Guidelines for exegesis

Exegesis is concerned with the writer’s original intent; what the author—that is, God through the human instrument—wanted to say in the original context. In exegetting a text, we bring out the original message. The following guidelines, framed as questions, encompass essentially what is called the grammatical-historical method of biblical interpretation:

What is the text?
First we must decide which translation to choose. Since the focus of hermeneutics is the written Word, it is very important that we use a translation that preserves the original text as far as possible. Good standard translations are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), and the New King James Version (NKJV).

For personal and family devotions, a paraphrase may be used. Paraphrases, however, should not be used in Sabbath School or in the pulpit.

What does the text say?
This is a question concerning the grammar and syntax of the original text. Since most readers will not have mastered Greek or Hebrew, they will have to rely on translations. Hence, a number of good Greek and Hebrew translations should be compared with one another to make sure the text says the same in our modern language as it does in the original languages.

What does the text mean?
The meaning of words and a person’s use of them are of great importance. In studying words, we must be aware that words may have several meanings and that meanings can change over time. For example, “flesh” in Galatians 5:17, refers to our sinful nature, our self-centeredness. In Philippians 1:22-24, however, “flesh” obviously refers to the physical body that can die.

The context must determine the meaning of a biblical word, just as context determines meaning in our own speech. Take, for example, the term “rest.” If, after working in the garden for hours, I say I want to rest, it means I want to sit down and take a break. If, however, I say “My father is resting in the grave,” I mean he died. The context determines the meaning of words.

What is the context?
The word “context” refers first of all to the immediate context, what comes immediately before and after the text under consideration, as well as to the larger context, i.e., the whole book or the whole of Scripture.

Disregard of the context usually leads to a wrong interpretation. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that in exegetting a particular text, the student must go back to the beginning of the story, if the context is historical, or to the beginning of the argument, if the text is involved in a chain of reasoning.

Whatever the situation, it is important that the text is in harmony with the meaning of the context, because a text without a context easily becomes a pretext.

What did the text mean when it was written?
This guideline deals with the geographical, cultural, and historical setting—the time and place of writing. To whom and by whom was the book written? Why was it written? And what role did the historical setting play in shaping the message of the book? What were the political and cultural conditions at that time? What were the tensions and problems the community faced? What were the customs of the people? These are the kinds of questions the interpreter must try to answer when considering the historical aspect of a passage.

What does the text mean theologically?
In the interpretation of a text, it is important to place its message into the theological context of the entire Word of God. What do other passages have to contribute to a certain topic? This is where the principle of comparing scripture with scripture is so important.

A variety of theological themes, such as God,
humanity, creation, the Fall, sin, covenant, Sabbath, law, remnant, salvation, sanctuary, eschatology, etc., can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments. And the theology of a particular passage must be in harmony with the theology of Scripture as a whole.

**What does the text mean today?**

The goal of interpreting Scripture is to make practical application of each passage to the individual’s life. The Scripture should ultimately be read and accepted as if God’s messages were personally addressed to each reader (Acts 9:6). The final question in interpretation, therefore, should always be “So what? What does all this have to do with me?”

Not all the above steps may be necessary each time a text is exegeted, but together they provide the framework within which the proper meaning of a biblical text can be interpreted.

—Gerhard Pfandl