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Principles Of Biblical Hermeneutics By J Edwin Hartill

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Introduction: Unlocking the Sacred Text

For centuries, Christians have wrestled with how to properly interpret the Bible. The task of moving from the ancient words of Scripture to meaningful, applicable truth for today is both a privilege and a profound responsibility. One of the most enduringly helpful guides in this endeavor is J. Edwin Hartill, a conservative scholar and professor who taught at Dallas Theological Seminary and Northwestern College. His book, *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*, remains a foundational text for students, pastors, and laypeople who wish to interpret the Bible faithfully. Hartill's work does not merely present a dry list of rules; it offers a robust, practical framework for understanding the divine-human book we call Scripture. In this article, we will explore the core principles of biblical hermeneutics as articulated by J. Edwin Hartill, showing how each principle helps us avoid common interpretive errors and arrive at the intended meaning of the biblical authors.

The Literal Principle: The Grammatico-Historical Method

The cornerstone of Hartill's hermeneutics is the literal principle, often called the grammatico-historical method. This principle insists that we interpret the Bible in its plain, normal sense—the way we would interpret any other piece of literature—unless the context clearly indicates figurative language. Hartill argues that the literal interpretation does not exclude figures of speech, poetry, or symbolism; rather, it means we take words in their usual meaning as determined by grammar, history, and the author's intention.

For example, when Jesus says, "I am the door" (John 10:9), the literal principle does not force us to imagine a wooden door with hinges. Instead, it recognizes that "door" is a metaphor meaning "access" or "way." However, when the Bible says Jesus was born of a virgin, the literal principle takes this as historical fact because the context gives no indication of symbolic intent. Hartill stresses that departing from the literal sense without clear contextual warrant leads to allegorization and subjective interpretation—a pitfall that plagued much of medieval exegesis.

This principle is essential because it anchors interpretation in what the original author meant to communicate to his original audience. Hartill reminds us that God spoke through human authors in specific historical settings, and we must honor that historical reality. By applying the grammatico-historical method, we avoid reading modern ideas back into the text and instead allow the text to speak on its own terms.

The Context Principle: The Key to Meaning

Perhaps no principle is more frequently violated than the context principle. Hartill teaches that "a text without a context is a pretext." Every verse, chapter, or passage must be understood in light of its immediate context (the surrounding verses), its book context (the author's purpose and flow), and its broader canonical context (the

whole counsel of Scripture).

For instance, Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” is often quoted as a promise of success in any endeavor. But the context shows Paul is speaking about contentment in every circumstance—whether in abundance or in need. The “all things” refers specifically to the ability to endure hardship, not to win a football game or pass an exam. Hartill’s emphasis on context protects interpreters from proof-texting—taking verses out of their setting to support a doctrine they were never intended to teach.

Hartill also teaches the importance of historical and cultural context. Understanding the customs, political structures, and religious background of the biblical world sheds light on passages that might otherwise seem obscure. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan gains depth when we understand the deep hostility between Jews and Samaritans in the first century. Without that context, we might miss the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching on neighborly love.

The First Mention Principle: Tracing Threads Through Scripture

Another distinctive contribution of Hartill is the first mention principle. This principle states that the first time a word, concept, or doctrine appears in Scripture, it often provides a foundational or precedent-setting meaning that later uses build upon. It is not an absolute rule, but a helpful guide for tracing the development of theological themes.

Consider the word “lamb.” The first mention of a lamb in the Bible is in Genesis 22:7, where Isaac asks his father Abraham, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham’s response, “God will provide for Himself the lamb,” sets a pattern of substitutionary sacrifice that culminates in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The first mention plants a seed that later revelation blossoms into a full doctrine.

Hartill applies this principle carefully, noting that it should never override the literal or contextual meaning of a later passage. It is a tool for seeing the unity of Scripture and how God progressively reveals truth. When used alongside other principles, the first mention principle enriches our understanding without leading to fanciful allegory.

The Principle of Progressive Revelation

Closely related to the first mention principle is the principle of progressive revelation. Hartill argues that God revealed His truth gradually over the centuries, not all at once. The Old Testament contains shadows and types that find their full meaning in the New Testament. This principle prevents us from expecting the same level of clarity in early biblical books as in later ones, and it guards against imposing New Testament truths onto Old Testament passages where they were not originally intended.

For example, the Levitical sacrificial system is understood more fully in light of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 10). But this does not mean the Old Testament sacrifices were meaningless or erroneous in their own time. They were a legitimate, God-ordained means of atonement that anticipated the ultimate sacrifice. Hartill insists that progressive revelation does not imply contradiction or correction of earlier truth; rather, it shows a deepening and expanding of God’s redemptive plan. Therefore, later Scripture can clarify earlier Scripture, but it should never be used to negate its original meaning.

This principle also helps with difficult passages—like the imprecatory psalms (which call down curses on enemies)—by showing that the full revelation of God’s love and command to love enemies came later through Christ. Nevertheless, we must interpret those psalms in their original historical context before applying progressive revelation.

Hartill devotes significant attention to typology, which he defines as the study of Old Testament persons, events, institutions, and objects that foreshadow New Testament realities. A type (from the Greek *typos*, meaning "pattern" or "impression") is a divinely ordained prefiguration of a future antitype. For instance, the Passover lamb is a type of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7); the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses is a type of Christ's crucifixion (John 3:14–15); and the tabernacle is a type of heavenly realities (Hebrews 8–9).

However, Hartill issues careful warnings against excessive typologizing. Not every Old Testament person or event is a type; only those that the New Testament explicitly identifies, or that follow clear patterns of correspondence, should be treated as such. He calls this the "law of correspondence" and the "law of escalation" (the antitype is always greater than the type). For example, Adam is a type of Christ (Romans 5:14), but David is not typically considered a type of Christ in the same direct sense, even though he is a prophetic foreshadowing in some ways.

Hartill's method keeps typology rooted in the literal meaning first. The interpreter must understand the type in its original historical context before seeing how it points forward. This prevents the fanciful allegories that have historically discredited typological interpretation.

The Principle of Prophecy: Literal Fulfillment

When it comes to biblical prophecy, Hartill is a firm advocate of literal interpretation. He argues that prophecies, especially those about the Messiah and future events, should be interpreted in their normal sense unless the context clearly demands otherwise. This means that Old Testament prophecies of a coming king, a restored Israel, and a renewed earth are not to be spiritualized away into "the church" or "heaven" unless the New Testament itself reinterprets them. For example, the prophecy of a virgin bearing a son (Isaiah 7:14) was literally fulfilled in Mary (Matthew 1:22–23).

Hartill also teaches the principle of "double fulfillment" or "near/far fulfillment"—a single prophecy may have an initial, partial fulfillment in the prophet's own day and a later, complete fulfillment in Christ or the eschaton. For instance, the prophecy of Immanuel in Isaiah 7–8 had a near fulfillment in the time of King Ahaz (the birth of Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz) and a far fulfillment in Jesus. Hartill insists that both fulfillments are literal, not allegorical, though the later one is more complete.

This principle guards against the common tendency to over-spiritualize prophetic texts, especially those concerning Israel's future. Hartill's approach respects the original authorial intent while acknowledging the New Testament's authoritative interpretation.

The Analogy of Faith: Scripture Interprets Scripture

One of the oldest and most important hermeneutical rules is the analogy of faith. Hartill explains this as the principle that Scripture is its own best interpreter. Since the Bible is divinely inspired and internally consistent, no passage can teach something that contradicts another passage. When we encounter a difficult or ambiguous text, we should interpret it in light of clear passages on the same subject.

For example, when considering the doctrine of salvation, James 2 (faith without works is dead) must be harmonized with Romans 3–4 (justification by faith apart from works). The clearer passages on justification by faith inform our understanding of James, helping us see that James is speaking about the evidence of genuine faith, not a different means of salvation. The analogy of faith prevents us from building a doctrine on one isolated verse while ignoring the full biblical witness.

Hartill emphasizes that this principle does not mean we impose our own systematic theology onto the text;

rather, we let the clear passages guide our interpretation of the unclear ones. It also requires humility—we must be willing to adjust our interpretations when they conflict with the plain teaching of other Scripture.

The Principle of Interpreting Scripture by Scripture

This principle is closely related to the analogy of faith but broader. Hartill teaches that we should compare Scripture with Scripture, letting parallel passages shed light on each other. This includes comparing Gospel accounts of the same event, examining how New Testament writers quote or allude to Old Testament passages, and observing how different authors address the same theme.

For instance, the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 are complementary, not contradictory. A careful comparison shows that Genesis 1 gives a broad overview, while Genesis 2 zooms in on the creation of man and woman. Similarly, Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is illuminated by the parallel accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Hartill warns that this principle must be applied with care to avoid forcing harmony where none exists. The goal is to understand how the biblical authors themselves used earlier Scripture—a practice that itself reveals the unity of the biblical message.

Conclusion: A Lasting Legacy for Faithful Interpretation

J. Edwin Hartill's *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*provides an enduring, accessible framework for anyone who desires to read Scripture with understanding and reverence. His principles—literal interpretation, context, first mention, progressive revelation, typology, prophecy, analogy of faith, and Scripture interpreting Scripture—work together to form a cohesive, sound method. They protect the interpreter from subjective eisegesis and open the door to the rich, objective meaning that God

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