Hermeneutics Workshop 04:
Systems of Interpretation
For the Bible Institute at GCBC **Fall 2026**
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Introduction:

Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is divine revelation. God has chosen to communicate through human authors to specific audiences. God's Word has meaning, and it is meant to be understood. Proper hermeneutics allows us to better understand God's Word. However, interpretation is not always an easy task. There are many challenges to interpretation because we are separated from the biblical text in multiple ways. These challenges are often ignored or overlooked, and that can lead to poor interpretation of Scripture. We should seek to identify these challenges, and then apply good principles of interpretation to these challenges in order to find the true meaning of the text. Following certain principles of interpretation leads us to developing a system of interpretation. Not everyone that studies God's Word holds to the same system of interpretation. These differing systems can cause two individuals reading the same passage to come to two totally different conclusions.

What Is a System of Interpretation?

A system of interpretation is the framework through which an interpreter understands how the various parts of Scripture relate to one another. Even when two people agree that context matters for proper interpretation, then can still reach different conclusions because they approach Scripture with different theological frameworks.

Why Do We Need a System?

Systematic theology helps us put together what the whole Bible teaches us about a particular doctrine. We develop a system to help us understand how all the individual passages of Scripture fit together. The system must be controlled by what Scripture says and not the other way around. We put together all the teachings in Scripture about God, Christ, sin, mankind, ect. Systematic theology helps protect us from coming to wrong conclusions based on one passage. Not everyone uses the same systems of interpretation, and therefore their systematic theology looks different. They reconcile different passages and teachings throughout Scripture in different ways than we would. That is why systems are important, and that is why making sure you have a system that is controlled by what Scripture says is essential for proper interpretation.

Major Systems of Interpretation:

There are many different systems of interpretation. We will not attempt to deal with every system that exists. We will identify some of the major ones that you will probably run into throughout your research in commentaries.

One of the major questions that these systems try to answer is how the Old Testament promises should be interpreted in light of the New Testament. How do God's promises to Abraham about the land, nation, blessing, and blessing to the nations relate to the church? How do God's promises to David about an eternal throne and kingdom relate to the church? How do God's promises about the New Covenant relate to the church? These questions must be answered in order to have a proper interpretation of Scripture. There are two major systems of

interpretation that answer these questions differently because they have formed different methods of interpretation and different systematic theologies.

Covenant Theology:

Covenant theology is one of the most prominent systems of interpretation. Covenant theology understands God's redemptive plan through a theological framework involving covenants. Covenant theologians attempt to emphasize the unity and continuity of God's redemptive plan. There are many different groups within this larger system, but the major distinguishing belief within this system is that God's covenants with Israel are fulfilled in the church. God's promises are not literally fulfilled in the nation of Israel, but rather are spiritually fulfilled in the church. People within this larger system may disagree about the details of this belief or how they articulate this belief, but this is the major characterizing belief of this system of interpretation. This is necessarily connected with more of an allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

Allegory is a symbolic representation. This means that words are not understood in their normal sense, but rather they are understood in their symbolic or spiritual sense. Allegory that was intended by the author contains symbols that have a hidden meaning behind them. Many covenant theologians would ascribe to a literal interpretation of Scripture because they believe that Scripture is meant to be allegorical. The interpreter must try to understand the hidden meanings behind the symbols. Allegory is not wrong if it is the intention of the author. The problem comes with finding hidden meanings where none exist, making the conclusions the subjective feelings of the interpreter. The principle of authorial intent protects us from allegorizing passages that were not meant to be allegorized.

Typology is also common among covenant theologians. The main idea of typology is that historical events foreshadow and find greater meaning in later events. This concept overlaps some with allegory, but the emphasis is on a fulfillment aspect. This typology is often Christological. Covenant theologians find types of Christ all throughout the Old Testament. Typology is also not wrong if it is the intention of the author, but it becomes a problem when typology is applied to something that Scripture does not indicate is a type. Similarity between two individuals or events does not mean that one is a type of another. Our principles of interpretation remind us that passages must be interpreted on their own individual merits, with attention to meaning for the original audience.

Amillennialism and postmillennialism are also more common among covenant theologians. Amillennialism is the belief that the Millenium represents Christ's present reign rather than a future, literal-thousand year earthly kingdom following His return. This belief says that Christ inaugurated His kingdom through His first coming, death, resurrection, and exaltation. This belief says the Millenium symbolizes the present reign of Christ, particularly His heavenly reign during the Church age. This eschatological viewpoint is a result of the underlying belief that the promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church. Postmillennialism is the belief that that Christ will return after an extended period of gospel success. The view is that Christ will return after the nations experience extensive conversion to Christianity. The Millennium represents a prolonged period of gospel prosperity and peace. This eschatological viewpoint is also a result of the underlying belief that the promises to Israel are fulfilled in Christ and the church. These allegorical interpretations of the Millenium are a result of a lack of distinction between Israel and the church. They are attempting to emphasize unity in God's plan and program, but this results in a lack of necessary distinctions.

Dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism is the other prominent system of interpretation. Dispensationalism emphasizes distinctions in God's administration of His program throughout history. Dispensationalism does not mean that people were saved differently in every dispensation. Most dispensationalists affirm salvation by grace through faith while distinguishing different administrations, responsibilities, and revelations throughout the dispensations. There are once again different groups within this larger system, but the major distinguishing belief within this system is that God's covenants with Israel will be fulfilled with Israel. Therefore, dispensationalism makes a clear distinction between Israel and the church.

A dispensation is a phase in God's program for mankind in which He, by use of a steward or stewards, regulates the lives of mankind by imposing specific rules for their daily lives. God has used periods of times to reveal something to mankind about Himself by comparison or contrast. Most dispensationalists identify seven dispensations throughout Scripture. Those seven dispensations are the dispensations of innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and fulness of times. Viewing Scripture from this framework causes the interpreter to identify key distinctions in God's program throughout the dispensations. This system of interpretation is built on the foundation of a literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture.

We hold to a literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture. This type of interpretation leads us to the system of dispensationalism. We believe that every prophecy will be fulfilled literally. This includes the promises and prophecies made about Israel that are yet to be fulfilled. Literal interpretation means that we interpret Scripture based on the normal reading of the text. We do not look for hidden meanings within the text because we believe that the text is meant to be understood normally. We do not allegorize passages because we believe that the text has one interpretation. We do not look for types unless Scripture tells us that something is a type. Historical interpretation means that we interpret Scripture in light of the historical context. This means that the human writer and the original audience are essential elements to proper interpretation. If all the promises to Israel are spiritually fulfilled in the church, then the original audience is no longer relevant. Those promises were made to Israel, and thus we believe they will be fulfilled in Israel. The historical context points us to this conclusion. Grammatical interpretation means that we interpret words and sentences at face value. We do not try to make words mean multiple things, and we respect the immediate context surrounding specific words and sentences. This literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture leads us to a dispensational system of interpretation. We do not hold to dispensationalism as infallible because any system organized by man is not infallible, but we hold to Scripture as infallible which leads us to a dispensational system of interpretation.

Premillennialism is the common view among dispensationalists. Premillennialism is the belief that Christ's reign follows His second return. Dispensational premillennialists believe that the Millennium refers to a future earthly kingdom in which God's promises to Israel receive a distinct national fulfillment. This viewpoint holds to the belief that Christ will have a literal, thousand year reign on earth. Dispensationalists expect all of God's promises to Israel to be literally fulfilled with Israel. Traditional dispensationalists teach a pretribulational rapture followed by the Tribulation, Christ's second return, and a future Millennium. This area of eschatology reveals a major different between covenant theology and dispensationalism. The underlying belief that Israel and the church are distinct is consistent with a literal interpretation

of end times prophecy. Dispensationalists are not forced to allegorize or spiritualize certain promises or prophecies because they make the distinctions that Scripture also makes.

Dangers of Systems:

There are some dangers that can come along with interpretation that is too system-driven. Scripture ought to control and direct our system, and not the other way around. These dangers apply to people with all different systems of interpretation including dispensationalism. Dispensationalists can also fall into some of these dangers.

The first danger is reading your system into the text. The idea is that "my system says this verse means X, therefore this verse must mean X." This is allowing our system to control Scripture rather than letting Scripture control our system. If Scripture says something that does not fit into my system, then something needs to be adjusted within my system. If there is a contradiction between our system and a passage of Scripture, then the fault is never with Scripture. We hold to a dispensational system of interpretation because that is what we see taught in Scripture. However, we need to remember that Scripture is authoritative over our system. We ought to let Scripture say what it says even if it makes our system more difficult to explain.

The second danger is ignoring difficult passages. Both dispensationalists and covenant theologians can be guilty of doing this. The idea is that if a passage does not fit your framework, then you simply do not discuss it much. The problem is that if a passage does not fit your framework, then there is a problem with your framework. Covenant theologians might avoid chapters like Ezekiel 40-48. These chapters describe a future temple that challenges their belief that the church fulfills the promises made to Israel. These passages talk about a physical temple, a sacrificial system, a priesthood, and division of land according to tribes of Israel. Covenant theologians would have to interpret most of the details in these chapters as symbolic rather than as literal prophecies. Therefore, they might be tempted just to avoid these chapters because they challenge their system of interpretation. Romans 11 is another chapter that can create challenges for their system of interpretation. Romans 11:1 says "I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Many of them do not agree with how to handle this chapter because it challenges their belief that God's promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church. Dispensationalists can also be guilty of avoiding passages that create challenges for their system of interpretation. Galatians 3 can challenge the dispensational belief that Israel and the church are totally distinct. Galatians 3:29 says "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." If the church consists of people who are Abraham's seed and heirs of the promise, how should that affect the way we understand the promises originally given to Abraham? This is the question dispensationalists must answer, and many may be tempted to avoid passages like this that challenge their system. Hebrews 8:6-13 and 10:1-18 can also create challenges for dispensationalists. Both of these passages talk about the New Covenant that the Lord promised to make with Israel and Judah in Jeremiah 31:31. However, Hebrews 10 makes present applications to the church based on the promises of this New Covenant. This challenges the belief that all promises to Israel will be fulfilled in Israel. We must not avoid passages that challenge our system of interpretation, but rather we should make sure our system actually lines up with what all of Scripture teaches.

The third danger is proof-texting your system. Both dispensationalists and covenant theologians can be guilty of doing this. The idea is collecting a few verses that appear to support

your position while ignoring passages that create tension or difficulties. Dispensationalists and covenant theologians both typically refer to their favorite passages much more than they refer to passages that are harder to explain within their system of interpretation. Their favorite passages are often the passages that the other system avoids. If your system is consistent throughout all of Scripture, then there is no need to proof-text your system. The principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture reminds us that we need to consider how each individual passages fits within the whole context of Scripture.

The fourth danger is misrepresenting opposing systems. The idea is "people who disagree with me do not believe the Bible" or "people who disagree with me have no respect for Scripture." This is a poor representation that both covenant theologians and dispensationalists often make of the other side because their defense of their own system is weak. We can recognize that many covenant theologians are studying God's Word in depth, are wanting to believe what the Bible says, and think they are interpreting Scripture accurately. Some may have wrong motivations, but I believe most of them do not. We should seek to understand the strongest form of their position before evaluating it. We do not have to make this discussion about interpretation of Scripture an argument motivated by the flesh. We do not have to fall into this danger of judging someone else's motivations or intentions. We should evaluate all systems of interpretation against what Scripture actually says, and we should let Scripture be our ultimate authority.

Homework – Consider Theological/Systematic Assumptions:

You should have chosen a passage, identified challenges, and established interpretative principles. Now, you need to identify what larger theological questions affect the interpretation of your passage. What dispensation does your passage take place in? Is your passage about Israel or the church? Is it prophecy? Is it fulfilled, partially fulfilled, or future? Is it connected to a covenant? Does another theological system interpret it differently? Answering this last question might involve looking at some commentaries to see if they differ in any substantial way. Your passage may be a passage that is interpreted the same by both covenant theologians and dispensationalists, but it may also be a passage that is commonly disagreed upon.

Conclusion:

A system of interpretation is important because it gives us a framework through which we understand how different passages relate to each other. Before we interpret a passage, we should be able to recognize what larger theological questions are involved. Scripture is sufficient and authoritative, so a good system should never contradict Scripture. We ought to always be looking for the proper interpretation of a passage even if a system disagrees with that interpretation.