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### *The Hermeneutical Challenge*

#### ***The Third Rail***

"Touch it and you die!"

## Introduction

Most major cities around the world have electrified light-rail systems—trains that transport city dwellers quickly and safely throughout their urban area. Many of these systems are underground and are called subways, metros, or the underground. Virtually all of them depend on electrical current to power the trains. This power is transmitted by way of a third rail running parallel to the tracks. The third rail makes it hazardous for anyone who falls onto the tracks, because most third rails carry currents starting as high as 1,200 to 1,500 volts and going much higher, enough to kill a person.

In politics "the third rail" is any issue so controversial that it can't be addressed unilaterally. Politicians like to say, "Touch that issue and you die!" So accomplishing legislation around third-rail issues in government calls for a willingness among opposed political parties to consider all of the relevant facts carefully and compromise where necessary.

In many churches and denominations around the world, the subject of women and church leadership is also a third-rail issue. It too calls for a willingness by opposing parties to consider all of the relevant facts carefully, but it is complicated by the reality that our final authority is always Scripture; and Scripture can sometimes be twisted in odd ways to support a point. For that reason, a course on women and church leadership must begin with some understanding of the hermeneutics or interpretive grid that we bring to any position on this third-rail subject. This is not a course in hermeneutics, but it is a course that is inherently based on a hermeneutic, a way of reading and interpreting all of the texts relevant to leadership in Christian churches.

At this point, pause the lecture and go to your Online Blog/Journal. There I want you to think about your beliefs about women and church leadership. Make notes to yourself about

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### Course Blog

Now pause this lecture-segment and go to your blog. Think about your beliefs about women and church leadership.

Make notes for yourself about your beliefs:

- Where do you stand at this moment on this subject?
- Does it feel like a "third-rail" issue or is it a settled issue for you?

It is essential that you capture your current beliefs before going through this course.

those beliefs: Where do you stand at this moment on the subject of women and church leadership? Does this subject feel like a third-rail issue to you, or does it seem to be a settled issue for you? It will be important as you work through this course to note your starting point.

## I. Thinking about your hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible

While readers of the Bible have always brought some kind of interpretive grid to the way they understand biblical teachings, it has been only in recent centuries that theologians have taken a harder look at what those interpretive grids look like, how they are formed and function, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Biblical scholars have identified several broad categories of hermeneutical methods or principles, and under these major groupings are more than two dozen specific kinds of hermeneutics. This simply points to the fact that there is a lot of disagreement among scholars on how we come at reading the Bible.

A hermeneutic is a kind of lens through which we look at Scripture, allowing us to see certain things. But our hermeneutic can also cause us to miss other things that our chosen lens may make opaque. Some people choose to read the Bible through a dispensational lens; others choose to read it through a covenantal lens. Still others use a Christocentric lens. Some use a first-mention lens, whereas others may use a progressive-mention lens. Still others use an allegorical lens—and on and on.

At the end of this first lecture-segment, you will find a short list of textbooks on hermeneutics. The list could be much, much longer! But this list will give you a sense of how various evangelicals approach the interpretation of biblical texts. Enter each of these books on the list into your LibraryThing site. Throughout this course, every lecture-segment will end with such a list. It is important that you build an expanding flexible bibliography, well tagged so that you can access this information as needed long after you've finished this course. At the same time, you may decide that you need to read some of the recommended books now. So much the better; that will allow you to critique them in your LibraryThing bibliography and to expand the tags you can assign to them. But you are not required to read any of them for this course at this point.

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### Hermeneutical Lens

The hermeneutical lens used in this course is the historical-grammatical method based on the interplay of linguistic, grammatical, historical, socio-political, geographical, and cultural factors we must discover about the text.

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### Virkler's five processes for doing this

1. The lexical-syntactical analysis: Look at the way words are used in the Bible—word order, punctuation, tense of verbs, etc.
2. The historical-cultural analysis: Learn as much as possible about the history and culture in which the text was written.
3. The contextual analysis: Study the text in both its chapter and book context.
4. The theological analysis: Explore the text's idea throughout the Bible, not just in one verse.
5. Recognize that different genres have different rules of interpretation.

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### We face three obstacles as we interpret Scripture

1. We don't speak the languages of the Ancient Near East (Hebrew, Aramaic, Koine Greek).
2. First-century Mediterranean cultures were radically different from our own, and we can't impose our own cultural standards on Bible times.
3. We bring our 21st-century religious, moral, and cultural expectations to the biblical text.

The hermeneutical lens used in this course is the historical-grammatical method based on the interplay of linguistic, grammatical, historical, sociopolitical, geographical, and cultural factors we must discover about the text. That usually involves five different processes.

- The first process is the lexical-syntactical analysis, in which we look at the way words are used in the Bible. That means looking at word order, punctuation, the tense of verbs, etc. We can use lexicons and grammars to help us with this process.
- The second process is called the historical/cultural analysis, in which we learn as much as possible about the history and the culture in which a particular book of the Bible was written so that we read the biblical text against that cultural and historical background.
- Then we do contextual analysis. We know that a text taken out of its context can become merely a pretext for something completely different from the writer's intention. So we always study texts in both their chapter and book context.
- Fourth, we do theological analysis. Wherever biblical ideas are discussed in different parts of the Bible, we take into account how those ideas are explored in each context. We can end up with an erroneous interpretation if we try to base our theology on a single verse.
- Finally, we recognize that different genres have different rules of interpretation. The Bible has stories, histories, prophecies, poetry, and letters. We don't read a poem and a letter in exactly the same way. A letter is primarily factual, whereas a poem may use a style and vocabulary that includes poetic metaphors and flights of fancy.

I've taken this list from Henry A. Virkler's 1981 book, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*.

All of this is to say that the task of hermeneutics is multifaceted if we really want to get to the core meaning of any biblical text. As we go through this course, we will attempt to note some of the principles we bring to interpreting the various texts about church leadership. But even as we do that, we always face three

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### Course Blog

At this point, pause this lecture segment and go to your blog.

As you think about the lens through which you have usually read Scripture, jot down any methods or principles you think you use for interpreting what you read.

Also jot down any questions you might have about developing a more nuanced method.

obstacles as we interpret Scripture:

- First, we do not speak the languages of the Ancient Near East. Language reflects culture, and as people living more than 2,000 years after the period recorded in the Bible, most of us don't have daily experience in the first-century Hebrew, Aramaic, or Koine Greek languages to know how to interpret the meaning of many words.
- Second, although we live nearly two millennia after the close of the biblical canon, we tend to impose our own cultural standards on Bible times. But the first-century cultures in both Palestine and in the Mediterranean Roman world were radically different from our own.
- Third, we bring our 21st-century religious, moral, and cultural expectations to the biblical text.

David L. Barr explores the significance of these obstacles in his book *New Testament Story* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1995).

At this point, pause this lecture segment and go to your Online Blog/Journal. As you think about the lens through which you have usually read Scripture, jot down any methods or principles you think you use for interpreting what you read. Also jot down any questions you might have about developing a more nuanced lens or method.

## II. A case study to help you think about your hermeneutical lens

Before we touch the third-rail issue of women and church leadership, it can be helpful to step back into history and take a look at another fierce debate that raged in the USA for 50 years in the 19th century. It was the debate over slavery. Information for this case study has been taken from Willard Swartley's hermeneutics textbook, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Herald Press, 1983). If you want to look at other extended case studies in hermeneutics, Swartley's book is a good resource. I quote extensively in this case study from Swartley, and if you want to find the source of each quote, go to Swartley's book.

How do you feel about tearing another human being by force

## The Hermeneutical Challenge



### Dr. Charles Hodge

Dr. Charles Hodge (1797-1878), the renowned principal of Princeton Theological Seminary (1851-1878), wrote: "If the present course of abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles was wrong."

### The Hermeneutical Challenge



#### Argument #1 - in Defense of Slavery

Slavery was divinely sanctioned by the Old Testament patriarchs.

from his or her homeland, putting that person in chains, and then selling him or her in a slave market, knowing that person will never again have the freedom to come and go, to rest or work at will, or to have a normal home and family life?

Most of us would have a hard job imagining how the church could vigorously defend something as evil as enslaving human beings created in God's image. Yet in the mid-19th century the majority of evangelical churches in the United States were staunchly aligned against the abolition movement, and they used the Bible to support their pro-slavery position. In fact, Charles Hodge, the renowned Princeton theologian, stated that "If the present course of abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles was wrong."

Did you hear that? If the effort to abolish slavery is right, then Jesus Christ and the apostles were wrong! We have to ask: How could Bible-believing preachers and theologians defend slavery on the basis of the Bible? How did they use the Bible so that it brought them to that position?

Pro-slavery Christians used four major arguments to support their position. These were published in their most succinct form by Dr. Thomas Stringfellow, a pastor in Richmond, Virginia, in an essay titled, "The Bible Argument: or Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation."

### A. Argument #1: Slavery was divinely sanctioned by the Old Testament patriarchs.

This argument begins with Genesis 9:24-27, Noah's curse on Canaan. These verses were called "the first appearance of slavery in the Bible" and are (according to then Episcopal bishop John Henry Hopkins) "the wonderful prediction of the patriarch Noah." Stringfellow also saw Noah's curse on Canaan as a prediction and wrote, "God decreed this institution before it existed." For these writers, Noah's curse on Canaan prophesied the black Africans' destiny.

The pro-slavery proponents also used Abraham as an example of divine sanction for slavery among the patriarchs. Abraham is held up in the New Testament as a champion of faith for all Christians (see Hebrews 11:17-19). Yet he was a great slave-owner:



**The Hermeneutical Challenge****Argument #2 - in Defense of Slavery**

Slavery was incorporated into Israel's national constitution: Israel was allowed to take foreigners as slaves (Leviticus 25:44-46).

The law allowed Israelites to sell themselves and their families into slavery for limited periods of time (Exodus 21, Leviticus 25).

- He brought slaves from Haran (Genesis 12:5).
- He armed 318 slaves born in his house (Genesis 14:14).
- He included these slaves in his property list (Genesis 12:16; 14:35-36).
- He received slaves as a gift from Abimelech (Genesis 20:14).
- He willed his slaves as part of his estate to his son Isaac (Genesis 26:13-14).
- The Bible says that the Lord blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves (Genesis 24:35).

To carry the argument further, the pro-slavery preachers also pointed to Joseph who was commanded by God to buy up the people and the land, making them slaves of Pharaoh (Genesis 47:15-25). So the first argument used by pro-slavery Christians in the 19th century, taken from the Bible, was that slavery was sanctioned by the patriarchs.

## **B. Argument #2: Slavery was incorporated into Israel's national constitution.**

Pro-slavery ministers and theologians also argued that God authorized two types of slavery for Israel's national life:

- First, Israel was allowed to take foreigners as slaves (Leviticus 25:44-46); Israelites could buy slaves, hold them as property, and will them to their descendants. Stringfellow argued from this text that "God ingrafted hereditary slavery upon the constitution of government."
- Second, the law allowed Israelites to sell themselves and their families into slavery for limited periods if they preferred bondage to freedom (Exodus 21; Leviticus 25). Even more, the institution of slavery took precedence over the institution of marriage (Exodus 21:2-4).

So not only was slavery sanctioned by the Old Testament patriarchs, it was also incorporated into the Old Testament law governing God's people.

**The Hermeneutical Challenge****Argument #3 - in Defense of Slavery**

Slavery was recognized and approved by Jesus Christ and the apostles.

They supported this with seven arguments

**The Hermeneutical Challenge****Argument #3 - in Defense of Slavery**

- Fourth, distinctions between master and slave are not an impediment to faith and are thus insignificant.

**The Hermeneutical Challenge****Argument #3 - in Defense of Slavery (continued)**

- Fifth, the apostles allowed slave-holders not only to be members of the church, but to serve as leaders in the church.

**The Hermeneutical Challenge****Argument #3 - in Defense of Slavery (continued)**

- Sixth, the apostles gave no directives that Christian masters should free their slaves, but said that slaves should remain in their existing state because masters have a right to their slaves' labor (1 Corinthians 7:20-24).
- Seventh, Paul's own example indicates that slavery is fully supported in the biblical apostolic writings.

## C. Argument #3: Slavery was recognized and approved by Jesus Christ and the apostles.

This argument has seven different parts. The slavery proponents argued, first, that Jesus and the apostles saw the cruel slavery practices in the Roman Empire and never said a word against them. Pro-slavery preachers used 1 Timothy 6:1-6 to show that slaves should be content in their situation and that to do so was in line with the sound instruction of Jesus Christ. On the basis of this text, Governor Hammond of South Carolina wrote:

It is impossible, therefore, to suppose that Slavery is contrary to the will of God. It is equally absurd to say that American Slavery differs in form or principle from that of the chosen people. We accept the Bible terms as the definition of our Slavery, and its precepts as the guide for our conduct.

Other pro-slavery writers argued that Jesus Christ revealed the doctrine of slavery to the apostle Paul. Dr. Stringfellow sharply rebuked abolitionists who taught that godliness abolishes slavery.

Second, they argued that we have to distinguish between the institution of slavery and its abuses. Christians should work to correct the abuses, but cannot tamper with the institution.

Third, they argued that the church has no authority to interfere with slavery as a political system. The church's task should not interfere with the political and economic systems in force.

Fourth, they argued that the distinctions between master and slave are not an impediment to faith and are thus insignificant. Whether a person is a slave or a master, he/she can be equally good as a Christian. Charles Hodge wrote:

These external relations . . . are of little importance, for every Christian is a freeman in the highest and best sense of the word, and at the same time is under the strongest bonds to Christ (1 Corinthians 7:20-22) . . . Paul treats the distinctions which slavery creates as matters of very little importance in so far as the interests of the Christian life are concerned.

A fifth argument used to support slavery was that the apostles allowed slaveholders not only to be members of the church but to serve as leaders in the church. Bledsoe stated:

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#### Pro-Slavery writers asked,

If Paul thought slavery was wrong, why didn't he counsel the fugitive Onesimus to claim his right to freedom? The answer is very plain. St. Paul was inspired and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. Who are we that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God?

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#### Arguments

Summary arguments for slavery included the idea that political, economic and social institutions function for the common good when "the rights of the individual are subordinate to those of the community" (Hodge).

As a parallel, Hodge concluded, "In this country we believe that the general good requires us to deprive the whole female sex of the right of self-government. They have no voice in the formation of laws which dispose of their persons and property."

### The Hermeneutical Challenge



#### Bledsoe Concluded,

"The history of interpretation furnishes no examples of more willful and violent perversions of the sacred text than are to be found in the writings of the abolitionists. They seem to consider themselves above the Scriptures; and when they put themselves above the Law of God, it is not wonderful [surprising] that they should disregard the laws of men."

As nothing can be plainer than that slaveholders are admitted to the Christian church by the inspired apostles, the advocates of [the antislavery] doctrine are brought into direct collision with the Scriptures. This leads to one of the most dangerous evils connected with the whole system, that is, a disregard for the authority of the Word of God, a setting up of a different and higher standard of truth and duty, and a proud and confident wrestling of Scripture to suit their own purposes.

Sixth, the apostles gave no directives in the Bible that Christian masters should free their slaves, but said that slaves should remain in their existing state because masters have a right to their slaves' labor (1 Corinthians 7:20-24). Thus Paul ordained the pattern for the church that slaves should be content with their state unless they could be freed lawfully.

Seventh and most important, Paul's own example indicates that slavery is fully supported in the biblical apostolic writings. Paul sent the converted slave Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon, and gave his reason for doing so that the master had a right to the services of his slaves.

Pro-slavery writers asked,

If Paul thought slavery was wrong, why didn't he counsel the fugitive Onesimus to claim his right to freedom? The answer is very plain. St. Paul was inspired and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. Who are we that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God?

## D. Argument #4: Slavery is a merciful institution.

This astonishing argument noted that by enslaving them, prisoners taken in war were spared being put to death. Also, through slavery "millions of Ham's descendants" who otherwise "would have sunk down to eternal ruin" have been "brought within the range of the gospel influence."

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In this country we believe that the general good requires us to deprive the whole female sex of the right of self-government.



### The Hermeneutical Challenge



#### Historian Anne Firor Scott wrote:

"It is truism, yet one easy to forget, that people see most easily things they are prepared to see and overlook those they do not expect to encounter..."

Because our minds are clouded we do not see things that are before our eyes. What clouds our minds is, of course, the culture that at any time teaches us what to see and what not to see."

They have no voice in the formation of the laws which dispose of their persons and property.

### Bledsoe concluded that:

The history of interpretation furnishes no examples of more willful and violent perversions of the sacred text than are to be found in the writings of the abolitionists. They seem to consider themselves above the Scriptures; and when they put themselves above the Law of God, it is not wonderful [surprising] that they should disregard the laws of men.

These are the chief arguments used to support slavery, based on the Bible.

Now pause this lecture segment and post responses to two issues in your Online Blog/Journal:

- (1) Post both your visceral and intellectual reactions to the way pro-slavery clergy and politicians used the Bible to defend the slave trade.
- (2) Recall from the first part of this lecture that our hermeneutic is a lens that allows us to see some things clearly while making other things opaque. Post in your Online Blog/Journal any principles from the Bible that you think the supporters of slavery might have missed seeing.

## III. Some building blocks of a more adequate hermeneutic

Historian Anne Firor Scott reminds us:

It is a truism, yet one easy to forget, that people see most easily things they are prepared to see and overlook those they do not expect to encounter. . . . Because our minds are clouded we do not see things that are before our eyes. What clouds our minds is, of course, the culture that at any time teaches us what to see and what not to see.

Clearly, the supporters of slavery in the mid-19th century found almost every verse in the Bible that could validate their slave-owning practices. But their hermeneutic was "flat" in the sense that it ignored in several cases the contextual, historical, and cultural settings of the verses they quoted. For example,

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#### A few building blocks for a more adequate hermeneutic:

1. Making an appeal to the Bible does not in itself guarantee a correct interpretation. It's not enough to look for words that say what we want them to say; we must be sure of the historical and textual context of those words.
2. We also must hear the full testimony of Scripture. We have to consider all of the texts on a given topic.

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#### The Eighth Commandment:

Exodus 21:16 expands the Eighth Commandment ("Thou shalt not steal"): "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death." The eighth commandment includes man-stealing.

In 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul listed crimes committed by "the lawless and insubordinate," including andrapodistes (man-stealer or slave-dealer) in that list. For Paul this was a mortal offense.

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#### Another Building Block to Consider:

• Our hermeneutic must include this: the texts we use should be used for their main emphasis, not for some attendant feature.

In Hebrews 11 Abraham was held up as a model of faith in God's promises, but he was not a model as a liar or as a slave-holder.

### The Hermeneutical Challenge



#### The Big Question:

From which set of scriptural resources do we derive our moral guidance?

How can we distinguish between what is merely DESCRIPTIVE in the Bible and what is PRESCRIPTIVE, to which we must cling?

- Abraham did hold slaves of some kind, as the pro-slavery advocates argued. He also practiced concubinage with Hagar, and he lied about his wife, Sarah, on at least two occasions. We can't copy his morality across the board and assume that because Abraham did something, it was morally justifiable.
- God regulated slavery in the Mosaic Law, but neither God nor Israel originated slavery. It was practiced by pagan cultures at that time, and God used the Sabbath, the seventh year, and the year of Jubilee as ways to modify the practice of slavery in the direction of justice and mercy.

So we might argue that making an appeal to the Bible does not in itself guarantee a correct interpretation. It's not enough to look for words that say what we want them to say; we must be sure of the historical and cultural context of those words.

A second factor is that we must hear the full testimony of Scripture. We have to consider all of the texts on a given topic. This includes not just specific elements but also general principles. It's true that the pro-slavery advocates found most of the biblical passages mentioning slavery, but they chose to ignore everything in the Bible about justice, mercy, and dealing with the oppressed. The overriding biblical principle of impartial love for all and of mutual service has to be part of the debate.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the eighth commandment was, "Thou shalt not steal." What the pro-slavery advocates missed was the immediate context of that command. In Exodus 21:16, the expansion of that commandment included this: "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death." The eighth commandment includes "man-stealing." In 1 Timothy 1:10, the apostle Paul lists kinds of crimes committed by "the lawless and insubordinate," and in that list he includes andrapodistes, translated "man-stealer" or "slave-dealer." For the apostle Paul, this was a mortal offense.

A third factor that must be part of our hermeneutic is that the texts we use should be used for their main emphasis, not for some attendant feature. In Hebrews 11, we see Abraham held up as a model of faith in God's promises. But he certainly was not a model as a liar or as a slave holder.

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### Exercise/Blog

Back in 1975 the magazine *The Other Side* carried a short self-exercise called "The Temporary Gospel?"

This exercise helps us think about how we approach various biblical commands.

Pause this lecture-segment now and download this one-page handout taken from that article. Spend the next 20-30 minutes doing the two-part exercise.

When you've finished, post your principle for distinguishing between the permanent/essential and the temporary/cultural. Also write out your reflections on that principle in your blog.

First Timothy 6:1-6 does indeed contain specific directives on the subject of slavery. But Jesus' command to love our neighbor also has direct bearing on any evaluation of the morality of slavery. So we look not only for specific words that say what we want them to say, but we also include broad moral imperatives found in Scripture. We might want to ask questions like these:

- What did Jesus emphasize in His teaching?
- What was the stated purpose of Jesus' ministry?
- What is the purpose of the gospel, the new order He came to inaugurate?

So we have to ask: From which set of scriptural resources do we derive our moral guidance? How do we distinguish between what we should regard in the Bible as being only descriptive and what we should cling to as being prescriptive? Sometimes the grammatical construction can help us, but not always. For example, the case laws in Exodus 21-23 are concrete and explicit. The grammar is clear: This is how Israelites were to treat slaves in Israel. Today most Christians regard those teachings on the treatment of ancient slaves in Israel as irrelevant to faith. On the other hand, Jesus' teachings about our attitudes, while appearing in descriptive passages, are most certainly authoritative for us.

Back in 1975, the magazine *The Other Side* carried a short self-exercise called "The Temporary Gospel?" It helps us think about how we come to biblical commands. Pause this lecture segment now and download this one-page handout taken from that article. Spend the next 20-30 minutes doing the two-part exercise.

First, as you think about each of the commands taken directly from the New Testament, check the P column (permanent) if you think the command should apply to all Christians at all times in all places. Check the T column (temporary) if you think the command applied at certain times in certain places but is not binding on all people all the time.

When you've finished the list, note the paragraphs at the end of the 50 statements. Perhaps you put a P in front of every statement or a T in front of every statement. Write out the principle you used to justify your choices. But perhaps you put a P in front of some statements and a T in front of others. Write out the principle you used to distinguish the permanent or essential from the temporary or cultural. Your principle must apply

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### You can approach Commands in the Bible from one of Three Positions:

1. You can say that all commands in the Bible are literal and normative or binding on all Christians at all times.
2. You can say that all commands are cultural and must be reinterpreted in the light of our circumstances today.
3. You can say that some commands in the Bible are normative and others are cultural, and we have to decide in which category a command belongs before we apply it today.

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### Approaching the Commands:

A wrong hermeneutic can lead us to be letter-of-the-law perfect but yet be dead wrong.

How are we to be saved from the hermeneutics of the Pharisees? They observed every specific command but directly opposed God's Messiah.

Jesus nailed them in Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

to every example in the list. Check your principle against your answers to see how consistently you applied it. Post your principle and your reflections on that principle on your Online Blog/Journal.

What about the command (#5) concerning foot washing in John 13:14? Many Christians would consider this command limited to first-century life when people walked dusty roads in open sandals. But some Christian groups, including some Mennonites and the Grace Brethren, consider this a command for all time. What about the command (#15) in James 5:14 about anointing the sick with oil? While some Christians dismiss this as archaic medicine, other devout Christians are convinced that this command is binding on all Christians everywhere at all times.

It turns out that you can approach the commands in the Bible from one of three positions:

You can say that all commands in the Bible are literal and normative or binding on all Christians at all times in all places.

You can say that all commands are cultural and must be reinterpreted in the light of our circumstances today.

You can say that some commands in the Bible are normative and others are cultural, and we have to decide in which category a command belongs before we apply it today.

Look at your answers now. You might have marked some commands P and others T, putting you into that third category. That's tougher because you have to weigh and consider every command, not just in its immediate context in the Bible, but also within the overall teachings of the entire Bible.

Our hermeneutic matters, because a wrong hermeneutic can lead us to be letter-of-the-law perfect, and yet be dead wrong. How are we to be saved from the hermeneutics of the Pharisees? They took care to observe every specific command, but they directly opposed God's Messiah. Jesus denounced their approach in Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

When we look at the Pharisees, we see that there's a wrong way to use the Bible that looks very religious. Jesus teaches us to go beyond the letter to the spirit. We are to hear the main in-

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### The Third-Rail Issue of Women and Church Leadership

Some passionately believe that God ordained a male/female hierarchy for leadership in the Church.

Others passionately believe that a redeemed community should model a return to God's creation norm of equality between men and women.

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### Four Basic Positions on Women's Roles in the Church

Authority Positions	Can hold positions of authority	Equal Women are equal with men and should, therefore, have positions of authority in the Church.	Subordinate Women are subordinate to men, but can have positions of authority in the Church.
	Cannot hold positions of authority	Women are equal with men, but should not have positions of authority in the Church.	Women are subordinate to men and should, therefore, not have positions of authority in the Church.

## The Hermeneutical Challenge



### In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn noted:

"The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. Practicing in different worlds, two groups see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. This is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But they see different things and see them in different relations one to the other. That is why a law that cannot even be demonstrated to one group of scientists may seem intuitively obvious to another."

tentions of the biblical writers. The slavery debate can alert us to self-justifying tendencies at work in how we use the Bible. Whenever our use leads to injustice, oppression, or structural violence, then the very heart of the Bible is repudiated. Whatever that position is based on, it is anti-biblical, no matter what texts it cites.

Recall the quote from historian Anne Firor Scott that I used earlier:

People see most easily things they are prepared to see and overlook those they do not expect to encounter. . . . Because our minds are clouded, we do not see things that are before our eyes. What clouds our minds is, of course, the culture that at any given time teaches us what to see and what not to see.

Our life situation and experience shape our perception and understanding. Whether an American grew up in the North or the South, was black or white, would influence his or her view on slavery—and would influence what he or she understood the Bible to say. As we approach the Bible, we must keep in view the fact that we can “see” some things more clearly than others simply because we reflect the culture of the home and church in which we grew up.

## IV. The third-rail issue of women and church leadership

A key issue on the front burner for many Christians is the question of women's roles in the church. People addressing the question span a broad gamut, but basically they fall into one of two categories:

Those who believe that God ordained a male/female hierarchy for leadership in the Church;

And those who believe that a redeemed community should model a return to God's creation norm of equality between men and women.

There are actually four different positions people hold, and they look like this:



### The Hermeneutical Challenge

#### The Challenge:

It's not easy to step back and put on a different pair of hermeneutical glasses in order to see what we might have missed in the past. But if we want to be obedient to the whole counsel of God, we must make the effort to do so.

So now we begin our trip through Scripture and through Church history, seeing some things we always knew were there, and perhaps seeing other things we hadn't thought about before.

### The Hermeneutical Challenge

#### Hermeneutic Bibliography

Fee, Gordon, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991).

Kaiser, Walter and Moises Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2007).

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993, 2004).

Marshall, I. Howard, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

## Four Basic Positions on Women's Roles in the Church

Throughout this course, you will interact with the arguments put forward in support of these contrasting perspectives on this subject.

We may ask ourselves how people reading the same Bible and taking it equally seriously can hold positions or paradigms as diverse as traditional hierarchicalism and egalitarianism. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn states that

The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. Practicing in different worlds, two groups see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. That is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But they see different things and see them in different relations one to the other. That is why a law that cannot even be demonstrated to one group of scientists may seem intuitively obvious to another.

What is true for historian Scott or scientist Kuhn is also true for the biblical exegete. It is striking to notice how our position or our hermeneutical lens affects, even determines what we are able to see in the biblical texts. Dr. David Scholer points out that our starting points always determine where we come out. Our presuppositions govern our outcomes.

What happened in approaches to the issue of slavery has also happened to approaches to the issue of women and church leadership. If you pick up a book written from a traditional position, the focus is almost entirely on the texts that support the subordination of women. On the other hand, if you pick up a book written from an egalitarian perspective, the focus is usually on texts that traditionalists consider to be irrelevant. For example,

When theologian Stephen Clark wrote about Genesis 2, he saw the man as central to the narrative and therefore the head.

When theologian Perry Yoder wrote about Genesis 2, he saw the woman as the climax of the narrative, which gave her an equal or even more important role.

It's not easy to step back and put on a different pair of hermeneutical glasses in order to see what we might have missed in the past. But if we want to be obedient to the whole counsel of God, we must make the effort to do so. So now we begin our

## The Hermeneutical Challenge

### Hermeneutic Bibliography (continued)

Swartley, Willard M., *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1983).

Thistleton, Anthony, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008-9).

Virkler, Henry A., *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1981, 2007).

Webb, William, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001)

trip through Scripture and through church history, seeing some things we always knew were there, and perhaps seeing other things we hadn't thought about before.

As this lecture segment 1 ends, return to your Online Blog/Journal and note questions you may have that you want to pursue or any observations you want to keep in mind throughout the course.

The short hermeneutics bibliography for this segment is as follows (to be downloaded and entered into LibraryThing.com):

Fee, Gordon. *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991.

Kaiser, Walter and Moises Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2007.

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993, 2004.

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