

## Hermeneutics

Matthew 5:3 - “poor in spirit”

- |                           |                                  |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Clement of Alexandria: | detachment from material wealth. |
| 2. Augustine:             | humble.                          |
| 3. John Calvin:           | suffering for Christ’s sake.     |
| 4. John Stott:            | a sense of spiritual bankruptcy. |
| 5. Elsa Tamez:            | material poverty.                |
| 6. Ulrich Luz:            | poor because of the Holy Spirit. |

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- 1) Awareness of the problems.
- 2) Are there any principles?
- 3) Are multiple meanings possible?

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- 1) How we read the Bible is influenced by many things.
- 2) The Bible only means what God intends it to mean.
- 3) We are not infallible in our interpretation of the Bible
- 4) Some differing interpretations complement each other.

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2 Peter 3:16 –

It is not easy to get at the true meaning of a text.

We cannot think that just any interpretation will do.

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Acts 15:28-29

Are these requirements binding on all Christians everywhere at all times?

The reference to sexual immorality is universally binding.

But what about eating blood?

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Some preliminary principles:

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God.
2. The first requirement in an interpreter is godliness.
3. We must remember our own frailty.

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**History of Biblical Interpretation**Hillel:

1. What the Bible applies in a minor case will also apply in a more serious one.
2. Where similar expressions occur in two different texts, one text may clarify the other.
3. When one passage makes explicit a particular detail of a particular theme, we may assume that it is implicit in all passages dealing with that theme.
4. The implications from a comparison of two texts may be applied to other texts dealing with the same theme.
5. A general statement may later be restricted, or a particular statement may later be generalised.
6. The meaning of one text may become clear if it is compared with another text on the same theme.
7. The meaning of a text must be determined from its context

- 1) Any particular Scripture must be compared with the whole of the rest of the Scriptures.
- 2) The meaning of a Biblical term must be clarified by its usages throughout the Scriptures.
- 3) Obscure passages must always be explained in the light of passages that are clear.
- 4) Sound interpretation starts from the assumption that all Scripture is harmonious and that there are no contradictions in the Bible.
- 5) The interpretation of a text must always pay attention to its wider context.

Origen:

allegory as the highest form of hermeneutics.

Origen, *On First Principles*, Book 4, Chapter 1, Paragraphs 8-19

a threefold manner of interpretation:

1. the flesh of Scripture – its obvious literal sense.
- [2. the soul of Scripture (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).]
3. the spirit of Scripture – its deeper mystical meaning.

Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Section 18: Matthew 15:29-31

- 6) All Scripture must be read as the revelation of Jesus Christ.
- 7) Every interpretation must demonstrate relevance to life.
- 8) Only an experience of God's grace can make us competent interpreters of God's word.

Chrysostom:

Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 52,

- 1. God's condescension
- 2. God's precision

- 9) In interpreting Old Testament passages, we must take account of the progressive nature of revelation.
- 10) We must expect to find the revelation of Christ in all parts of the Scriptures.
- 11) Sound interpretation assumes that the Holy Spirit has inspired every detail for a purpose, and that we need to take account of every thing.
- 12) Our guiding responsibility is to discover what God intends the text to say.
- 13) Every valid interpretation will have practical application.
- 14) We must approach the Scriptures with enthusiasm and affection.

Augustine:

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 1, Chapters 35-37  
 Book 2, Chapters 5-13  
 Book 3, Chapters 2-4  
 Book 3 Chapter 17  
 Book 3, Chapters 26-27

- 15) The purpose of Biblical interpretation is that we may be better able to preach the gospel.
- 16) A valid interpretation of Scripture must promote love for God and our neighbour.
- 17) To discover what God intended to say in his word is the interpreter's paramount consideration.
- 18) To discover what the human author intended to say is also vitally important.
- 19) No one interpretation will necessarily capture the total meaning of a text.
- 20) The interpreter ought to learn the original Biblical languages, or at least he needs to use a good translation of the Bible.
- 21) We must distinguish between literal and figurative language.

- 22) We must distinguish between matters of universal application and matters of only particular relevance.
- 23) It is legitimate to use extra-Biblical sources to help us understand the Bible.
- 24) Much of the Bible's teaching is plain.
- 25) Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, and difficult passages must be explained by the light of clear passages.
- 26) We must not base doctrine on obscure passages.
- 27) We must not base a doctrine on a single verse of Scripture.
- 28) Every interpretation must be compatible with the Bible's essential gospel message.
- 29) We must not assume that a Biblical term always means exactly the same thing in every context.
- 30) Context must always guide us in our interpretation of particular details.
- 31) Godly Christian character is vital for effective interpretation.
- 32) We shall only interpret Scripture correctly if we approach it with respect and with a commitment to submit to the authority of God's word.
- 33) The interpreter needs to know the whole Bible thoroughly.
- 34) The Bible must be studied with the care and precision which reflect our humility before the word of God.

John Cassian:

Cassian, *Conference 14*, Chapters 8 and 10

two kinds of knowledge:

- practical
- theoretical

two kinds of theoretical knowledge

- historical
- spiritual

three kinds of spiritual knowledge

- tropological
- allegorical
- anagogical

Galatians 4:22-27

- |             |                        |
|-------------|------------------------|
| vv. 22-23   | the historical sense   |
| vv. 24-25   | the allegorical sense  |
| vv. 26-27   | the anagogical sense   |
| “Jerusalem” | the tropological sense |

## 1 Corinthians 14:6

revelation	allegorical interpretation
knowledge	tropological interpretation
prophecy	anagogical interpretation
teaching	historical interpretation

allegorical revelation	1 Corinthians 10:1-4
tropological knowledge	1 Corinthians 11:13
anagogical prophecy	1 Thessalonians 4:13-16
historical doctrine:	1 Corinthians 15:3-5 Galatians 4:4-5 Deuteronomy 6:4

35) Godly humility is essential if we are to understand God's word rightly.

Hugh of Saint Victor

respect for the Biblical text as given –

the literal-historical interpretation must be the foundation for all other interpretations

the two goals of Bible reading:

- the development of a moral life
- the knowledge of God

the three senses of Scripture:

- 1) the historical sense
- 2) the allegorical sense – leading to the goal of knowledge of God
  - i. simple allegory – the knowledge of God in present experience
  - ii. anagogical readings – the knowledge of God in future fulfilment
- 3) the tropological sense – leading to the goal of moral development

the three parts of the literal interpretation

1. the syntax and meaning of the words used
2. the total surface meaning of the passage
3. the theological meaning of the text

Thomas Aquinas later recognised that a theological truth can be part of the literal historical meaning of a text.



5. The literal sense of sacred Scripture is the principal one, because it is what the author, namely the Holy Spirit, intends. The figurative sense is contained within the literal sense.
6. The faith, and everything necessary to salvation, both what we should believe and what we ought to do, are found in the literal sense .
7. The literal sense of sacred Scripture, wisely and properly understood, is infallible and totally sufficient as the rule of faith.
8. It is not impossible for there to be several literal meanings for one and the same text of the sacred writings.
9. To understand sacred Scripture correctly, it is often necessary to refer to what precedes and what follows a particular text, and also to examine other places which deal with the same subject matter.
10. To hold the true literal sense of the sacred Scriptures it is absolutely vital to pay attention with application and diligence to the varied manner in which they are given.
11. The known difficulties in understanding the sacred Scriptures are very useful and necessary. They yield their reward to the exercise of zeal.
12. Because there are so many such difficulties in understanding the sacred Scriptures, the Scriptures need diligent and faithful expositors.
13. It is most important to make a diligent comparison amongst expositors and preachers of sacred Scripture. We should always prefer the interpretation of those who agree with previous expositors, and of those who possess the gift of grace. The early church fathers are to be preferred as interpreters to more recent writers.
14. The words of different teachers should be compared, and if any differences are discovered amongst them, they should be harmonised. However, if they are altogether opposed to one another, that teacher's interpretation should be accepted whose sentiments are nearest to the truth and to the sense intended by the author of the Scriptures, namely the Holy Spirit, that is the sense corroborated by the authority of the church.
15. Sacred Scripture suffers at the hands of arrogant and presumptuous readers, permitted by God to wander from the truth. They veer off into various heresies and errors. The omnipotent and supremely good God would not permit heresies and other evils unless he was able and willing to bring out of them greater good.
16. The accurate exposition of sacred Scripture, is finally resolved by the authority, reception and approval of the universal church, which is the highest source of doctrine and interpretation of the faith.

#### Biblical interpretation during the 5th to 15th centuries

Four main features :

- 1) the Bible can only be read in an attitude of prayer.
- 2) obedience is required to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in the text of Scripture.
- 3) every detail of the Biblical text must be closely examined.
- 4) meditation on Scripture should lead us on to the contemplation of God himself.

47) We should never try to reinterpret the plain teaching of Scripture.
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48) We should approach the task of interpretation with reverence.
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- 49) Every interpretation must be consistent with the fundamental truth of the divine mercy.
- 50) Our goal in interpreting Scripture is to discover God's intended meaning.
- 51) Only the true meaning of Scripture is a valid basis for theological or moral argument.
- 52) There may be several aspects to the meaning of a text.
- 53) Every text should be interpreted by its context.
- 54) Cross referencing will help us to understand the meaning of particular texts.
- 55) Interpretation must seriously pay attention to genre, and apply the rules appropriate to the type of literature in view.
- 56) The Scriptures should be examined with meticulous diligence.
- 57) The Bible interpreter needs to be a person of upright moral character.
- 58) We must respect and learn from previous commentators.
- 59) We should prefer the interpretations of godly believers to those of academic sceptics.
- 60) We should take a general consensus by interpreters very seriously as a guide to the correct understanding of Scripture.
- 61) Biblical interpretation must be carried out in an attitude of prayer.
- 62) Every interpretation should promote obedience and faith.
- 63) The interpreter should pay careful attention to all the details of the text.
- 64) Understanding of the Scriptures should lead on to a deeper knowledge of God himself.

### Martin Luther

Romans 1:17:

*the righteous by faith shall live*

three possible readings:

1. a statement of justification by faith
2. the life of the justified believer is empowered by faith
3. the righteous shall live because of God's faithfulness to them

Medieval Romans Catholicism interpreted these words to mean:

God will reward with eternal life the person who is living righteously

Luther rejected this misreading of the text

1. the literal and spiritual senses are equated
2. Christological allegory is part of a redemptive development

Luther, *Table Talk*, 'Of God's Word', Sections 1, 3-5, 8-9, 11, 14, 28-29, 35, 37, 57.

- 65) Every part of the Bible contributes to the unfolding revelation of God's redemptive purpose.
- 66) The Old Testament contains illustrations of the work of Christ.
- 67) Interpretation of Scripture is a task to be carried out within the fellowship of the people of God.
- 68) We seek to ascertain the human author's intended meaning.
- 69) The reader may not confer a meaning upon the text of Scripture.
- 70) An accurate translation is necessary for correct interpretation.
- 71) The Bible's essential gospel message is clear and plain.
- 72) There are depths of meaning in the Scriptures.
- 73) Diligent study is needed.
- 74) Interpretation must take account of the Bible's various literary genres.
- 75) The interpreter must be pure in heart and a man of prayer.
- 76) We must approach the task of interpretation with faith not doubt.
- 77) The believer who has suffered for Christ's sake will be the best interpreter of Scripture.
- 78) Every valid interpretation will be of help and encouragement to believers in their struggles.

### William Tyndale

Tyndale, *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*

1. The main function of the law is to expose our sin, and so to drive us to seek God's mercy in Christ.
2. The main function of the gospel is to assure us that there is mercy to be found in Christ, and so to entice us to put our trust in him.
3. A further function of the law is to guide trusting souls in living out the Christian life; that life may be summed up in the single word 'love'.

- 79) Translation of the Scriptures is important so that any believer may participate in the task of interpretation.
- 80) It is important to see the Bible's big picture in order to make sense of the details.
- 81) Every interpretation must be consistent with the fundamental gospel message.

John Calvin

1. We must approach the Bible with faith, expecting to hear God's voice.
2. The chief virtues of a good commentary are clarity and brevity.
3. The author's intention must be the guiding principle in interpretation.  
this was to be found by considering three things:
  - (1) the historical circumstances in which the author was writing.
  - (2) the audience and the situation being addressed.
  - (3) the grammatical form in which the writer expressed himself.
4. The literal sense of interpretation is paramount, but we are not expected to follow it slavishly.
5. The Christological interpretation of Scripture must be historical as well as theological.
6. Biblical interpretation passes through three distinct but related phases:
  - (i) exegesis
  - (ii) dogmatics
  - (iii) preaching

After Calvin, some Reformed commentators returned to fanciful allegorisation.

Thomas Shepard is an example.

Matthew 25:1-13

Four key Reformation principles:

1. the rejection of allegorisation
2. the need for Bible translation
3. the perspicuity of Scripture
4. the analogy of faith as a guide to correct interpretation

82) We must always come to the Bible with faith.

83) The main purpose of Bible reading is to meet with God himself.

84) The whole point of hermeneutics is the discovery of the author's intended meaning.

85) We are not permitted to impose our own fanciful interpretations.

86) In interpreting Scripture we must remember that its whole thrust is Christological.

- 87) The Christ-centredness of Scripture does not mean that we should try to find far-fetched references to Christ everywhere.
- 88) We must read the Scriptures as the story of a developing redemptive process.
- 89) There are some parts of the Bible which are intended to be understood metaphorically.
- 90) To interpret a passage we must consider the writer's historical circumstances.
- 91) We must also consider who his audience were.
- 92) We need to understand the situation being addressed by any particular book of the Bible.
- 93) The main aim of hermeneutics is to enable us to preach God's word, involving accurate exposition and relevant application and exhortation.
- 94) We must study the grammar of a passage in order to interpret it correctly.
- 95) We need a sound dogmatic framework for the task of interpretation.
- 96) Our dogmatic framework must itself grow out of accurate exegesis of the text.
- 97) The translation of the Bible into the languages of the world is essential.
- 98) Because of the perspicuity of Scripture, any believer may take part in the hermeneutical task.
- 99) Any particular interpretation must be in harmony with the church's statement of faith.
- 100) Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, because all Scripture is harmonious and free from contradiction.
- 101) Obscure texts must be explained in the light of those that are clear.

### The Reformed Confessions of Faith

*Second Helvetic Confession* (1536), Chapter 2

*The Irish Articles* (1615), Paragraphs 4-5

*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, Paragraphs 7-9

#### 1. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture.

The correct interpretation is ascertained from:

- (i) the nature of the language of Scripture
- (ii) the circumstances in which the Scripture was written
- (iii) comparison and contrast with other Scriptures
- (iv) the establishment of doctrine on the basis of many clear passages

#### 2. Scripture has only one sense.

#### 3. A correct interpretation will agree with the rule of faith and the rule of love.

4. It is desirable to know the original languages.
5. Bible translation is a vital obligation.
6. Earlier interpreters are to be respected, but only Scripture itself is our authority.
7. Although some things in the Bible are hard to understand, the basic gospel message is absolutely clear.
8. There are too particular areas of difficulty in interpretation:
  - (i) matters specific to the times in which the Scriptures were first given
  - (ii) prophecies as yet unfulfilled

- 102) Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture.
- 103) A Scripture must be interpreted by comparison with other Scriptures.
- 104) The interpreter must pay attention to the grammar of a passage.
- 105) The interpreter must be aware of the situation addressed by a passage.
- 106) Doctrine must only be established from clear passages.
- 107) A doctrine must not be based on a single text.
- 108) Scripture has is only one meaning.
- 109) A true interpretation will be in harmony with the rule of faith.
- 110) A true interpretation will promote love.
- 111) A knowledge of the original languages is desirable.
- 112) Translation is essential.
- 113) Every believer may participate in the hermeneutical task.
- 114) We should respect earlier interpreters, but only follow them where they agree with the Scriptures, and are godly believers.
- 115) Only the Scriptures can be the basis for theological argument.

1) The prerequisites for interpreting Scripture

*1. The moral and spiritual qualities needed by the interpreter*

(1) The interpreter must be a believer [8]

(2) The interpreter must be prayerful [61, 75]

(3) The interpreter must be humble [35]

- (4) The interpreter must be godly [31, 35]
- (5) The interpreter must be morally upright [57]
- (6) The interpreter must maintain a pure heart [75]
- (7) The best interpreter will have known suffering [77]

*2. The attitude to Scripture needed in the interpreter*

- (1) He must respect it and submit to its authority as God's inspired word [32]
- (2) He must have faith and not question its teaching [76, 82]
- (3) He must love the word [14]
- (4) He must approach it with reverence [48]
- (5) He must study it with enthusiasm [14]

2) The purposes for which Scripture is interpreted:

*application to life [7, 13, 37]*

- 1. The knowledge of God [38, 64, 83]
- 2. Accurate and powerful preaching [15, 93]
- 3. Obedience, faith and love [16, 62, 110]
- 4. Encouragement for the suffering believer [78]

3) The presuppositions for the interpretation of Scripture

- 1. The perspicuity of Scripture [24, 71]
- 2. The harmony of all the Scriptures [4, 100]

4) The context for the interpretation of Scripture

*1. Within the contemporary fellowship of the church [67]*

*2. In fellowship with God's people in all ages [58]*

- (1) Take an interpretative consensus seriously [60]
- (2) Prefer the interpretations of godly believers [59, 114]

*3. The participation of all believers [79, 98, 113]*

## 5) Guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture

1. *Compatibility with the church's statement of faith* [28, 99, 109]

(1) A sound dogmatic framework [43, 95]

(2) The fundamental gospel message [81]

(3) The big picture [80]

2. *Consistency with the truth of divine mercy* [49]

## 6) The aim of Biblical interpretation

1. *The sole aim is to discover what the author intended his words to mean* [84]

(1) We seek to understand God's meaning [12, 17, 50]

(2) We seek to understand the human author's meaning [18, 68]

2. *We seek to understand how the original readers would have understood the text* [44]3. *We may not impose our own meaning on to the text* [69, 85]

(1) We must respect the text as given [36]

(2) Reinterpretation is forbidden [47]

4. *There may be several aspects to the meaning of a text, though there is only one meaning* [19, 45, 52, 72, 108]

## 7) The importance of accurate interpretation

1. The only valid basis for theological argument [51, 115]

2. A sound doctrinal system grows out of accurate exegesis [96]

## 8) The tools needed by the interpreter

1. A knowledge of the original languages, if possible [20, 111]

2. Accurate translations of the Scriptures [20, 70, 97, 112]

3. A thorough knowledge of the whole Bible [33]

## 9) The Christological centre of interpretation

*All Scripture is the revelation of Jesus Christ* [6, 10, 86]

## 1. What this does not mean:

we are not to look for symbolic references to Christ in every minor detail [87]

2. What it does mean:

- (1) The story of an unfolding redemptive process [9, 65, 88]
- (2) Typological illustrations [40, 46, 66]

10) Specific principles of interpretation

*1. Scripture is its own interpreter*

- (1) Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture [25, 100, 102]
  - (i) Comparison of a particular text with the whole of Scripture [1, 103]
  - (ii) Cross-referencing [54]
  - (iii) Clarification of a Biblical term [2]
  - (iv) Awareness of different meanings for the same term [29]
- (2) Obscure texts must be interpreted in the light of clear texts [3, 25, 101]
  - (i) Doctrine not to be based on obscure texts [26, 106]
  - (ii) Doctrine not to be based on a single text [27, 107]

*2. Take account of genre [55, 74]*

*3. Interpret a text from its context [5, 30, 53]*

*4. Study the grammar and syntax of a passage [41, 94, 104]*

*5. Consider the writer's circumstances [90]*

*6. Identify the original audience [91]*

*7. Understand the historical situation being addressed [92, 105]*

*8. Distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical use of language [21, 89]*

*9. Distinguish between matters of universal application and matters of only particular relevance [22]*

*10. It is legitimate to use non-Biblical materials as helps to the understanding of Scripture [23]*

## 11) Practical challenges

1. Attention to every detail [11, 63]
2. Meticulous diligence [34, 56, 73]

### Two Paradigm Shifts

#### Historical Criticism

- a fruit of the 'Enlightenment'

- Five characteristics:

1. It was undergirded by evolutionary theory
  - this undermined the foundation of Biblical faith
2. Human reason alone was seen as judge in the study of the Bible
  - this undermined the authority of Scripture
3. The Bible was approached from a naturalistic standpoint
  - this undermined the historicity of Scripture
4. Biblical interpretation was secularized
  - this undermined the Bible's unique timelessness
5. The idea of 'myth' was introduced as a literary category
  - this undermined the Bible's big picture

The '*New Hermeneutic*' (Ernst Fuchs)

the issue:      how can we be led beyond our exiting horizons so that we can hear the text of Scripture speak in a fresh way for today?

the hermeneutical circle

Historical Criticism is vital for the New Hermeneutic:

it emphasizes the distance between the Biblical world and our time

it sets the text free to speak in a new way today

An evaluation of the '*New Hermeneutic*'

positive:

it reminds us that we do come to the Bible with our own presuppositions: we need to be aware of that to help us not just to read into the Bible what we already think.

negative:

1) we do stand in a rich heritage of faith, and do not have the right to start the task of interpretation all over again.

2) it overlooks the work of the Holy Spirit who can overcome our prejudices and speak through the word.

- 3) it can lead to creative novelties which are not what God intends to say in his word.
- 4) because it approaches Scripture with a worldview alien to that of the Scriptures themselves, it is not likely to lead to effective interpretation.
- 5) The idea of distance between the Biblical world and our own is an invention of the critics' imagination.
- 6) a so-called 'deeper understanding' of the text is not necessarily the same as a correct understanding: the New Hermeneutic can lose the content of the Christian faith.

#### Eta Linnemann's repudiation of Historical Criticism

1. its presuppositions are atheistic
2. it is an ideology incompatible with the material it is studying

Linnemann insists that the gospels are historically reliable accounts of Jesus' works and words, based on eyewitness reports

She points out that:

1. the gospels were written down a mere thirty years after the events they report, whereas historical criticism treats them, incorrectly, as the product of a lengthy period of developing oral tradition.
2. there were hundreds of eyewitnesses, so distortion of the facts would be impossible.

Eta Linnemann makes five points about eyewitness memory:

1. Eyewitness memory intensifies according to the importance of the event.
2. Eyewitness memory can be activated and strengthened:
  - (i) when there is a real desire to recall events.
  - (ii) when there is a constant sharing of memories amongst eyewitnesses.
  - (iii) when people who were not eyewitnesses ask questions.
3. Eyewitnesses invariably put their memories into words.
4. Different eyewitnesses have different personalities, so they remember things in different ways.
5. Memory is culturally conditioned, so details emphasized in one culture may be completely overlooked in another.

#### Postmodern approaches

- treating the Bible as a literary document
- constructing a 'narrative world'

- regarding historical questions as irrelevant
- responding to the Bible as if it is a novel

(1) *Reader-Response Theory* (Wolfgang Iser)

- the reader creates the meaning of a text
- the implied reader sets limits to the possibilities of interpretation
- reading is a community project
- we must deliberately read against the grain of dominant interpretations

The result of this approach is the Scriptures means nothing in itself, and no common understanding of its message is possible.

But this is surely an abuse of the inspired word of God.

(2) *Structuralism* (Daniel Patte)

- the purpose of reading the Bible is to uncover the structures given in language, and then to create a plurality of meanings
- the author could not convey what he meant because the structures given in language limit what he may say
- every story is constructed around pairs of opposites, which correlate with other pairs
- as we read a text's contradictions, we uncover numerous layers of meaning
- there is no single ultimate meaning

This approach is an insult to the Scriptures, believers, and God himself.

(3) *Deconstruction* (Jacques Derrida)

- meaning is temporary and transient
- the meaning of a text is constantly forming, deforming, and reforming
- every text has multiple (potentially infinite) meanings
- a text may mean things to a reader that the writer could not have intended
- every meaning undermines every other meaning
- the end result is meaninglessness

This is a game which is inappropriate for the word of God.

**The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics**