

How to Interpret Holy Scripture More Accurately

Like any growth, development may be healthy or it may be malignant; discerning the difference between these two kinds of growth requires constant research into the pathology of traditions. But it is healthy development that keeps a tradition both out of the cancer ward and out of the fossil museum.¹

In the nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834, theologian, philosopher, and biblical scholar) originated the idea of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle philosophy simply means: “Each part of a text must be interpreted with reference to the whole; yet the meaning of the whole cannot be grasped without considering the parts.”² Interpretation is an attempt to understand the work as a whole by an analysis of its elements.³ Hermeneutics⁴ ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis.⁵ Nevertheless, hermeneutics is often used in a much narrower sense to grasp the relevance of ancient works. In other words, it is concerned about the “here” and “now.”⁶ Louis Berkhof (1873-1953, American-Dutch Reformed theologian) makes the following succinct observation:

The *necessity* of the study of hermeneutics follows from several considerations:

(1) Sin darkened the understanding of man, and still exercises a pernicious [evil, malicious] influence on his conscious mental life. Therefore, special efforts must be made to guard against error.

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 60.

²Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, “Hermeneutics,” *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1991), 97. This essay applies the hermeneutic circle in order to identify the false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew.

³Ibid.

⁴ See Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 17, where Stein writes: “The term ‘hermeneutics,’ . . . simply describes the practice or discipline of interpretation; see also Thomas H. Olbright, *Hearing God’s Voice* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996), 185, where he says, “In a large sense, hermeneutics constitutes a theory about how one person explains or communicates a text to another.”

⁵See Morner and Rausch, “Exegesis,” Ibid., 72,73, where they write, “Originally, the detailed analysis, explanation, and INTERPRETATION of passages in the Bible, or, by extension, of any literary or intellectual text. The term carries with it a sense of digging out the meaning of a difficult passage.”

⁶See Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 25.

(2) Men differ from one another in many ways that naturally cause them to drift apart mentally. They differ, for instance,

- (a) in intellectual capacity, aesthetic taste, and moral quality resulting in a lack of spiritual affinity [a quality that makes people or things suited to each other];
- (b) in intellectual attainment, some being educated, and others uneducated; and
- (c) in nationality, with a corresponding difference in language, forms of thought, customs, and morals.⁷

John H. Hayes (Professor of Old Testament at Candler School of Theology) and Carl R. Holladay (Associate Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean at Candler School of Theology) define *exegesis* as an attempt “to reach an informed understanding of the text.”⁸ It is possible for us to miss the point of the text if we do not consider the “linguistic, cultural, and historical background to the inspired writings,” writes Cedric Johnson (Clinical Psychologist in private practice).⁹ It is also in this vein that Berkhof cautions us not to fall into the same trap that many fell into during the Reformation. He again sharpens the focus of caution:

The militant spirit of the age found expression in hundreds of polemical writings. Each one sought to defend his own opinion with an appeal to Scripture. *Exegesis became the handmaid of dogmatics, and degenerated into a mere search for proof-texts.* The Scriptures were studied in order to find there the truths that were embodied in the Confessions.¹⁰ (Emphasis mine)

To set the tone for this discussion, perhaps it would be helpful to review the experiences of numerous individuals within the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement.¹¹ Many within this Movement encounter long-held traditions in his or her quest to understand the Word of God in its context.¹² In our study of Scripture, we need to study linguistics, that is to say, the use of words within its context. It is not uncommon for us to identify the traditions of our “interpretative community” with the Word itself (verbatim citations). Once more, Cedric Johnson expresses the basic problem well in his discussion of presuppositions:

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 12.

⁸ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook, Revised Edition* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1987), 23.

⁹ Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 20.

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Interpretation*, 28-29.

¹¹ See, Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An Anecdotal History of Three Churches* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1981) for one of the most objective works in this area.

¹² See Hayes and Holladay, *Exegesis*, 66, where they explain how to interpret a text:

The best guide to the meaning of a word is the context in which it is used. This means, first of all, the **immediate context** of the passage in which it occurs. If a word has several meanings, one should explore the range of meanings and see how they fit or do not fit in the context. A **broader context** is the whole of the document in which the terms appear. One should explore how a term is used and what it denotes elsewhere in the document. (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

Generations of scholars in the field of hermeneutics have recognized the influence of preunderstanding on interpretation. C. S. Lewis observed that “what we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience.”¹³

Untold numbers with whom I have discussed the science of exposition have shared their frustrations with me concerning the mistreatment from leaders within the Christian community. I too have experienced these same blockings and have described my own Christian journey as “Gullible’s Travels.” We often accept what we are taught without question. It is in this sense that our interpretation is neither subjective nor objective. In other words, we have never taken the time to employ our minds subjectively in analyzing the Scripture for ourselves, nor have we looked at the Scriptures objectively. Our interpretations are “ready-made or prefabricated meanings.”¹⁴ Our interpretations are hand-me-downs from our interpretative community. Again, Stanley Fish (b. 1938, literary theorist, legal scholar, and author) rightly says, “In other words interpretive¹⁵ communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned.”¹⁶ In spite of Fish's “deconstruction” philosophy, nevertheless, he is correct when he writes:

And, moreover, the way of seeing, whatever it was, would never be individual or idiosyncratic, since its source would always be the institutional structure of which the “see-er” was an extending agent. This is what Sacks means when he says that a culture fills brains “so that they are alike in fine detail”; it fills them so that no one’s interpretive acts are exclusively his own but fall to him by virtue of his position in some socially organized environment and are therefore always shared and public.¹⁷ (Emphasis mine)

Leaders, especially ministers within the various denominations, often memorize verses from the Bible by the hundreds. Frequently, their interpretations are not so much theirs, as it is the interpretation of a social structure to which they belong; that is to say, their interpretative community. Traditions still stand in the way of listening anew to the biblical text.¹⁸ Once more,

¹³Johnson, *Interpretation*, 45.

¹⁴See Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 172, for this type of hermeneutical mind-set, which manner of interpretation is prevalent among numerous Christians.

¹⁵Fish does not use “interpretative community” but “interpretive community.”

¹⁶ Ibid. I disagree with Fish’s philosophy of the text being unstable. If I understand Fish correctly, he is a deconstructionist in his philosophy. See Morner and Rausch, “Deconstructive Criticism,” *NTC’s Dictionary*, 50-51, where they explain “deconstruction”:

An approach to LITERARY CRITICISM based on the views and procedures of the French thinker Jacques Derrida [1930-2000, French philosopher and critic]. Deconstructive criticism utilizes reader-centered theories of meaning that ignore reference to the author’s intention and deny the possibility of a terminate meaning or “correct” interpretation for any text. Deconstructive criticism makes possible innumerable contradictory but “undecidable” meanings. First becoming prominent in the 1970s, deconstructive criticism is central to POST-STRUCTURALISM. (Emphasis mine)

¹⁷ Ibid., 335.

¹⁸See Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 48-68.

Justo and Catherine Gonzalezs' caution: "We must learn to reevaluate and reinterpret what has been handed down to us."¹⁹ It is still very difficult for us to conceive that we might cite Scripture and, at the same time, fail to apply the text correctly in light of its historical background. Have we placed ourselves within the voice of the text? If not, we cannot see or hear the intent of the author. If we expect to interpret a passage correctly within a given context, we must view the various components of a text in conjunction with the larger context—the book as a whole.

Some religious writers within the various fellowships among God's people suppose that they have all the answers. And as a result of this kind of intellectualization, the supposedly intellectually correct party ostracizes those who go against the grain with their particular interpretative community. To justify condemnation over against the so-called nonconformist, then Matthew 7: 15 is cited: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

We must be careful that we do not go to the Scriptures to prove what we already believe, but rather to see what they say. We are so accustomed to reading the Bible as previously taught by generations of interpreters that we cannot distinguish between our interpretation and God's written Revelation. In other words, for one to question the traditional interpretations is tantamount to questioning the Word of God itself.²⁰ This failure to discriminate between explanation and divine inspiration is one of the main obstacles that we encounter in our efforts to liberate the Bible from its culture and to maintain unity among God's people. The heritage of hand-me-down traditions is confused with the text itself. The faith of the fathers becomes the watchword for orthodoxy. The interpretation of the fathers becomes normative and is passed on as authoritative.

One of the most difficult obstacles for any Christian is to approach the text without any strong personal biases. Studying the Bible with colored glasses ultimately leads to distortion of the text.²¹ People often tend to give preconceived beliefs the same authority as they give to the Bible. In other words, our preconceived political power is equal to that of the Scriptures. Our own personal journey of faith, with the ghosts of the past, makes it very difficult for us to view the Scriptures without prejudice. Our prior understanding and interpretation make it difficult to sift out the truths of God in dealing with the text.²² **The culture of our heritage controls the**

¹⁹Ibid., 31.

²⁰ For an insightful article on the differentiation between Revelation and interpretation, see Leroy Garrett, "It Means What It Says," *Restoration Review* 17, no. 4 (April 1975): 68-71.

²¹See Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation*, 42, where he captures, in concise language, the subjective biases of all interpreters:

My contention is that conflicting theological positions are in part due to the fact that we all approach a text, sacred or secular, with our strong subjective biases. Even though we have a commitment to read the Bible on its own terms; and even though we want the Divine and human authors to speak for themselves, somehow we still come up with contradictory views on some issues. (Emphasis mine)

²² For an excellent presentation of this concept, see Justo Gonzalez and Catherine Gonzalez, "Difficulties in Hearing the Text," in *Liberation Preaching*, 29-47.

text of the Bible. We should never forget that our own journey occurs within a vast architecture of preunderstanding—no thinking takes place in a vacuum. Frederic W. Farrar (1831-1903, a canon of Westminster, rector of St. Margaret’s Westminster, archdeacon of Westminster Abbey, and the Dean of Canterbury) draws attention to the religious hatred that generates from this know-it-all attitude:

My opinions are founded on interpretations of Scripture. Scripture is infallible. My views of its meaning are infallible too. Your **opinions** and **inferences** differ from mine; therefore you must be in the wrong. All wrong **opinions** are capable of so many ramifications that any one who differs from me in minor points must be unsound in vital matters also. Therefore all who differ from me and my clique are “heretics.” All heresy is wicked; all heretics are necessarily wicked men. It is my religious duty to hate, calumniate [malign, injure the reputation of by calumny] and abuse you.²³ (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

One of the downfalls toward interpreting the Word of God accurately is our failure to transfer ourselves back into the first century and look through their eyes. It is not uncommon for us to transfer the authors of the first century to the twenty-first century and interpret their words in the light of our own theological heritage. Again, Louis Berkhof is on target as he seeks to call attention to our modern-day plight or delimita of transference of the present century to the first century:

Moreover, he will have to transfer himself mentally into the first century A.D., and into Oriental conditions. He must place himself on the standpoint of the author, and seek to enter into his very soul, until he, as it were, lives his life and thinks his thoughts. **This means that he will have to guard carefully against the rather common mistake of transferring the author to the present day and making him speak the language of the twentieth century.** If he does not avoid this, the danger exists, as McPheeters expresses it, that “the voice he hears (will) be merely the echo of his own ideas” (Bible Student, Vol. III, No. II).²⁴ (Emphasis mine)

The first step in explaining Scripture is to read the text. To fathom a passage involves the *immediate context*, the *remote context*, and the *larger context*. The *immediate context* includes verses preceding and following the reference that one is studying. On the other hand, the *remote context* may take in the entire book in which the text is found. Also, the *larger context* may embrace the whole of God’s written Revelation. This understanding of contexts helps to determine the meaning or meanings that we attach to any distinct phrase. Otherwise, the interpreter may impose conjectured convictions on a text without due reflection upon what the author says.

²³Frederick W. Farrar, “Religious Hatred,” quoted in Carl Ketcherside, *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 6 (June 1965): 92.

²⁴Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962), 115.

Without a conception of a context, a person's particular context tends to shape his or her understanding or interpretation of the message under consideration. 1 Timothy 2:12 is a classic illustration of how Christians often fail to examine the *cultural context* as well as the *remote context* in seeking to enter into the mind of the author. Sidney Greidanus (b. 1935, American pastor and biblical scholar) is correct when he says, "An interpreter must be careful not to read more into a text than is actually there at that particular stage of redemptive history."²⁵

Merely reciting Scriptures that draw attention to certain party dogmas is not sufficient to determine the meaning of the text. Remember that the context is the determining factor in trying to arrive at a correct insight. We must not employ Holy Scripture in a way the Holy Spirit did not employ them. Leroy Garrett points out with justification that:

People tire of our equating our understanding of the word of God with the word of God itself. This is to say that we must distinguish between revelation and interpretation. **Revelation** is what God has given us in scripture. **Interpretation** is what we conclude the scriptures to mean. One is divine, the other human.²⁶ (Emphasis mine)

One of the first Scriptures that I memorized came from Matthew's Gospel, which citation centered on "false prophets" (Matthew 7:15). I, myself, in my early ministry, applied this Scripture to those who allowed women to participate in the Assembly of God's people. Anyone who failed to adhere to my interpretation of God's Word was looked upon as a "false" teacher. Many fellowships still cite this Scripture: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." This Scripture is cited correctly as far as the wording is concerned, but many Bible expositors do not speak *as* the Bible speaks. In other words, we may speak *where* the Bible speaks and not speak *as* the Bible speaks.

In order to understand this passage of Scripture, it is necessary to study the whole of Matthew's Gospel before analyzing the individual elements. This is also true with one's examination of the role of women in the church. 1 Timothy 2:12 cannot be understood correctly without investigating the whole of the book itself. Again, I repeat the words of Schleiermacher: "Each part of a text must be interpreted with reference to the whole; yet the meaning of the whole cannot be grasped without considering the parts."²⁷ This Scripture citation (Matthew 7:15) is set forth as an example to draw attention to the *remote context* as we seek to correctly identify who the "false prophets" were that Jesus issued His stern warning. As stated earlier, we must interpret each text in light of the whole. Yet, at the same time, we must also interpret the whole in light of the parts. Without reading a book as a book, we will draw conclusions that are not in harmony with the intent, purpose, meaning, or aim of the author's sense.

²⁵Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 71.

²⁶Garrett, "It Means What It Says," *Restoration Review* 17, no. 4 (April 1975): 69.

²⁷See Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, "Hermeneutics," *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1991), 97. This essay applies the hermeneutic circle in order to identify the false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew as well as the injunction against the women in 1 Timothy 2:12..

A BASIC PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION: VIEW OF THE WHOLE VERSUS THE PARTICULAR

The following analysis of the Gospel of Matthew is an example of how we should read the Pastoral Epistles. As we contemplate a study of the whole of Matthew's Gospel, it is imperative that we examine the full text before an examination of its parts (for example, Matthew 7:15). This basic rule of interpretation must also be applied to 1 Timothy 2:12. If a reader explores a specific verse without weighing its sum total, then one's reflection may radically alter a correct view of a particular text.

Examples of particularization of texts without contexts to support certain dogmatic presuppositions are rampant among many Christians. We may consider the following isolated Scriptures as examples of frequently cited texts that are misapplied by many sincere Christians to uphold a sectarian spirit that divides the Christian community for which Jesus prayed (John 17). I have purposely drawn from Matthew's Gospel four citations that Christians frequently misapply because of one's failure to consult the various contexts of these Scriptures:

- Watch out for **false prophets**. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. (Matthew 7:15)
- Enter through the **narrow gate**. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (7:13-14)²⁸
- If your **right eye** causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (5:29-30)
- But I tell you, **Do not resist** an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (5:39)
- **Do not judge**, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (7:1-2)²⁹

It is not uncommon for interpreters to impose their own conceptual grids on a text without due reflection. When we approach the Word of God, we should advance toward the author's words with a **hermeneutics of suspicion**. In other words, we should be conscious of our own fallibility in interpreting Scriptures. Our interpretation should always remain the object of suspicion and of critical evaluation. **We must have a self-critical stance toward the**

²⁸See Dallas Burdette, "The Narrow Gate" for a contextual study of Matthew 7:13-14 in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 209-214.

²⁹See Dallas Burdette, "Judge Not" for a contextual study of Matthew 7:1-2 in *Old Texts through New Eyes*, 189-205.

tendency to impose our own agenda upon the exposition of Scripture. This is especially true in the above Scripture citations as well as a multitude of other Scriptures.

For many believers, “false prophets” (7:15) are those who disagree with their brand of orthodoxy or their interpretation of Scripture. It is not uncommon for many Christians to appeal to the Scripture (7:13-14) concerning the **small gate** and the **narrow road** to give credence to their particular denominational stance as the only way to heaven. Some saints have even taken the self-mutilation language (5:29-30) as a call to physical impairment of the body.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we encounter many statements that are hyperbolic (bold exaggerations for the sake of emphasis) in nature. I began my ministry at the age of 17 among a very legalistic group of believers who maintained that the turning of the right cheek in Matthew 5:39 provided justification for their position for not defending one’s country in the time of war. In all fairness to this fellowship, this conclusion was not and is not rebellion against God. There is a distinction between rebellion against God and an honest mistake of the heart or mind.

We cannot necessarily just take the Scriptures at face value (surface reading) without seeking to understand the intent or meaning of the author. We are to employ sound methods of interpretation in seeking to unfold the intended meaning of any text. In our analysis of 1 Timothy 2:12, we will seek to employ the basic principles of interpretation that should be applied to any kind of literature. For an accurate interpretation of First Timothy, we should examine the literary techniques employed by Paul as he deals with the problem of those who do not know who Jesus is. We need to develop the habit of working with the text in order to hear what the original hearers heard. Hopefully, this study will assist us in our understanding of the original setting in order to help remove our twenty-first century bifocals and thus journey back into the first century, to stand upon their threshold, to see through their eyes, and to think their thoughts.

God’s people must pursue the reading of the Bible without colored glasses that often leads to distortions. We must guard against our interpretation as equal to or on par with Scripture itself. To accomplish these objectives of critical investigation, it is necessary to learn how to reread the Bible. To set the stage for our examination of First Timothy, I wish to briefly outline the Gospel of Matthew that will assist us in correctly identifying the “false prophets” in the Sermon on the Mount. This examination will act as a forerunner for our in-depth study of First Timothy, which book is frequently misinterpreted because of a lack of investigation into its *cultural background*.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Careful handling of the Bible will enable us to “hear” it a little better. It is all too easy to read the traditional interpretations we have received from others into the text of Scripture. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false, even an idolatrous, degree of certainty. Because traditions are reshaped as they are passed on,

after a while we may drift far from God’s Word while still insisting all our theological opinions are “biblical” and therefore true.³⁰ (Emphasis mine)

As we approach the Gospel of Matthew, we are immediately made aware that this book is a book of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. This brief overview of Matthew’s Gospel is an illustration of how we should approach Paul’s first Epistle to Timothy. If we wrench Scriptures out of context, we will fail to interpret First Timothy as well as Matthew’s Gospel correctly. The entire Book of Matthew is a story of numerous battles between Jesus and the leaders.³¹ Without this concept of a religious war of hostilities, we can read Matthew 7:15 concerning “false prophets” and misapply.

Matthew’s Gospel is remembered for its Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Golden Rule. The Gospel of Matthew is cherished for its union of Gospel and ethics, of faith and morality. Matthew’s Gospel is concerned to recover the moral and ethical aspects of the Christian life, something that the Old Testament prophets also sought to capture. Matthew speaks against those who set themselves over against the ethical instructions of Jesus. For Matthew, it is not sufficient just to accept Jesus as the Messiah, but one must obey Him. This is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about—ethical behavior that is pleasing to God. **Matthew’s Gospel is also an examination of the oral law of the Jews versus God’s written Revelation.** The *oral law* of the Jews was later codified into the Babylonian Talmud.

In fact, Matthew includes the stern warning of Jesus against those who do not obey God: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7:21). Matthew also concludes his Gospel with Jesus’ admonition to His apostles to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in [into] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:19-20). Thus, Matthew begins and ends the ministry of Jesus with a call to correct conduct. The following insight about interpretation from Roy B. Zuck (Chairman of the Bible Exposition Department of Dallas Theological Seminary) is extremely helpful in our evaluation of any text.

Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context. Understanding a word or sentence in its context is another aspect of normal interpretation, of how we normally and usually approach any written material. A single word or even a **sentence** may have several meanings depending on the context in which it is used. The word *trunk* may mean a part of a tree, the proboscis [snout] of an elephant, a compartment at the rear of a car, a piece of luggage, the thorax of an insect, a part of the human body, or a circuit between telephone line exchanges. Obviously it cannot mean all these things or even several of them at once in a single usage. The reader can determine its meaning based on how it is used in the sentence.

The same is true of the sentence, “He is over the hill.” The context may suggest that he is literally on the other side of a small mountain or that he figuratively is “over the hill” in the sense of having

³⁰D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 14.

³¹For an in-depth study of false prophets in the Book of Matthew, see Dallas Burdette, *False Prophets in the Gospel of Matthew: Who Are They?* (D. Min. dissertation, Erskine Theological Seminary, 1999). Available from UMI Dissertation Services—A Bell & Howell Company (800-521-0600, ex. 7020).

lived beyond middle age. Ignore the context and you lose a basic tool for interpretation.³² (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

The Gospel's Structure: An Example of the Remote Context

We have employed the phrase “false prophets” to illustrate a principle of correct interpretation. It is not uncommon, as stated above, for sincere Christians to apply this phrase loosely as a label toward other believers who do not hold to their particular brand of orthodoxy. This example (Matthew 7:15) is a classic illustration of how a Scripture can be misapplied without considering the whole. Remember, any text must be interpreted with reference to the whole book. For us to interpret any Scripture correctly, we should consider the structure or focus of the book itself before dealing with all its individual parts. This is true for an accurate interpretation of Matthew 7:15 concerning “false prophets” as well as our interpretation of First Timothy concerning 1 Timothy 2:12, which text concerns instructions about women teaching.

The context of the Sermon on the Mount focuses upon the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and adherence to their *oral traditions*, which they placed on par with God’s Law. The following structure of Matthew’s Gospel (the whole) should assist every individual in his or her understanding and application of the parts to guide the Christian community today.³³ As we peruse the Gospel of Mathew, we are conscious that there are three major divisions of Matthew’s Gospel (1:1—4:16; 4:17—16:20; 16:21—28:20). Matthew also records five major discourses that should help us in the identification of the “false prophets” in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The following outline sets forth the five major discourses.

- The Sermon on the Mount (5:1—8:1)
- The Charge to the Apostles (chapter 10)
- The Parables (chapter 13)
- The Lesson on Forgiveness (chapter 18)
- The Judgment and End of Jerusalem (chapters 24—25)

Subsequent to these five discourses, Matthew gives a transition that concludes each major discourse:

- “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (7:28)
- “After Jesus had finished instructing” (11:1)
- “When Jesus had finished these parables” (13:53)
- “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (19:1)
- “When Jesus had finished saying all these things” (26:1)

³²Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, Victor Books, 1991), 65.

³³For an in-depth literary analysis of Matthew’s Gospel, see Dallas Burdette, “A Literary Analysis of the Gospel of Matthew,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes*, 26-62.

Matthew’s Gospel can further be divided into ten sections in which “doing” and “teaching” alternate.

| NARRATIVE | TEACHING | TRANSITION |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| 1—4 | 5—7 | 7:28 |
| 8:1—9:34 | 9:35—10:42 | 11:1 |
| 11:2—12:50 | 13:1—52 | 13:53 |
| 13:53—17:27 | 18:1—35 | 19:1 |
| 19:1—23:39 | 24:1—25:46 | 26:1 |
| 26:1—28:20 | | |
| Passion Week | | |

Matthew portrays Jesus as *doer* and *teacher*. He records at least twenty miracles and six major messages. Approximately sixty percent of Matthew’s Gospel focuses on the teachings of Jesus. It is also significant that he arranges his material in a topical, rather than a chronological order. For instance, he groups ten miracles together in chapters 8—9. The above outline helps us to look at the discourses in context in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the conflict that existed between Jesus and the Pharisees.

This particular study has sought to make us conscious of how prior understanding can affect our current understanding of Scripture. All Christians who open God’s Word and read it bring with them the forestructures of their lives formed by their history, their language, and their culture in which they live. Therefore, it is imperative upon every reader to capture the original intent of the author. Since no one can approach the text without presuppositions, then one must exercise every safeguard to interpret the Word of God correctly. John H. Hayes (b. 1934, Professor of Old Testament, Candler School of Theology, Emory University) and Carl R. Holladay (Associate Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean, Candler School of Theology, Emory University) capture the labyrinth or web of confusion that Christians face as they seek to interpret a particular text of Scripture:

To put it another way, the text itself should set the interpretive agenda whenever possible. This in no way suggests that the interpreter can bring to the text a mind which is a “blank tablet” for this is clearly impossible. In fact, every time we read a text, we bring to the text the total accumulation of who we are—our previous history, our previously accumulated knowledge, our outlook, our individual concerns, and our preunderstanding of what the text or passage means. It has been said that a literary work is like a picnic—the author brings the words and the reader brings the meaning.... The interpreter should allow the text to speak for itself. By this we mean that the text possesses its own voice, and at this stage the interpreter should learn to listen.³⁴ (Emphasis mine)

³⁴John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook*, Revised Edition (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1987), 133.

CONCLUSION

In the next chapter of our study concerning the role of women in the Church, we will examine Chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel in order to understand more clearly the role that women would played in the Great Commission. The context of Luke 24 reveals that women were not excluded in witnessing for Christ—privately or publicly. As we endeavor to interpret the Word of God more accurately, we need to learn to abide by the three major rules of interpretation—CONTEXT, CONTEXT, and CONTEXT. When we, as Christians, fail to examine the **remote** (the whole), the **immediate** (the text), and the **larger** context,

We will continue to observe divisions within the Christian community as long as we fail to read a book as a book and apply the basic principles of the science of interpretation. We must interpret the individual text in relationship to the whole and the whole in relationship to the individual text. When we neglect or disregard adherence to an all-encompassing principle of exegesis, we will misconstrue Divine Revelation. Our subsequent study will also focus upon the prepositional phrase "**from Galilee**," which phrase reinforces the right of women to participate in Christian ministry. This prepositional phrase is extremely important in seeking to determine who is to be involved in the proclamation of God's Good News of salvation by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ upon Calvary.