

Can Illiterate People do Hermeneutics?

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Can an illiterate person do hermeneutics? That question may sound odd to some people, and it may seem like a good question to others, especially Western seminary-trained pastors. In the West, hermeneutics has typically been viewed almost like a hard science. That is, through good exegesis we know reasonably well what the words means. Then after combing that with scholarly Biblical and Historical theology we can arrive at a fairly precise interpretation of a Bible passage. The assumption is that the interpretation would be the same validated understanding for people anywhere. If hermeneutics really is a scientific process, then how could an illiterate oral processer ever participate in doing hermeneutics? How could oral Bible storying accomplish this?

First, the former view assumes that interpreting the meaning of a Bible passage in cultural context is the same as interpreting the meaning of biblical words in the original languages (exegesis). At least, it seems that is how Bible interpretation became during the western modern period; a written text-oriented activity, analyzing words then producing interpretations that were assumed to be universally valid.

Maybe that is why the ?written biblical text? has lost so much relevancy in the West. Emergent church writers seem confused over the two as well. This is not necessarily so for oral processors. As the oral telling of scripture spreads among majority world cultures these days, they are doing hermeneutics in very dynamic and relevant ways. They revere the biblical text (the exegesis), but as a living communication where listening rather than reading is the same as listening to God. After all, it is His words. The oral processing of that communication in community is producing some very good and culturally relevant interpretations for the local tellers and listeners. Could it be because Holy Scripture is moving off the printed pages and back into the community where such conversations, learning and application can occur? What do you think?