

**Hermeneutics,
the Rules for Interpreting
Holy Scripture.**

by
The Rev. James B. Jenson, pastor,
St. James Lutheran Church, Bothell, WA,
and
with annotations and footnotes by
The Rev. Willis C. Jenson, supply pastor,
Concordia Lutheran Mission, Terrebonne, Oregon.

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Hermeneutics (the rules for interpreting Scripture).

The word hermeneutic is from a Greek word which means to “explain, expound, interpret, translate.”¹ The rules for interpreting Holy Scripture must not be created by the Church. The rules for interpreting Scripture must follow the rules of human speech and the “nature, form, and purpose of Holy Writ.”² These rules, therefore, follow objective guidelines and seek only to bring out (exegete) the meaning of Holy Scripture.

The following rules provide a good basic guide to the rules of interpreting Holy Scripture according to the principles enunciated above.³

1. Honor the rules of grammar. No interpretation is to be accepted which does

¹Ludwig Fuerbringer, *Theological Hermeneutics, An Outline for the Classroom*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924, p. 2. “Ludwig Ernst Fuerbringer was born on 29 March 1864 in Frankenmuth, Michigan. He was the youngest of five children born to Ottomar Fuerbringer and his wife Agnes Buenger. He received his preparatory training at Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Indiana, after which he entered Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and graduated from there in 1885. He was called to be his father’s assistant at St. Lawrence Lutheran Church in Frankenmuth, Michigan, and was ordained there on 12 July 1885. He served this congregation for eight years. In 1893 he accepted a call as professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. On 30 September 1931 he was installed as the third president of this institution, succeeding the late Dr. Francis Pieper. Fuerbringer served in this position until his retirement in 1943. Concordia College, Adelaide, Australia, bestowed a doctor of divinity degree on him in 1924, and he received a doctor of letters degree in 1939 from Valparaiso University. Ludwig Fuerbringer was the editor and author of the following works: *Statistical Yearbook, Synodical Handbook of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States; Dr. Walthers Briefe, Men and Mission Series, Guenthers Populaere Symbolik; Theologische Hermeneutik, Theological Hermeneutics; Liturgik; Einleitung in das Alte Testament; Einleitung in das Neue Testament; Book of Job, The Concordia Cyclopedia, Die evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahrs; Eighty Eventful Years, Persons and Events* etc. Fuerbringer died on 6 May 1947 and is buried at Concordia Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri.” *Concordia Historical Institute*, St. Louis, Missouri, <http://chi.lcms.org/collections/fa/m-0027.htm> 9 August 2009. Dr. Fuerbringer was also the nephew of the Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther. The Rev. Dr. Ludwig Fuerbringer, *80 Eventful Years, Reminiscences of Ludwig Ernest Fuerbringer*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1944, p. 71.

²Fuerbringer, p. 2.

³This list is adapted from Rules for Interpretation of Scripture, a guide for Bible classes prepared by the Rev. James B. Jenson, pastor, St. James Lutheran Church, Bothell, Washington.

not agree with the established rules of grammar.

2. Honor the proper meaning of words.

A. Popular use (*usus loquendi*, i.e. the spoken use)⁴ is to be taken, not a derived use.

B. General use (*usus generalis*) is to be considered before a specialized use (*usus specialis*).

C. Be aware that special uses do occur.

3. Honor the context (i.e. the setting of the passage).

4. One meaning at a time with words (*sensus literalis unus est*, i.e. the intended sense is one).⁵

⁴Fuerbringer, p. 9: “Every word has an original etymological meaning and a meaning in actual popular usage (*usus loquendi*)...Knowledge of the original meaning of words, according to their etymology, very often is of practical value to the exegete; however, his first and chief aim should be to understand the meaning of words according to the *usus loquendi*, because in interpreting Scripture he always deals with words as they were actually used to convey a certain sense.” Etymology: “the origin and development of a word; tracing a word back as far as possible, generally by the methods of comparative linguistics.” *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. “etymology”, p. 628.

⁵Fuerbringer, p. 12: “Every word in the Holy Scriptures can have only one intended meaning in any one place and in any one relation. *Sensus literalis unus est.*” This rule has slipped in the Missouri Synod since World War II. This fact is evidenced by the multiple fulfillment (more than one intended sense) of Messianic prophecy articulated by such sources as the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*. For example: Jesus' exegesis of Psalm 110:1 stopped the mouths of His adversaries, but not the editors of the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*. When Jesus demonstrated that the Son of David was the LORD according to Psalm 110:1, “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.” (Matthew 22:46) But the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* allows more than one fulfillment of Psalm 110:1: “Oracles concerning the Messianic King-Priest. This psalm...is frequently referred to in the NT testimony to Christ. Like Ps 2, it has the marks of a coronation psalm, composed for us at the enthronement of a new Davidic king. Before the Christian era Jews already viewed it as Messianic. Because of the manner in which it has been interpreted in the NT -- especially by Jesus..., but also by Peter...and the author of Hebrews... -- Christians have generally held that this is the most directly “prophetic” of all the psalms. If so, David, speaking prophetically..., composed a coronation psalm for his great future Son, of whom the prophets did not speak until later. It may be, however, that David composed the psalm for the coronation of his son Solomon, calling him “my Lord” (v. 1) in view of his new status, which placed him above the aged David. But if so, the NT seems to require that David, inspired by the

5. Use the literal sense of a word unless the text itself gives a good reason to take it otherwise.⁶
6. Comparisons (figurative language, parables, etc.): Do not go beyond the point of comparison in figurative language.⁷
7. Honor the historical circumstance.
8. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Only the truly converted are able to properly interpret Scripture. (I Corinthians 2:14-15).⁸
9. Scripture cannot contradict itself. The Bible has one Author (God). If a text seems to contradict another the problem is in our understanding not the

Spirit, was already pointing beyond that preliminary application to “David’s greater Son” and “David’s Lord,” the Messiah.” (emphasis added, gen. ed. Robert G. Hoerber, assoc. eds. Horace D. Hummel, Walter R. Roehrs, Dean O. Wenthe, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986, p. 906). Clearly, if Scripture has one intended sense, this text can only refer to one person. The Only Man who puts all things under His Feet is the Messiah (cf. Psalm 8:6b, Ephesians 1:20-23). St. Peter and St. Paul exclude multiple fulfilment of Messianic prophecy in their expositions of Psalm 16:10. Both St. Peter and St. Paul argue that this Psalm cannot refer to David since David died and his body decayed (“saw corruption” Acts 13:36), Psalm 16:10 cannot refer to anyone else except the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:27-29, Acts 13:34-37). Fuerbringer writes: “Another common error of exegetes with regard to Messianic prophecies must be avoided; he must insist that these prophecies may have only one meaning, not two or more. Direct Messianic interpretation over against the so-called typical interpretation.” (p. 18)

⁶Fuerbringer, p. 12: “The literal meaning (sensus literae) of a word should therefore in all cases be accepted as the intended sense (sensus literalis), unless sufficient reasons prompt us to accept a trope (a figure of speech)” (amplification added).

⁷Fuerbringer, p. 11: “Examples of metaphors may be found in Luke 13, 32 and I Pet. 2,5. In explaining such metaphorical expressions, the exegete must, on the one hand, correctly understand the point of comparison, and, on the other hand, he should not carry the comparison beyond the point of comparison....Not all the details in a parable are to be explained.”

⁸Fuerbringer, p. 24: “In order correctly to understand the contents of the Holy Scriptures, the exegete must be able to understand occurrences and conditions of the inner spiritual life of a regenerated person. The regenerated man differs from the natural man in his view of everything spiritual, I Cor. 2, 14. 15, and therefore only such a person as has already felt the power of God’s Word in regeneration can, in the real and full sense of the word, be a theological exegete.”

Scripture. John 10:35.⁹

10. Sola Scriptura (the Word Alone), not reason, experience, tradition, or church governs the interpretation.¹⁰

11. Analogy of Scripture: Any interpretation which does not agree with all its parallels is unacceptable.¹¹

12. Analogy of Faith: No interpretation may be accepted that contradicts the doctrines of Christianity set forth in the clear passages.¹²

⁹ Fuerbringer, p. 14: “The complete agreement of Scripture with itself must be accepted a priori as a basis in its interpretation. This claim must under no circumstances be surrendered, because the divine origin of the Scriptures makes impossible any inconsistency of thought or speech, any contradiction, or even the smallest error. 2 Tim. 3,16; 2 Pet. 1,21; I Cor. 2, 13; Ps. 119, 160; John 10,35. Another point that must not be lost sight of in this connection is the fact that the Scriptures would not be suited to be the source and rule of all doctrine if we could not a priori assume their inerrancy and perfect harmony. 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Ps. 19, 8-10.”

¹⁰ Fuerbringer, p. 21: “In view of all these facts the only authentic expositor of the Bible is the Bible itself. Human reason, under the direction of the Holy Ghost, acts merely as the instrument through which the exposition takes place; it therefore is never to be regarded as the norm or judge according to which the sense of Scripture may be established. 2 Pet. 1,20; I Cor. 2, 14; Matt. 16, 17; Eph. 4, 18....This applies also to what is termed enlightened and regenerated reason. 2 Cor. 10, 5....The Church can in no wise act as judge with regard to the sense of Scripture.”

¹¹ Fuerbringer, p. 15: “The inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures carries with it absolute assurance of the fact that all passages from both the Old and the New Testament which deal with the same matter, and to the extent in which they treat of the same matter, must be considered as being in full agreement with one another -- analogia (the correct relation, agreement) Scripturae, parallelismus realis. Any exposition of a passage, therefore, which does not agree with all its parallels is untenable.”

¹² Fuerbringer, p. 19: “The divine inspiration of the entire Holy Bible, as a matter of course, implies that all parts of the Scriptures are in harmony with each other. An exposition, therefore, which does not agree with any doctrine clearly revealed in its sedibus doctrinae cannot be regarded as tenable. No exposition must contradict the so-called analogia fidei, that is, the ‘certain and clear passages of Scripture.’”

The Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther writes: “The same is true of the interpretation of certain Bible passages. The only criterion of an incontrovertible 'prophecy,' or interpretation of Scripture, which St. Paul demanded is 'Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith,' Rom. 12:6. If, for instance, an exegete does not reach the specific sense of a Bible passage and yet interprets it in such a manner that his interpretation rests on other clear Bible passages, he

13. Scripture interprets Scripture: The plain passages interpret the difficult.¹³
14. Sedes Doctrinae (Seat of Doctrine): Every doctrine necessary to our spiritual welfare is taught in a clear passage. These clear and binding passages are called the seat of doctrine.¹⁴
15. Every interpretation must agree with Scriptures own stated purpose for being. (II Timothy 3:15).¹⁵
16. Law and Gospel: The interpreter must recognize and distinguish these two doctrines of Scripture.¹⁶

is indeed mistaken in supposing that a certain teaching is contained in this specific Bible passage, but he is not erring in doctrine. In like manner he who unconditionally subscribes to the Symbolical Books declares that the interpretations which are contained in the Symbols are “according to the analogy of faith.” *Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church, Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, p. 242, rpr. Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press.

¹³Fuerbringer, p. 15: “This analogia fidei, however, does not imply that the Scriptures speak in the same plain and complete way of a certain matter in all passages treating of this matter. In view of this fact the general rule results that we must consider the less clear or plain passages in the light of the clearer passages, which method of procedure must never be reversed. Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur.”

¹⁴Fuerbringer, p. 16: “Every doctrine of Holy Scripture is set forth at some place or other very clearly, in proper terms, as the main theme of the discourse (sedes doctrinae, loci classici, dicta probantia)....All passages dealing with certain doctrine are to be understood and expounded according to the sedes doctrinae. Compare Matt. 20:1-16; 22, 1-14, and Eph. 1, 3-6; Rom. 8, 28-30; Acts 13, 48; 2 Thess. 2, 13.14. (Formula of Concord, pp. 986-990....)”

¹⁵Fuerbringer, p. 2: “Regarding their purpose, the Scriptures are a guide to our salvation. 2 Tim. 3, 15; John 5, 39; Luke 11, 28. For this reason the exposition of Scripture, for which Hermeneutics lays down the necessary rules, must be not only grammatically and historically correct, but also be truly theological and must agree with the purpose of all theological activity.”

¹⁶Romans 3:21: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.” (emphasis added) “*Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God’s wrath, let it be done how or when it will, that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ, although it is true and right that the apostles and preachers of the Gospel (as Christ Himself also did) confirm the preaching of the Law, and begin it with those who do not yet acknowledge their sins nor are terrified at [by the sense of] God’s wrath; as He says, John 16, 8: ‘The Holy will reprove the world of sin because they believe not on Me.’ Yea, what more forcible, more terrible*

*declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son? But as long as all this preaches God's wrath and terrifies men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ's own preaching, but that of Moses and the Law against the impenitent. For the Gospel and Christ were never ordained and given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid. And again: Christ says, John 16, 8: 'The Holy Ghost will reprove the world of sin'; which cannot be done except through the explanation of the Law. ... the term Gospel is not always employed and understood in one and the same sense, but in two ways, in the Holy Scriptures, as also by ancient and modern church-teaches. For sometimes it is employed so that there is understood by it the entire doctrine of Christ, our Lord, which He proclaimed in His ministry upon earth, and commanded to be proclaimed in the New Testament, and hence comprised in it the explanation of the Law and the proclamation of the favor and grace of God And in *this* sense the [general definition], that is, the description of the word *Gospel*, when employed in a wide sense and without the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel, is correct, when it is said that the Gospel is a preaching repentance and the remission of sins. For John, Christ, and the apostles began their preaching repentance, and explained and urged not only the gracious promise of the forgiveness of sins, but also the Law of God. Furthermore the term *Gospel* is employed in another, namely, in its proper sense, by which it comprises not the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of the grace of God, as follows directly afterwards, Mark 1, 15, where Christ says: *Repent, and believe the Gospel.*" *The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article V. The Law and the Gospel.* 12-13, 3, 4, 5, 6, *Triglotta*, pp. 955, 957, 953.*