



First
Presbyterian
Church
of Waynesboro, Virginia

The Columns *Online*

February 8, 2023 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

What is a biblical hermeneutic? What if I have one?

Whether you know it or not, you have a biblical hermeneutic — maybe even more than one.

by Chip Hardwick | Presbyterian Outlook

Hermeneutic is a five-dollar word sometimes foisted upon unwitting congregants by theologically-trained leaders who forget that all too recently they themselves also had no idea what the word meant. I remember a sharp, well-educated church member commenting that her former pastor had a Ph.D. in hermeneutics and that she herself would need a Ph.D. to understand what that meant! I had to decide quickly whether to tell her that I was about a third of the way through a Ph.D. seminar on the subject before I could start to define it.



And yet — you have one, whether you can explain it or not. Don't be alarmed, but you may even have more than one, especially when it comes to Scripture!

continued

Biblical hermeneutic, continued.

The Merriam-Webster definition defines hermeneutics as “the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible).” It is often described as the lens through which we view Scripture (or any other text), the assumptions and approaches we bring to the table as we interpret what a passage means for us today. Its etymological root stems back to Hermes, the Greek messenger god who translated and interpreted the words proclaimed from Mt. Olympus back to the humans in its foothills.

Each of us has at least one lens that we bring to the Scripture. That lens is crafted by what we hear our parents say about the teaching on the way home from church and what we learn from our peers and mentors in Bible studies, small groups and sermons. It’s shaped by devotional authors we admire and secular writers who offer commentary on the religious sphere. Developed over a lifetime and sharpened through our varied experiences, our hermeneutic might never capture our attention without self-reflection.

As you read the following specific hermeneutical approaches, see if you find yourself nodding to one or more of the lenses that have guided the interpretation of Scripture through the centuries.

Classical hermeneutics

Scholars point to three classical hermeneutics, each traceable back to the first few centuries after Christ: the *literal*, *moral*, and *allegorical*. The *literal* hermeneutic, as its name suggests, approaches passages understanding that the text is true as written on a literal, surface level. “It just says what is says,” as a Southern Baptist preacher once told me. Interpretation in this case comes when the reader tries to figure out most clearly what the words themselves mean. A literal hermeneutic of our creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 produces a certainty that God created the world in six days and created two human beings named Adam and Eve. This lens might lead to awe at God’s miraculous power.

The *moral* hermeneutic as defined by the Britannica article on “The Critical Study of Biblical Literature” “is necessitated by the belief that the Bible is the rule not only of faith but also of conduct.” Students of Scripture with this lens dig into each pastor seeking ethical guidance for human flourishing. Presbyterian scholar Frances Schaefer’s impactful 1976 book *How Then Shall We Live?* asks a question typical for this hermeneutic. The moral approach to Genesis 1-2 leads us to explore our own part in the stewardship of creation, whether or not we interpret the text literally.

The *allegorical* interpretation of Scripture looks for how each element of a passage specifically relates to and reflects some aspect of the faith. Jesus sometimes uses this hermeneutic to explain his parables. For instance, his interpretation of the parable of the sower in Luke 8 states “the ones on the path are those who have heard, then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts.” C.I. Scofield, a Presbyterian scholar at the turn of the 20th century, used allegory to interpret Genesis 1:16, claiming that the sun represents Christ, the moon the church, and the stars individual believers.

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Biblical hermeneutic, continued.

Postmodern hermeneutics

Beyond these classical approaches, scholars have articulated other perspectives which coincide with the postmodern impulse to value each community's unique perspective to articulate truth. For instance, an approach that explores Scripture with respect to racial-ethnic and gender/sexual orientation leads to varied hermeneutics of liberation theology. James Cone's 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power* brings the Bible to light from the point of view of the American Black experience, rife with oppression. *Sexism and God-Talk* by Rosemary Radford Reuther, published in 1983, uses a feminist hermeneutic to



Hardwicke.

expose and engage the patriarchal nature of Scripture. Other examples of hermeneutics emerging from a community's unique experiences include Latin American, LGBTQ+, womanist (Black women), *mujerista* (Latina women), and Asian and Asian-American.

With all of these possibilities, we might ask whether "anything goes" as we interpret the Scripture. Here the late president of Princeton Seminary Tom Gillespie's analogy of a tethered buoy is helpful. Just as a buoy tied to the bottom of the ocean can move in a wide circle, various hermeneutics lead to a broad spectrum of meanings. However, the buoy's wide circle is nonetheless bounded. Its wide circle is prescribed by its tether. Similarly, the spectrum of meanings on a text is also bounded. A text cannot faithfully mean anything an interpreter with a particular hermeneutic wants it to mean.

Of course, to this list of hermeneutics, we must add the approach that many Presbyterians use when reading Scripture: an educated middle- or upper-middle-class White lens. Like me, many of us lean toward a cerebral perspective where we primarily look for what we can learn about God in a passage. Whether we are theologically conservative (and tend to read passages for how they encourage faith in Christ) or liberal (and tend to interpret Scripture for how they call us to fight the sinful powers of this world), we bring an implicit hermeneutic to the Bible, just like members of other communities.

Within the broad variety of faithful meanings, though, the variety of hermeneutics described in this article, and many others besides, can help us to more fully understand God's Word and its call to us.

OUR WORSHIP CHANNELS

click on the logos





LENT 2023

2/22

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE



3/01

LENTEN SERIES: THE PARABLES
BROWN BAG LUNCH

3/29



4/06

MAUNDY THURSDAY SERVICE
SIMPLE MEAL & COMMUNION

ALL EVENTS ARE AT NOON.



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Music Notes for February 19

The anthem for the final Sunday of Epiphany takes its text from one of this week's Scripture readings. The passage from Psalm 119 begins with "*Teach me, o Lord, the way of Thy statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.*" These words have been set to music by countless composers over the centuries; this week's anthem will be a setting by David Hurd (b. 1950).

Dr. Hurd served as Professor of Sacred Music and Director of Chapel Music at General Theological Seminary in New York City for 39 years. He is currently Director of Music/Organist at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Times Square. Hurd is also an active concert organist. Teach Me, O Lord is one of over 100 choral and organ compositions published by Hurd.



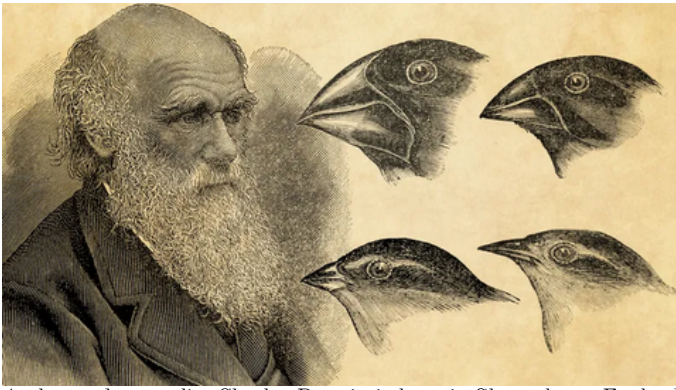
Worship This Week:

Psalm 119: 33-40
Matthew 5: 38-48

Sermon: Perfected.

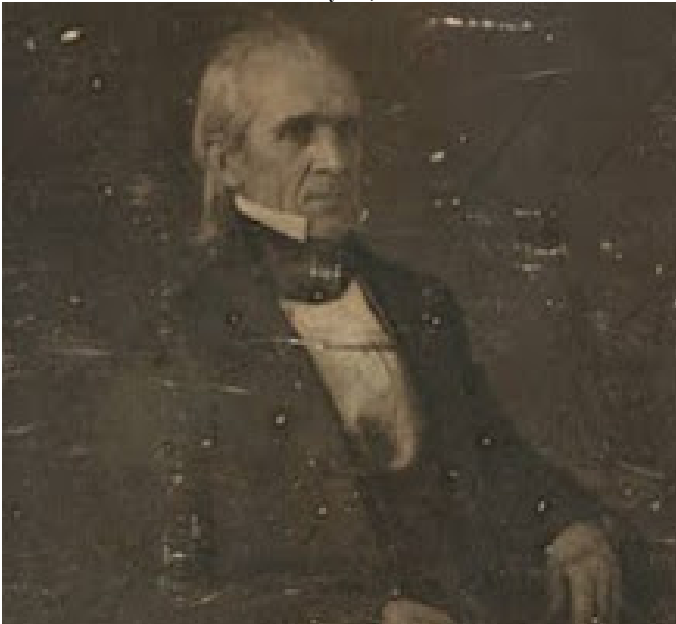


This Week in History.



Author and naturalist Charles Darwin is born in Shrewsbury, England. His best known work is *Origin of the Species*, concerning the theory of evolution.

February 12, 1809



Mathew Brady makes a daguerreotype of President James Polk - the first U.S. President to be photographed in office.

February 14, 1849



Salvatore Phillip "Sonny" Bono is born in Detroit, MI Bono He was a songwriter and producer before recording a series of hits with his wife, Cher. After a career as a popular singer, actor and television host, he would be elected mayor of Palm Springs, CA, and then to the U.S. Congress, where he serves until his death in a skiing accident in 1998.

February 16, 1935



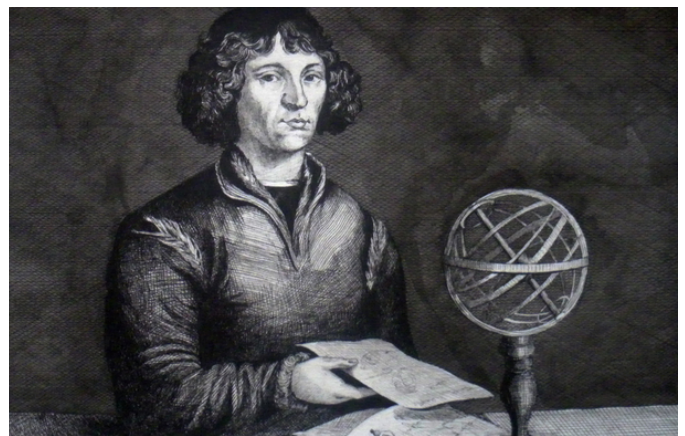
The first tax-payer supported (i.e., *public*) school in America, *Boston Latin School*, is established in Boston, MA. An *Exam* (or *Magnet*) school, the core curriculum is the classics, particularly those in Latin. Former students include: *Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Santayana, Joseph Kennedy, Leonard Bernstein, Louis Farrakhan, and Barry Newman.*

February 13, 1635



Giuseppe Zangara, an unemployed brick layer, attempts to assassinate president-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. in Miami, FL's Bayfront Park. Roosevelt is spared when onlookers deflect Zangara's aim, but Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago, IL is mortally wounded.

February 15, 1933



Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) is born in Torun, Poland. Considered the founder of modern astronomy, he pioneered the theory of a heliocentric universe.

February 17, 1473