

***INVITATION TO  
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION &  
THE HERMENEUTICAL TRIAD:  
NEW HERMENEUTICAL LENSES FOR  
A NEW GENERATION OF  
BIBLE INTERPRETERS***

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much for your gracious invitation to deliver this year's Criswell lectures. I consider it an honor and a privilege to be with you this week. In my first lecture today, I will introduce you to a set of new hermeneutical lenses that I call "the hermeneutical triad"—those being history, literature, and theology. This hermeneutical triad forms the backbone of Dick Patterson's and my new hermeneutics text, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*. Today, I will introduce you to the hermeneutical triad generally and build a proper theoretical foundation.

What is the "hermeneutical triad"? In short, our simple core proposal is this: for any passage of Scripture, regardless of genre, you will want to study the historical setting, the literary context, and the theological message. Thus the hermeneutical triad consists of history, literature, and theology. As we will see shortly, such a triadic approach is grounded in an authorial-intent hermeneutic that embraces the common-sense notion that successful communication depends first and foremost on discerning an author's or speaker's communicative intent.

After this, I will talk about three important realities with which every interpreter is confronted and three geometric figures that have been used

to describe the hermeneutical task of which the triad is one. I will also make the point that while, as far as I know, “hermeneutical triad” is a new term, the practice of studying a passage’s historical, literary, and theological dimensions is anything but novel. Next, I will compare the approach chosen in our hermeneutics text with other models adopted in standard texts such as *The Hermeneutical Spiral* by Grant Osborne or *Grasping God’s Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. Finally, lest anyone think the hermeneutical triad is exclusively about method, I will close with a few words on the importance of cultivating interpretive virtues.

## II. AUTHORIAL INTENT

A tried-and-true foundational hermeneutical principle which needs to be periodically reexamined and reaffirmed is that the proper goal of interpretation is to discern a given author’s intent in writing to his or her original audience. E. D. Hirsch has argued this most cogently in his classic text *Validity in Interpretation*. What is more, because the biblical text is an authorially shaped and designed product that requires careful and respectful interpretation, there is an important ethical dimension in interpretation as well. As Kevin Vanhoozer has exhorted us in his important work *Is There Meaning in This Text?*, which builds on Hirsch, we should therefore engage in interpretation responsibly, displaying due respect for the biblical text and its author. There is no excuse for interpretive arrogance that elevates the reader above text and author. According to Vanhoozer, the “golden rule” of interpretation requires that we extend to any text or author the same courtesy that we would want others to extend to our statements and writings. This respect is due not only to the human authors of Scripture but ultimately God who chose to reveal himself through the Bible by his Holy Spirit.

In certain circles, the idea of finding the authorial intent of a given document has come under heavy criticism. How can we know the mind of the author when he wrote, especially when the Bible was written so long ago? This is a valid question, but we should remember that in seeking authorial intent, we do not strive for absolute certainty. Hirsch makes clear that he does not expect to find a given author’s intention with certainty but instead posits the determination of a range of more or less valid interpretations as a more realistic aim. What interpreters of any text ought to pursue, Hirsch argues, is possible options of what an author may have meant when he wrote his text. Remember, Hirsch’s title is *Validity in Interpretation*, not *Certainty in Interpretation*.

Let me briefly try to illustrate the primacy of authorial intent by giving an example from everyday life. My wife and I are in the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner. I’m clearing the table, while my wife begins to wash the dishes. My wife notices that the garbage can is full and the trash

needs to be taken out. She looks my way and says, “Andreas, could you please take out the trash?” What exactly does my wife mean? Does she mean that I should take out the trash after I have stretched out on the couch and taken a thirty-minute nap? Or that I should take out the trash *tomorrow*? Well, given the fact that the trash is full and that we are in the middle of cleaning up the kitchen, she probably wants me to take the trash out right now. To hear her intention as I would *want* to hear it (given my irresistible urge to stretch out on the couch) does not respect a very basic tenet of communication—namely respect for my wife’s communicative intent. Much more importantly, taking what my wife says the way *I* prefer to construe the meaning of her words does not demonstrate love toward my wife. In the same way, we should strive to understand the biblical author’s intent and thus fulfill the golden rule of interpretation.

### III. THREE INESCAPABLE REALITIES

We have reestablished, therefore, that any responsible hermeneutic must be grounded in the notion of authorial intent. The obvious follow-up question then becomes: “How do we access and assess authorial intent?” In this regard, the underlying premise of our hermeneutics text is that interpreters of Scripture are faced with three inescapable realities in their interpretive practice. These three realities form the three points of the hermeneutical triad and present themselves as follows:

#### 1. History

*History* is the first reality with which we are confronted as biblical interpreters. God’s revelation to humanity took place in a real-life, time-and-space continuum. The writings of Scripture did not come into being in a vacuum; they were written by people with specific beliefs, convictions, and experiences. Since Christianity is a historical religion, and all texts are historically and culturally embedded, it is important that we ground our interpretation of Scripture in a careful study of the relevant historical setting.

#### 2. Literature

The second reality pertains to *texts* containing revelation that require interpretation. Since Scripture is literature, the bulk of our interpretive work will entail coming to grips with the various literary and linguistic aspects of the biblical material. This includes matters related to canon, genre, and other communicative dimensions of the biblical texts. Our study of Scripture also should be open to consider literary concepts such

as setting, characterization, plot, and a variety of literary devices including the nuances of figurative language.

### 3. Theology

The third and final reality with which we are confronted as biblical interpreters is the reality of *God* and his revelation in Scripture. Since Scripture is not merely a historical-cultural deposit, and since it is not merely a work of literature but inspired and authoritative revelation from God, the proper goal and end of interpretation is theology. Interpreting Scripture is first and foremost an avenue for encountering the true and living God and for being conformed to the image of his beloved Son in the power of his Holy Spirit.

## IV. NEW TERM, WIDELY PRACTICED METHOD

Now, as I mentioned, the *term* “hermeneutical triad” is new—to my knowledge, I am the first to use it—but the actual *practice* of studying Scripture in terms of history, literature, and theology is certainly not. To the contrary, a number of scholars discuss the study of Scripture from this vantage point. Let me give you just a few examples:

- Tremper Longman and Raymond Dillard, in their standard text *Introduction to the Old Testament*, routinely discuss a given Old Testament book under the rubrics of “Historical Background,” “Literary Analysis,” and “Theological Message.”
- N. T. Wright, in several of his writings such as his important foundational work *The New Testament and the People of God*, speaks of studying Scripture in terms of history, literature, and theology, and on the whole does a masterful job in executing this program.
- Kevin Vanhoozer, in advocating what he calls a “canonical-linguistic approach” in his book *The Drama of Doctrine*, writes, “First, in order to do justice to these texts, we must approach them on several levels: historical, literary, and theological.”
- Sidney Greidanus, finally, a leading and widely respected author on preaching, in *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* grounds biblical preaching in the three component parts of history, literature, and theology.

The notion of a “hermeneutical triad” of history, literature, and theology is therefore anything but novel, even if the terminology is. By speaking of a hermeneutical triad, we are tapping into well-established interpretive theory and practice.

## 1. Of Circles, Spirals, and Triads

The hermeneutical triad represents at least the third geometric figure used in a hermeneutical context. First, there is the *hermeneutical circle*. What is the hermeneutical circle? In short, it is the notion that your understanding of a text in its entirety provides the proper framework for understanding the individual parts and vice versa. In other words, we should interpret the parts in light of the whole. No one would deny that the notion of the hermeneutical circle embodies an exceedingly important hermeneutical principle. Second, there is the *hermeneutical spiral*, the notion, as Osborne puts it, that “biblical interpretation entails a spiral from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance in the church today.” This, too, is doubtless a significant insight. As we interpret Scripture, we move back and forth between the biblical text and our own contemporary context and attempt to contextualize scriptural truth to our own situation. Third, there is the *hermeneutical triad*, the proposal that history, literature, and theology form the proper grid or lens for biblical interpretation.

This trifocal lens, I would argue, is critical if we want to maintain balance in our hermeneutical endeavors. The history of interpretation is full of examples where interpreters unilaterally emphasized one or two of those elements while neglecting the other. An obvious example is the so-called “historical-critical method” that over time came to be so preoccupied with a passage’s historicity that it neglected to appreciate the Bible’s literary dimension. Hans Frei has trenchantly critiqued this aberration in his work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. More recently, we have seen a proliferation of literary and narrative methods, a phenomenon Kevin Vanhoozer has dubbed “the aesthetic turn” in biblical studies. This unilateral emphasis on the literary dimension of Scripture, too, I submit, while commendable and a step in the right direction in many ways, is imbalanced, because we should never jettison the Bible’s historical dimension or pit its literary against its historical aspects. Let me commend using the hermeneutical triad as a lens through which to view the history of biblical interpretation. I have tried to do this in a doctoral seminar I am teaching on the topic at Southeastern, and doing so has enabled me to see that many dead ends in biblical scholarship were the result of a unilateral focus on one or two of the dimensions of the hermeneutical triad coupled with a neglect of the remaining aspects.

The hermeneutical triad approach therefore embraces and incorporates the legitimate contributions of each of the three geometric figures I have mentioned—the hermeneutical circle, spiral, and triad. By starting with the big picture or broadest category—canon—and moving from there to genre and to the study of a concrete literary unit in its discourse context, a triadic hermeneutical approach honors the principle of interpreting the parts (specific words) in light of the whole (canon, genre)—the hermeneutical circle. By moving all the way from history—the historical-

cultural grounding of a given biblical passage—to contemporary application, we heed the key concern expressed by the proponents of the hermeneutical spiral—that interpretation is not complete until we apply our interpretive insights to our own lives and those of our congregations.

Our text thus aims to ground biblical interpretation in the best of faithful, responsible, and methodologically sound hermeneutics. Proper interpretation insists that our goal is the author’s communicative intent. The trifocal lens that brings this intent into sharper focus is the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology. Let us now turn to the next question: What does this trifocal lens look like that we have designed and specially fitted for the eyes of a new generation of biblical interpreters?

## 2. The New Lens

I have worn contact lenses for years. Because of a rare eye condition, I must wear hard lenses that keep my cornea in shape. Upon reaching middle age, I have found it increasingly difficult to read the small print in footnotes or study notes in Study Bibles, for example, close up. The other day, when I was helping my 16 year-old daughter Tahlia with a geometry assignment (yes, we were studying triangles), I struggled once again to make out some of the small characters in her math textbook. At some point, my wife entered the kitchen where we were working, with her own reading glasses in hand, saying, “Why don’t you try these?” Resisting my initial urge to brush my wife’s comments aside (after almost twenty-two years of marriage, I know better), I put on my wife’s glasses, and the difference was palpable. All of a sudden, I could see crisply and clearly! All I needed was some extra, sharper lenses. I am here to propose that putting on the new lens of the hermeneutical triad—history, literature, and theology—may well have a similar effect on our ability to interpret Scripture more accurately and more precisely.

Our hermeneutics text has several distinctives. First, there is a pronounced difference between the *sequence in procedure* adopted in *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* and that followed in other hermeneutics texts. Many books, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* being a typical example, move from general to special hermeneutics, based on the premise (I think) that as a piece of human communication, the Bible should be interpreted like any other piece of writing. Thus Grant Osborne, my esteemed former hermeneutics teacher, starts out his book with chapters on Context, Grammar, Semantics, Syntax, and Historical-Cultural Background before turning to Genre Analysis—all aspects of general hermeneutics applicable to the interpretation of *any* text, whether biblical or otherwise. In our book, by contrast, we turn the conventional wisdom on its head: rather than moving from general to special hermeneutics, we move from special to general, that is, from the canon of Scripture and the respective biblical genres to studying the discourse and

individual words of Scripture. In doing so, we are building on an enormous amount of recent scholarship that stresses the importance of the canon, theology, metanarrative, and Scripture as “theo-drama” (Vanhoozer’s term).

As a result, as mentioned, we do not start with individual words and sentences (as Osborne and others do); we start with the canon. Incidentally, this is also how we interpret, say, a play by Shakespeare (though in light of the new movie, *Anonymous*, I should perhaps have used a different example). We do not just analyze the words in a given sentence. We first try to learn more about Shakespeare (or whoever the author of his plays was), his background, the time in which he wrote, surveying his major works, and so on, before finally settling on a particular play and then perhaps reading a good summary before eventually delving in and starting to read the book. Even when we encounter a given word with which we are unfamiliar, we may not stop reading, because we are more concerned about following the general flow than identifying individual word meanings. Thus, in our book, we do not start with analyzing the details of the biblical text (such as word study). We start with the whole (that is, canon and genre).

What is more, we do not start out pretending the Bible is just like any other book because we do not believe that it is. Rather, our purpose is not to study just *any* form of human communication; our purpose is to *study the Bible*—the inerrant, inspired Word of God. This conviction governs our presentation from the very outset and is maintained throughout the entire volume. Ultimately, this is *God’s* canon, conveyed in the genres intended by *God*, and communication of *God’s* discourses using *God’s* words (without, of course, denying human instrumentality, style, and authorship). Thus, we do not introduce the notion of the Bible being “special” at some point later in the interpretive process (as if it were immaterial to the early stages of general hermeneutics) but put it front and center in the organization of the book.

By comparison, other books such as the classic *How to Study the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart essentially jump right into interpreting the different genres of Scripture, which rightly occupies a central part in any hermeneutical method for interpreting Scripture and also forms a sustained and central part of our volume. *Grasping God’s Word*, another popular textbook co-authored by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, utilizes the metaphor of the interpretive journey and adopts a more pragmatic, didactic approach, starting with identifying sentences, paragraphs, and discourses before addressing historical and literary context as well as word studies, and moving to application. Only then, specific New Testament and then Old Testament genres are discussed (which, incidentally, strikes me as a rather idiosyncratic order).

In our book, we also use the metaphor of an interpretive journey through the canonical landscape. We do make a concerted effort,

however, to ground our proposed interpretive method more rigorously in hermeneutical theory, specifically the importance of canon and genre, and the primacy of special over general considerations in the interpretation of Scripture. It is not that words and grammar are not important—they are. It is more a matter of determining the proper framework for interpretation: the canon, genre, and discourse unit, versus individual words and grammar, and how one best translates this into a given interpretive method. Based on the solid foundation of an authorial-intent hermeneutics, and equipped with the new, finely-tuned trifocal lenses of the “hermeneutical triad,” the method we propose in our hermeneutics text, then, looks like this:

#### *Preparation*

- a. Prepare yourself for the interpretive task by recognizing your own presuppositions.
- b. Pray for God to open your mind to understand the Scriptures.
- c. Approach your task with a proper method for biblical interpretation-- the hermeneutical triad.

#### *Interpretation*

- a. Determine the historical setting of the passage and identify relevant cultural background issues (History).
- b. Locate your passage in the larger canonical context of Scripture (Literature/Canon).
- c. Determine your passage’s literary genre and use appropriate interpretive principles for interpreting each given genre (Literature/Genre).
- d. Read carefully and seek to understand your entire passage in its larger discourse context (Literature/Language/Discourse Context).
- e. Conduct a semantic field study of any significant terms in your passage (Literature/Language/Word Meanings).
- f. Identify any figurative language in your passage and interpret figures of speech in keeping with proper principles of interpretation (Literature/Figurative Language).
- g. Identify the major theological theme(s) in your passage and determine the passage’s contribution to your understanding of the character and plan of God in dealing with his people (Theology).

#### *Application and Proclamation*

- a. Assess the contemporary relevance of your passage and make proper application to your own life.
- b. Find appropriate ways to communicate God’s message to God’s people for His glory and their good.



## V. CULTIVATING INTERPRETIVE VIRTUES

Based on what I have said so far, one could get the idea that proper hermeneutics is primarily a matter of method, that is, of following a series of steps and, lo and behold, out comes the correct interpretation. However, this is only partially true. Certainly, method is very important. If you go about doing just about anything in life but you use the wrong way of going about doing it (your method), you probably will not succeed. So method is important. At the same time, what is even more important is the reason why you are using the method, in our case, the hermeneutical theory underlying your practice. Hopefully, my all-too-brief remarks this morning have made at least a plausible case for the kind of triadic approach we are advocating. I would love to see many young Bible interpreters embrace the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology and make it their framework for studying Scripture from here on out (who knows, some may already have been using a similar approach without calling it “hermeneutical triad,” and that is great!). So method is important, and hermeneutical theory is important, too. But what is most important is the person doing the interpreting him- or herself. You and I are not automata, machines who are programmed with a certain hermeneutical method and after a few moments spit out the correct interpretation. Rather, we are persons, and as such we are creatures of habit who need to discard old, unhelpful habits and cultivate new, useful ones. We are learners who need to develop interpretive skills to be able to handle the variety of biblical texts with which we find ourselves confronted in Scripture. Perhaps more importantly, we are called upon to develop interpretive virtues, a set of qualities developed over time that will assist us in becoming increasingly competent biblical interpreters.

In closing, let me suggest a series of interpretive virtues that flow organically from the three dimensions of the hermeneutical triad. Let me commend these to you as worthy goals in your interpretive practice. If you ever have the opportunity to teach hermeneutics, whether in a local church or college/seminary context or at home (*Do* try this at home!), try to instill these virtues in your students. As a student, aspire to hone these virtues in your quest to become what Paul calls “a workman who does not need to be ashamed,” one who “rightly divides” or “accurately handles God’s word of truth.” Here, then, are some of these virtues (though the list is certainly not exhaustive):

1. History
  - a. Historical-cultural awareness
2. Literature
  - a. Canonical consciousness

- b. Sensitivity to genre
  - c. Literary and linguistic competence
3. Theology
- a. A firm grasp of biblical theology
  - b. An ability to apply and proclaim passages from every biblical genre to your own life and to the life of your congregation

As I teach hermeneutics at Southeastern, it is my goal to equip men and women to become virtuous interpreters who exemplify the interpretive virtues of historical-cultural awareness, canonical consciousness, sensitivity to genre, and so forth. Our churches need skillful, competent, virtuous interpreters to defend the faith and to nurture believers with the Word and to help them grow spiritually. Thank you for letting me share my vision for faithful, responsible biblical interpretation and for letting me introduce the hermeneutical triad. In my second lecture, as mentioned, I will demonstrate the hermeneutical triad in action as we look at a very familiar passage of Scripture, John 3:16.

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