


*The Role of Hermeneutics in Theological Systems*  
Shepherds 360 Church Leaders Conference, Cary, NC, Oct 21–24, 2024

Cory M. Marsh, Ph.D.  
Professor of New Testament, Southern California Seminary, El Cajon, CA  
Scholar in Residence, Revolve Bible Church, San Juan Capistrano, CA  
Cory.marsh@socalsem.edu

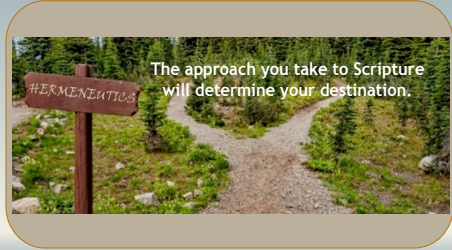
SHEPHERDS 360  
CHURCH  
LEADERS  
CONFERENCE,  
CARY, NC, 2024

Cory M. Marsh, PhD  
Professor of New Testament  
Southern California Seminary  
San Diego, CA.  
Scholar in Residence  
Revolve Bible Church  
San Juan Capistrano, CA

The Role of Hermeneutics in  
Theological Systems



THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF  
HERMENEUTICS



The approach you take to Scripture  
will determine your destination.

LANGUAGE & HERMENEUTICS

- The purpose of language is for *meaningful communication*—between God and man, man and God, and man and man.
- Presupposes God is logical or orderly (1 Cor 14:33).
- Humans expect to be understood (authorial intent). Normal default way of thinking, speaking—and praying.
- Therefore, *authorial intent* is the meaning of “meaning.”
  - What the *author intended to convey* is the meaning of any message (written or oral).
  - Authorial meaning is sharable, reproducible.
- The literal method of hermeneutics is based on these principles of language (logical God, language is meaningful communication, authorial intent/meaning).
- The greatest proof of literal hermeneutics is that without it, logical and sincere communication is impossible!

LANGUAGE & HERMENEUTICS

- The literal method of interpretation is built around two main components: *grammar* and *history*.
- For each passage examined, both the *grammar of the Text* (semantics and syntax) and the *facts of history* (historical context and factual historical hindsight) are surveyed at the discourse level.
- Both grammar and history are taken at face value *consistently* in order to reach one main goal: *the single-intended meaning of the Author/author*. Exegesis.
- The technical term is a *consistent* “literal, grammatical-historical” hermeneutical method. Non technical terms are: plain sense, clear sense, normal sense, natural sense, obvious sense, face-value sense, etc.

THE ROLE OF HERMENEUTICS IN SYSTEMS OF THEOLOGY	
Inductive vs. Deductive Starting Points	
Inductive Method = Bottom Up	Deductive Method = Top Down
Evidence Based	Assumption Based
From Particulars to Universals	From Universals to Particulars
From Data to Conclusion	From Premise to Conclusion
Dependent on “Exegesis”	Can be dependent on “Eisegesis”

INDUCTIVE HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES	
Principle	Meaning
Literal Principle	Most natural sense. What the author intended.
Contextual Principle	The text within its historical, literary, and theological settings.
Single-Meaning Principle	One correct interpretation. Wide-range significance.
Exegetical Principle	Meaning <i>drawn out</i> of the text, not put in it.
Linguistic Principle	Priority of original languages over translations.
Progressive / Dispensational Principle	Meanings in the OT are not changed by the NT. Attention paid to distinct economies.
Consistency Principle	The same method maintained through all the biblical genres.

## COVENANT THEOLOGY IS DEDUCTIVE

- In order to maintain salvation-history as the primary theme in Scripture, CT approaches the text *deductively* as its starting point to postulate theologically-redemptive covenants, even reaching back into eternity past preceding biblical revelation.
- CT constructs its view of world history on the basis of these two or three *theological* covenants, none of which is explicitly identified in Scripture, at best inferred from Scripture.
- CT's deductive approach allows for the *system itself* to be a hermeneutic by which to interpret key turning points in Scripture. Covenant theologians, therefore, have no qualms admitting their system is a hermeneutic rather than being the *result* of a hermeneutic (contra DT):
  - "In that historical unit, salvation is defined in covenantal terms, but that is the heart of it. So it is a redemptive-historical hermeneutic. To me, that is what makes a covenantal theology."—**Peter Lillback** ("Covenant Theology: Zwingli et. al. Versus Luther I," part 6, lecture, WTS).
  - "God's [theological] covenants with us are the historically conditioned *hermeneutical tool* for relating the Old and New Testaments. Reformed covenant theology was never "invented," as if we can trace the origins of *this hermeneutic* and its doctrinal categories to a clear-cut moment in church history"—**Harrison Perkins** (*Reformed Covenant Theology*, 445).
  - "Once again, this covenant theology can be read out of the Scriptures or it can be *imposed upon the Scriptures*—**Michael Horton** ("Interpreting Scripture by Scripture," *Modern Reformation*, July, 2010).

## DISPENSATIONALISM IS INDUCTIVE

- Dispensationalism is a biblical theology that offers a view of world history which glorifies God through his dealings with creation by way of divinely governed economies advanced throughout Scripture. Its distinct pattern of beliefs and theology are the *result* of its approach to Bible study, that approach being a consistently applied grammatical-historical hermeneutic.
- Three reasons why dispensationalism is inductive by its use of consistent, literal hermeneutics ("grammatical-historical")—philosophically, biblically, and logically:
  - **Philosophically:** *The purpose of language itself requires literal interpretation.*
  - **Biblically:** *The OT prophecies of Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally.*
  - **Logically:** *Only way to ensure objectivity and clarity.*
- "Dispensationalism is not a hermeneutical approach that is imposed upon the Scriptures. It is, rather, a way of reading the Bible that can be supported by the Bible itself."—**Glenn R. Kreider** (*Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, 18).

## DISPENSATIONALISM

Charles Ryrie's *Sine Qua Non of Dispensationalism*

- I. Consistent Literal Interpretation of Scripture
- II. Distinction between Israel and the Church
- III. Doxological purpose of human history

**SINE QUA NON:**  
That, without which, there is nothing.

## THE SINE QUA NON & OTHER DISPENSATIONAL DISTINCTIONS IN SCRIPTURE

- Luke 1:31–32: consistency demands Virgin Birth *and* future literal reign over national Israel.
- Rom 11:25: consistency demands "Israel" 2x in same verse—both literal nation.
- Three distinct dispensations in Ephesians. In each of them "dispensation" (οἰκονομία) is used:
  - A previous dispensation (3:8–9).
  - The present dispensation (3:2–3).
  - A future dispensation (1:9–10).
 (As to the present dispensation, Paul uses the actual phrase "dispensation of the grace of God" [τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ] in Eph 3:2.).
- Col 1:24–27: Church was a "mystery" previously unknown but now revealed in this "dispensation." This demands a distinction not only between Israel and the church but also between the Church and the Kingdom.
- Rom 6:14: Christians are under "grace" not "law." Thus, the Church is distinct from Israel and the Kingdom.
- Acts 11:15; cf. 15:7: Peter's testimony confirms the church is a new/distinct institution not to be conflated with Israel.
- God's glory is the ultimate purpose of history, including salvation (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 10:31; Eph 1:12).