.
 - Distinguishing between supra-cultural principles and cultural applications
 - Being aware of cultural differences between 1st century and 21st century believers