

Ellen G. White and Hermeneutics Part I: Who Needs It?

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I. Introduction

- A. Four basic theological presuppositions are foundational to the study of hermeneutics.
 - 1. Revelation: God reveals himself to humanity through spokespersons (2 Peter 3:2; Rev 1:1; 19:10; 22:6; Jer 1:4-10).
 - 2. Inspiration: The Holy Spirit guided the prophets in writing the thoughts received by revelation (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21).
 - 3. Inscripturation: The written form of the revelation of God is inspired and authoritative.
 - 4. Illumination: It is possible for men and women of all times and places, through partnership with the Holy Spirit, to understand the revelation of God (Deut 30:11-16).
- B. A practical reason for the importance of hermeneutics: Most controversies over the use of the Ellen G. White writings are at least ostensibly related to issues of interpretation.
- C. Hermeneutics is the heart of this course. *AU Bulletin* course description: "Orientation in methods of research and interpretation of the writings of Ellen G. White."
 - 1. Previous topics have been background to this one.
 - 2. Topics after this will seek to apply hermeneutical principles to a variety of issues.
- D. Definitional Considerations
 - 1. What does the word *hermeneutics* mean? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines hermeneutics as "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation and explanation."
 - 2. The chief concerns of hermeneutics are:
 - a. What did the prophet mean by what the prophet said?
 - b. What does the prophet's message mean today?
 - 3. The search for meaning includes two major aspects:
 - a. *The words* (semantics).
 - b. *The thoughts and message* conveyed by those words (intent of the prophet and of the Holy Spirit, 1 Peter 1:10-11).

Everyone has had experience with interpreting words and meanings. Our contemporary life is full of examples in which we use interpretation to draw the right meaning out of words and expressions.

It happened in the Denver County Courthouse in early 1999. Judge Claudia Jordan was officiating that

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Friday, when she hurriedly scribbled out a message and shoved it to the clerk: "Blind on the right side. May be falling. Please call someone." Realizing a medical emergency could be transpiring, the clerk raced off and called 911. A few moments later when Judge Jordan learned that paramedics were rushing to the courthouse to assist her, she cried out in dismay. Pointing to the sagging venetian blinds on the right side of the courtroom, she hurriedly explained, "I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I wanted someone *from maintenance!*"

"Blind on the right side. May be falling. Please call someone." The clerk knew what the judge *wrote*. The clerk did not know what the judge *meant*.

E. Objectives and Methodology of Hermeneutics

1. The **goal** of hermeneutics is to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).
2. The **guiding purpose** of hermeneutics is twofold:
 - a. To achieve balance.
 - b. To avoid distortion.
3. The **importance** of hermeneutics :
 - a. "Listen as for your life to 'what saith the Scripture.' It is of supreme importance that you hear aright....Your salvation depends on you hearing aright, and receiving with meekness the engrafted Word" (UL 50; from Letter 32, Feb. 5, 1907).
4. The best **methodological approach** seeks to develop and employ "tools" (rules) by means of which meaning may be correctly extracted from the message. (The next three parts will deal with methodology.)

F. Is there a need for hermeneutics?

1. The purpose for this introductory lecture on hermeneutics is to show that there is a need for hermeneutics. Whether with the Bible or with the writings of Ellen G. White we need to know what the text says and what it means. Hermeneutics is therefore an important science and theological endeavor.

II. The Biblical Backgrounds of the Term Hermeneutics

- A. Christ (Luke 24:27). "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded [*hermeneuo*] to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."
- B. Earliest preaching:

Preaching, as customarily thought of today, was first done in the post-Exilic synagogues of Palestine following the captivity. It was inextricably intertwined with concerns about hermeneutics. Nehemiah 8:8 : "They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear, and giving the meaning, so that the people could understand what was being read."
- C. **Philip** asked the Ethiopian treasurer, who was reading the book of Isaiah as he rode in his chariot near Gaza, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30).
- D. **Paul** prayed that the Christians at Colosse might be filled with the knowledge of God's will "through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9). He urged Timothy, in his last epistle, to "reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Tim 2:7). He also said, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of God" (v.15).

- E. If, in his word, God tells us we should understand what is in Scripture, if we should boast about understanding and knowing him, if we should handle the word of God correctly, is it, therefore, possible to *not* understand Scripture, to misinterpret it, and to handle the word of God incorrectly? Yes, it is possible.

III. Misinterpretation -- A Problem for Prophets

A. A Problem for Jesus.

1. The earthly ministry of Jesus was made unnecessarily difficult because he was so frequently misunderstood.
 - a. By the religious leaders of his day:
 - (1) "The envious Pharisees misinterpreted the acts and words of Christ which, if properly received, would have been beneficial to their spiritual understanding" (1SM 30).
 - (2) "When Christ was in our world, He said to the Pharisees and scribes, 'Why do ye not understand my words and appreciate them?' They were continually placing their own construction upon the plain words of truth that fell from His lips" (UL 236).
 - (3) "But those who had been entrusted with the oracles of God, that they might be faithful expositors of the Scriptures, rejected and denied the Teacher sent from heaven. Christ saw that their spirit and principles were entirely contrary to the Scriptures. He saw that the Word of God was misinterpreted and misapplied. He saw how difficult it would be to instruct the people to read the Scriptures correctly, when their teachers read them in the light of their perverted judgment. What could He do to soften and subdue their hearts? This was the burden of His prayer [when He prayed all night in the mountain-- Luke 6:12]" (UL 80).
 - b. By his own disciple, Judas Iscariot:

"He [Judas] would introduce texts of Scripture that had no connection with the truths Christ was preaching. These texts, separated from their connection [context], perplexed the disciples, and increased the discouragement that was constantly pressing upon them. Yet all this was done by Judas in such a way as to make it appear that he was conscientious. And while the disciples were searching for evidence to confirm the words of the great teacher, Judas would lead them almost imperceptibly on another track. Thus in a very religious, and apparently wise, way he was presenting matters in a different light from that which Jesus had given them, and attaching to His words a meaning that He had not conveyed. His suggestions were constantly exciting an ambitious desire for temporal preferment, and thus turning the disciples from the important things they should have considered" (DA 719).

B. A Continuing Problem For Ellen White.

1. "Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given...picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection [context], and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves [only] the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White" (1SM 44).
2. "Those who are not walking in the light of the message, may gather up statements from my writings that happen to please them, and that agree with their human judgment, and, by separating these statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasoning,

make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn. I charge you not to do this work. To use my writings thus . . . is misleading and inconsistent” (E.G. White to G.C. Tenney, Letter 208, June 29, 1906, p. 3).

IV. Why Some Think There is No Need for Hermeneutics.

A. Typical Arguments

1. "Take it just as it reads, in plain English. We don't need a formal set of rules to interpret inspired writings." "After all, didn't Sister White, herself, say, 'Take the word of God just as it reads'?" (UL 144). That is true, but she meant the plain meaning of the totality of Scripture on a topic, not necessarily the apparent meaning of an isolated text.
2. Some people seem to perceive everything in life as purely good or purely evil, totally right or totally wrong. People used this kind of reasoning to criticize W. A. Fagal for preaching the gospel on television back in 1950.
3. People who hold a dictation-verbal concept of inspiration, reason that if God dictated every word of Scripture, then surely words dictated by God cannot be misunderstood.

Example: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). Does this forbid killing insects? Some Adventists in 1901 thought so (3 SM 329). True meaning: "You shall not murder."

B. Two Dangers to Avoid.

C.

There are dangers in using rules of interpretation. (There are equal or greater dangers in interpreting by impulse or intuition without being guided by any objective principles.)

1. Danger #1 : That in explaining, we "explain-away."
 - a. Rules of interpretation can be misused to water down the clear intent of the inspired message (Matthew 15:4-6). "Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition." Ellen White alluded to the same text with reference to how people misuse her writings:

"If the preconceived opinions or particular ideas of some are crossed in being reproved by testimonies, they have a burden at once to make plain their position to discriminate between the testimonies, defining what is Sister White's human judgment and what is the word of the Lord. Everything that sustains their cherished ideas is divine, and the testimonies to correct their errors are human--Sister White's opinions. **They make of none effect the counsel of God by their tradition**"--Ms 16, 1889, p. 1 ("The Discernment of Truth," circa Jan. 1889. 3SM p. 69) (2MR 87.3).
 - b. Counsel for pastors and other church leaders:

"And now, brethren, I entreat you not to interpose between me and the people, and turn away the light which God would have come to them. Do not by your criticism take out all the force, all the point and power, from the *Testimonies*. Do not feel that you can dissect them to suit your own ideas, claiming that God has given you ability to discern what is light from heaven and what is the expression of mere human wisdom. If the testimonies speak not according to the word of God, reject them. Christ and Belial cannot be united. For Christ's sake, do not confuse the minds of the people with human sophistry and skepticism, and **make of none effect** the work that the Lord would do" (5T 691).

- c. Satan's last deception:

“The very last deception of Satan will be to make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God. ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’ (Prov. 29:18). Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, to unsettle the confidence of God's remnant people in the true testimony. He will bring in spurious visions to mislead, and will mingle the false with the true, and so disgust people that they will regard everything that bears the name of visions as a species of fanaticism; but honest souls, by contrasting false and true, will be enabled to distinguish between them” (2SM 78.2; see also 1SM 48.3).

“There will be a hatred kindled against the testimonies which is satanic. The workings of Satan will be to unsettle the faith of the churches in them, for this reason: Satan cannot have so clear a track to bring in his deceptions and bind up souls in his delusions if the warnings and reproofs and counsels of the Spirit of God are heeded.”-- Letter 40, 1890 (1SM 48.4).
- 2. Danger #2 : The "everything-is-gray" syndrome :
 - a. In endeavoring to correct one extreme view, there is always the potential danger that, in reaction, one will go to the opposite extreme. In attempting to correct the erroneous view that *all* things in life are black-or-white, we may, unwittingly, create the wrong impression that *nothing* is clear, or absolute.
 - b. For, indeed, there are moral absolutes in the Christian walk. Moral purity is an absolute, adultery is always wrong. It is always wrong to lie, cheat, or steal.
 - c. But in some matters (for example, diet), there are gray areas: not everything is absolutely right or wrong. We do well to remember what Ellen White said about diet: "The other members of my family do not eat the same things I do. I do not hold myself up as a criterion for them. I leave each one to follow his own ideas as to what is best for him. I bind no one else's conscience by my own. *One person cannot be a criterion for another in the matter of eating. It is impossible to make one rule for all to follow*" (To Bro. and Sis. G.A. Irwin, Lt 127, 1904, cited in *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 491).

V. Reasons Why We Need a Clear Hermeneutical Method

- B. The Existence of Misinterpretation.
- C. Distance. The greater our chronological, historical, theological, and linguistic *distance* from the original context in which she wrote, the more we need a hermeneutical method that pays close attention to all these areas.
- D. Truth. Our need to know the will of God, as accurately as possible, demands a Bible-and-Spirit-of-Prophecy based hermeneutical method.
- E. Unity of the Church. The unity of the church demands a hermeneutical method that we can all agree on, yielding interpretations that we can agree on.

VI. A Hermeneutical Process for the Bible and Ellen G. White.

- A. At least six authors have published on the hermeneutics of the Ellen G. White writings (see

Additional Sources at end of lecture). The following outline seeks to boil down the most essential elements of these works into a simple, memorable, yet comprehensive outline.

B. The Five-Step Hermeneutical Outline

1. Preparation

- a. Heart**
- b. Mind**

2. All Available Data

- a. Scripture**
- b. Spirit of Prophecy**

3. Contexts

- a. Literary**
- b. Historical**
- c. Theological**

4. Principles vs. Particulars (= “Precepts,” or “Applications”)

5. Specialized help for exceptional cases.

- a. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, index and chapters on hermeneutics**
- b. Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.**

World Wide Web: <<http://www.WhiteEstate.org>>

Andrews University Research Center, James White Library
Telephones: 616-471-6266, 3209

General Conference, Main Office of the White Estate

E-mail: Tim Poirier: <TPoirier@WhiteEstate.org>

Telephones:

Administrative Secretary: 301-680-6545

Tim Poirier: 301-680-6552

Note on exams: Items 1 through 5b should be memorized for both exams. Identical wording is not required, but you should be close enough that I can see that you know the content. For 5a, “textbook” would be the absolute minimum; for 5b, “White Estate” would be enough. The phone numbers and Internet addresses will not be on the exam.

VII. Preparation—the Prerequisite for Spirit-led Hermeneutics

(2 Chron 12:14; 19:3; 20:33; Ezra 7:10)

A. Heart Preparation

1. Necessity

“The perception and appreciation of truth, [Jesus] said, depends less upon the mind than upon the heart. Truth must be received into the soul; it claims the homage of the will. If truth

could be submitted to the reason alone, pride would be no hindrance in the way of its reception. But it is to be received through the work of grace in the heart; and its reception depends upon the renunciation of every sin that the Spirit of God reveals. Man's advantages for obtaining a knowledge of the truth, however great these may be, will prove of no benefit to him unless the heart is open to receive the truth, and there is a conscientious surrender of every habit and practice that is opposed to its principles. To those who thus yield themselves to God, having an honest desire to know and to do His will, the truth is revealed as the power of God for their salvation" (DA 455-456).

2. Positive danger of study without heart preparation

"Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit we shall be continually liable to wrest the Scriptures or to misinterpret them. There is much *reading of the Bible that is without profit and in many cases is a positive injury*" (5T 704, emphasis supplied).

"When the word of God is opened without reverence and without prayer; when the thoughts and affections are not fixed upon God or in harmony with His will, the mind is clouded with doubt; and *in the very study of the Bible, skepticism strengthens*. The enemy takes control of the thoughts, and he suggests interpretations that are not correct" (5T 704, emphasis supplied; see also SC 110).

3. Methods

a. Prayer

b. Willingness to yield up preconceived ideas

"All who handle the word of God are engaged in a most solemn and sacred work; for in their research they are to receive light and a correct knowledge, that they may give to those who are ignorant. . . . Everyone who diligently and patiently searches the Scriptures that he may educate others, entering upon the work *correctly and with an honest heart, laying his preconceived ideas, "whatever they may have been, and his hereditary prejudices at the door of investigation, will gain true knowledge. But it is very easy to put a false interpretation on Scripture, placing stress on passages, and assigning to them a meaning, which, at the first investigation, may appear true, but which on further research, will be seen to be false.* "If the seeker after truth will compare scripture with scripture, he will find the key that unlocks the treasure house and gives him a true understanding of the work of God. *Then he will see that his first impressions would not bear investigation, and that continuing to believe them would be mixing falsehood with truth*" (MS 4, 1896).

c. Surrender to Holy Spirit; commitment to practice the light received (DA 456, above).

B. Mind Preparation

1. Correct hermeneutics

2. Broad general knowledge of Bible and Spirit of Prophecy.

3. Growing personal acquaintance with the writings themselves

VIII. Summary

A. The doctrines of Revelation, Inspiration, and Illumination imply the need of a careful method to help us ascertain whether we are being led by the Holy Spirit or merely by personal intuition.

B. Definition of hermeneutics: "The study of principles of interpretation."

C. Concerns of hermeneutics:

1. Words and their individual meaning.
2. Thoughts and message conveyed by the words.

D. Jesus used a hermeneutical method in expounding Scripture: Luke 24:27

E. Dangers in misuse of hermeneutics: Can be used to evade pointed truth, by explaining it away or watering it down. This is at least part of what Ellen White meant by “make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God” (2SM 78).

F. Danger in having no hermeneutical method: Confusion and disunity because everybody interprets it according to their own impulses, biases, and opinions.

G. Four reasons why we need a hermeneutical method:

1. Misinterpretation took place even in Ellen White’s lifetime.
2. Chronological, historical, theological, and linguistic distance.
3. The need for certainty about truth.
4. The need for unity in the church.

H. The Five-step hermeneutical outline. The next three lectures will present steps 2-5 of a hermeneutical process for the writings of Ellen White.

IX. Review Questions for Exam Preparation

1. Give 4 reasons why we need an objective hermeneutical method (p. 5).
2. Learn the Five-Step Hermeneutical Outline, including three subheads under Step 3.
3. Give a Bible text (and be able to state its key idea) for the hermeneutical principle that heart preparation is the essential prerequisite for spiritual study. (Proverbs 9:10)
4. Complete the sentence: “Man’s advantages for obtaining a knowledge of the truth, however great these may be, will prove of no benefit to him unless the _____ is open to receive the truth, and there is a _____ of every _____ and _____ that is _____ to its principles” (DA 455-456).

X. Additional Sources on the Hermeneutics of the Ellen G. White Writings

T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (1955), 438-449.

Arthur L. White, “Helpful Points in Interpretation and Use of the Ellen G. White Writings,” in *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* (1963), 3:3211-3216.

Robert W. Olson, “Hermeneutics: Guiding Principles in the Interpretation of the Bible and the Writings of Ellen G. White.” White Estate Document (1986).

Roger W. Coon, “EGW and Hermeneutics: Its Importance and Place—An Introduction,” GSEM 534 Lecture Outline, Andrews University, April 4, 1995.

George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (1997).

Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, (1998), 372-443.