

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: FOUNDATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Robert L. Thomas

Prelude

A gradual drift from confidence in the integrity of the Bible is well underway. A vast portion of Christendom does not adhere to belief in the verbal (every word) plenary (in every section) inspiration (God-breathed) and thus inerrancy of God's word. Believers with a high view of inspiration need to face this reality as David faced Goliath—not intimidated, but ready to take up the challenge.

How to Remedy the Drifting

Second Timothy 2:15 provides the remedy that would halt the doctrinal slippage that was happening in Ephesus. This verse and its context bring out several key elements to arrest the drift.

Timothy's Goal

Paul does not tell Timothy to attack the problem directly, but instructs him to use indirect means. In essence, he says, "Do not confront these men directly, though sometimes that may be necessary ("reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering," 2 Timothy 4:2b). Rather your goal, Timothy, is to gain the approval of God by making yourself an unashamed workman. Concentrate on the positive side of teaching the Word of truth. Be a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser. You are not to allow yourself to be distracted by mere human considerations. You are to have an eye that is single toward His will and glory. You are looking for His seal of approval. Strive to maintain His standards so that you have nothing to be ashamed of before Him."

The word for "approved" (*dokimon*) in 2:15 includes two ideas, that of being tested and that of being approved. Some never have the opportunity of being tested that church leaders have. It is a great privilege to be tested, but how each one responds to the test is crucial?

A Christian leader should also have as his goal not to be ashamed because he has done a shoddy job. Nor should he be ashamed of his work before men. Note Paul's elaboration on this theme at 1:8, 12, 16. "Hold your head up, Timothy. Do the right kind of job and you will not have to apologize to anyone."

The Means

The instrumental participle *orthotomounta* [English, "accurately handling"] in 2:15 tells how Timothy can satisfy the standard set earlier in the same verse: "cutting straight the word of truth" or "handling the word of truth accurately." We cannot be sure what figure Paul had in mind with this participle. Sometimes in secular Greek writings, it referred to a mason squaring and cutting a stone to fit exactly into a predetermined opening. Other times it referred to a farmer who ploughs a straight furrow in his field, or to a tentmaker cutting a piece of canvass to exactly the right size. Still other times it referred to a road-maker constructing a straight road.

Because of the word's use in Proverbs 3:6 and 11:5 ("In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight"; "The righteousness of the blameless keeps their ways straight") and the use of similar terminology in Hebrews 12:13 ("make straight paths for your feet"), Paul probably had in

mind the figure of road construction. The specifications for the construction have to be exactly right.

Some have objected to trying to understand just what figure Paul had in mind. They say that what we need to do is to be in the same ballpark with our interpretation. They claim that knowing the broad sense of the Word is sufficient, and pressing to figure out the specific meaning is an example of *logomachia* (“striving with words,” “hair splitting,” 2 Timothy 2:14) that Paul forbids in the verse just before 2:15. That is not, however, what Paul meant by *logomachia*.

In 1 Timothy 6:4 the word refers to quibbling over words, so here he probably refers to verbal disputes that distract from the close attention that should be given the word of truth. “Truth” highlights the contrast between God’s unshakable special revelation and the worthless chatter of the novelty seekers in Ephesus. A correlation exists between the quality of a *detailed* analysis of Scripture and maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy.

In 2:15 the command instills in Timothy’s mind the importance of precision. Learning the general idea of what Scripture teaches is not sufficient because it gives the novelty teachers too much room to roam in justifying their innovations. It allows them to shade the truth a little bit this way or that way in order to integrate the Bible with psychology, science, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, mathematics, modern linguistics, or some other secular discipline that allegedly has come up with additional truth from God’s general revelation. An expositor’s handling of Scripture has to be accurate. It has to be right on target.

General Introduction

The topic of this article will take us through an assortment of general considerations related to biblical hermeneutics. The first thing to do is to review the role of hermeneutics in relation to other subjects in the theological curriculum. In view of limited space, the review comes most easily in viewing a chart (see chart #1, next page).

Clarifying the Definition

With the traditional grammatical-historical approach to exegesis, three areas of study constitute the foundational approach to obtaining the meaning of a biblical text, if meaning is what you are seeking from a biblical text.

At this point we must inject a parenthesis into our discussion because of recent confusion that has been injected into the discussion of biblical interpretation. Recent definitions of key terms have varied from traditional senses of the words, making it necessary for us to recapture and emphasize the original sense. Four varying definitions of *hermeneutics* have in recent years been espoused,¹ but the correct definition is “a set of principles.” Of the four recently suggested meanings for *exegesis*, only “an implementation of valid interpretive principles” is correct. Recent proposals have listed as many as eight definitions of *meaning*, but only “the truth intention of the author”

¹ For a listing and a discussion of newly proposed definitions of various terms, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 20-27.

satisfies time-honored standards. The only one of four proposed definitions of *interpretation* that measures up to long-standing criteria is “an understanding of the truth intention of the author.”

**Schema of Relationships
Between Fields of Theological Study - #1**

Level 4

Bible Exposition

Level 3

Systematic &
Biblical
Theology

Church
History &
Historical
Theology

Philosophy of
Religion &
Apologetics

Counseling
Christian Ed.
Administration
Homiletics
Etc.

Level 2

Biblical Exegesis

Level 1

Biblical
Introduction

Hermeneutics

Biblical
Languages

The proliferation of ramifications now attached to hermeneutical terminology is bewildering. No one intentionally created this state of confusion, but it is a shame that propounders of the new hermeneutical approaches did not utilize new terms for different meanings rather than assigning new meanings to old terms. It is almost as if there is an unconscious desire to retain a continuity with the past where little or no continuity exists. The practice of assigning new meanings to old words has resulted in an unusually high degree of uncertainty in communication among evangelicals. To what does one attribute such confusion?

Final answers to that question are evasive, but a proposal is that confusion in defining common hermeneutical terms has arisen at least in part from different hermeneutical principles that have come into play among evangelicals in recent years.

The Foundational Nature of Hermeneutics

Chart #1 (above) shows the foundational role of hermeneutics, traditionally referred to as grammatical-historical principles. The grammar requires a knowledge of the principles of the biblical languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The history necessitates an awareness of the facts of history. Obviously, to utilize the principles of hermeneutics, a person must have a working knowledge of the original languages of the text of Scripture. He must know what books belong in the canon and must establish the exact text of the autographs of the books of the Bible. He gets help here from that portion of Biblical Introduction known as General Introduction with the area of Special Introduction furnishing him an understanding of the history surrounding the writing of each book.

Even here, however, confusion has arisen in the disciplines that stand beside hermeneutics at Level 1 as foundational to the practice of exegesis, which is at Level 2 in the Theological Curriculum. For one thing, traditional grammatical principles have come under assault by a relatively new discipline frequently referred to as Modern Linguistics. Modern Linguistics, though it still in a fluid stage of development, has challenged principles of grammar that have been a hinge and staple of grammar of long standing. Daniel Wallace's well-known *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* is full of the influence of Modern Linguistic principles that have strayed away from a centuries-old understanding of grammatical principles. A typical example of this is his "plenary genitive" in which he not only allows for but also advocates more than a single meaning for a specific grammatical construction.²

The English word "historical" has several meanings. It can be either history as a record of actual happenings simultaneous with the chronology of the narrative or history as interpreted by later chronological generations. Grammatical-historical principles have traditionally looked to the former of these definitions, but some evangelicals today are veering away from that meaning and opting for the dynamic concept of history. Progressive Dispensationalism is an example of the dynamic concept—i.e., an ongoing record of past events—versus a stable concept [past events connected with someone or some event].³

In light of such deviations from traditional definitions of various terms, when one speaks of following grammatical-historical principles of interpretation, he must be careful to define clearly his what he means. Otherwise, his hermeneutical principles may be indistinguishable from those used by the new evangelical hermeneutics.

² E.g., D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 119-21.

³ E.g., Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus under Fire*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 81-84.

Recent Additions to the Foundation

Evangelical hermeneutics as now practiced in many and probably most evangelical environments takes on a different complexion from the traditional evangelical model. Level 1 in the Schema of Relationships Between Fields of Theological Study has a new member. We may chart the resulting new Schema as in chart #2:

**Schema of Relationships
Between Fields of Theological Study - #2**

Level 4

Bible Exposition

Level 3

Systematic &
Biblical
Theology

Church
History &
Historical
Theology

Philosophy of
Religion &
Apologetics

Counseling
Christian Ed.
Administration
Homiletics
Etc.

Level 2

Biblical Exegesis

Level 1

Biblical
Introduction

Hermeneu-
tics

Preunder-
standing

Biblical
Languages

Compared to Schema #1, we see that the new resident at Level 1 is “Preunderstanding.” Definitions of preunderstanding vary widely. The rise to prominence of the ill-defined disposition of preunderstanding is probably the most conspicuous difference from grammatical-historical practice in biblical interpretation. One has defined it as “hermeneutical self-awareness.”⁴ Many consider this addition to the arena of hermeneutical guidelines to be an absolute

⁴ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 7.

necessity and a healthy development.⁵ The special attention devoted to the interpreter is ultimately the result of the Kantian philosophical emphasis on subjective reality as distinct from and more basic than objective reality.⁶

With many, preunderstanding is the principal determiner of one's eventual understanding of Scripture.⁷ With others, it is possible to overcome preunderstanding partially and to approximate the text's objective meaning to some degree.⁸ But with almost all, if not all, preunderstanding as a starting-point for the new evangelical hermeneutics is here to stay.⁹

What then is preunderstanding? For Silva, it is another name for prejudice and a commitment to the traditional view of inspiration,¹⁰ but it also includes such things as a dispensational theology.¹¹ Another definition cited above is hermeneutical self-awareness¹² by which Osborne includes the impact of church history, contemporary meanings of word symbols, personal experiences, one's confessional tradition, and rational thinking.¹³ McCartney and Clayton use "presuppositions" to speak of the same thing as "preunderstanding" and define them as one's views regarding life and ultimate realities and about the nature of the text being studied."¹⁴

⁵ Ibid., 267, 286-87; W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard Jr. [hereafter KBH], *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, Word, 1993), 7; M. Silva, in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, The Search for Meaning*, co-authored by W. C. Kaiser, Jr. and M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 264. Blaising and Bock also recognize and welcome the change in evangelical hermeneutics with its incorporation of preunderstanding when they write, "And by the late 1980s, evangelicals became more aware of the problem of the interpreter's historical context and traditional preunderstanding of the text being interpreted. These developments . . . have opened up new vistas for discussion which were not considered by earlier interpreters, including classical and many revised dispensationalists" (Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* [Wheaton: Victor, 1993]), 35-36).

⁶ For further discussion of when and how this recent change in evangelical hermeneutics came about, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 13-20, 43-46.

⁷ E.g., McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 65; R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 19; M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 88.

⁸ For example, Klein, et al., 115.

⁹ E.g., Osborne, *Spiral* 286-87, 294; Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 88.

¹⁰ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 237, 245.

¹¹ Ibid., 264.

¹² Osborne, *Spiral*, 7.

¹³ Ibid., 14, 266, 267, 292.

¹⁴ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader*, 13.

KBH, following Ferguson, define preunderstanding as “a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it.”¹⁵ They distinguish these from presuppositions, including in the latter such things as the inspiration of the Bible, its authoritativeness and truthfulness, its spiritual worth and effectiveness, its unity and diversity, its clarity, and a fixed canon of sixty-six books.¹⁶ How this differs from preunderstanding is difficult to decipher, especially in light of their use of the same point—one’s view of the miraculous—as an illustration of both preunderstanding and presuppositions.¹⁷

Johnson lists five hermeneutical premises that he apparently equates with preunderstanding: the literal, the grammatical, the historical, the textual design, and the theological.¹⁸ McQuilkin’s name for preunderstanding is presuppositions. He gives the following: as a supernatural book, the Bible is authoritative and trustworthy; as a natural book, it uses human communication.¹⁹ Tate refers to preunderstanding as the interpreter’s present horizon of understanding, i.e., the colored lenses through which the reader views the text.²⁰ He seems to distinguish preunderstanding, at least to some extent, from presuppositions which he classifies as reader presuppositions and theological presuppositions.²¹

Uncertainty among hermeneutical theoreticians regarding what constitutes preunderstanding is widespread, resulting in multiple understandings of “preunderstanding.” They agree only regarding its influence on the outcome of the interpretive endeavor. In line with this acknowledged subjectivism, most advocate that one must view his own interpretive conclusions as tentative.²² This relativism leads easily to divesting the Scripture of any value in stating propositional truth, though one writer would limit the uncertainty to ambiguous areas such as sovereignty and responsibility, the millennial issue, and church government.²³

¹⁵ Klein, et al., *Biblical Interpretation*, 99; cf. Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics, An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88-93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94, 100. They distinguish preunderstanding from prejudice also by making the latter a subcategory of preunderstanding (*ibid.*, 99 n. 34, 100).

¹⁸ E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 31-53.

¹⁹ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying*, 20-23.

²⁰ W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 166.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 166-70.

²² E.g., Klein, et al., *Biblical Interpretation*, 306; Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 88; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader*; 164; Osborne, *Spiral*, 307.

²³ Osborne, *Spiral*, 287.

Others pass off this uncertainty as tolerance of fellow believers for the sake of unity—i.e., “I don’t agree with your conclusions . . . , but I concede your interpretation.”²⁴ If allowed to progress to its logical end, however, this outlook leads eventually to a realization that what we have considered to be cardinal doctrines—such as the deity of Christ, His second coming, and His substitutionary atonement—are merely the myopic conclusions of Western, white, middle-class, male interpretations.²⁵ Such a hermeneutical approach spells the end of meaningful Christian doctrine, and plays into the hands of postmodernism and deconstructionism.

Reasons Why the Current Foundation Is Shaky

The new and primary role given to preunderstanding in the exegetical process conflicts sharply with traditional grammatical-historical principles. It injects subjective elements into interpretation that have been purposely and consciously shunned among evangelicals in quests for the meaning of Scripture until the emergence of new hermeneutical principles in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Those who studied hermeneutics in many evangelical colleges and seminaries before and during the 1950s learned the importance of seeking objectivity in interpretation, i.e., letting the text speak for itself without imposing personal biases into what the meaning might be. Ramm has put it this way:

The true philological spirit, or critical spirit, or scholarly spirit, in Biblical interpretation has as its goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. Its goal is exegesis—to lead the meaning out of the text and shuns eisegesis—bringing a meaning to the text. . . .

.....
It is very difficult for any person to approach the Holy Scriptures free from prejudices and assumptions which distort the text. The danger of having a set theological system is that in the interpretation of Scripture the system tends to govern the interpretation rather than the interpretation correcting the system. . . .

.....
Calvin said that the Holy Scripture is not a tennis ball that we may bounce around at will. Rather it is the Word of God whose teachings must be learned by the most impartial and objective study of the text.²⁶

Before the hermeneutical revolution that began among evangelicals during the 1970s and 1980s, objectivity was the highest priority. Beginning study of a text with a conscious preunderstanding of what it would yield was unthought of, as Ramm so emphatically stated before he ever conceived that evangelicals would advocate letting subjective considerations become a part of interpretation. He

²⁴ Klein, *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation*, 150-51; cf. 139-44.

²⁵ Cf. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation*, 125.

²⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 115-16.

allowed that such occurred with nonevangelicals such as Buttmann and⁹ Tillich, but insisted that it not happen among those of evangelical persuasions.²⁷

Terry supported the same quest for objectivity, expressing it in different terms:

The objectionable feature of these methods [i.e., the Apologetic and Dogmatic methods] is that they virtually set out with the ostensible purpose of maintaining a preconceived hypothesis. The hypothesis may be right, but the procedure is always liable to mislead. It presents the constant temptation to *find* desired meanings in words and ignore the scope and general purpose of the writer. There are cases where it is well to assume a hypothesis, and use it as a means of investigation; but in all such cases the hypothesis is only assumed tentatively, not affirmed dogmatically. In the exposition of the Bible, apology and dogma have a legitimate place. The true apology defends the sacred books against an unreasonable and captious criticism, and presents their claims to be regarded as the revelation of God. But this can be done only by pursuing rational methods, and by the use of a convincing logic. So also the Scriptures are profitable for dogma, but the dogma must be shown to be a legitimate teaching of the Scripture, not a traditional idea attached to the Scripture. . . .

.....
The systematic expounder of Scripture doctrine . . . must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach. The apologetic and dogmatic methods of interpretation which proceed from the standpoint of a formulated creed, and appeal to all words and sentiments scattered here and there in the Scriptures, which may by any possibility lend support to a foregone conclusion, have been condemned already. . . . By such methods many false notions have been urged upon men as matters of faith. But no man has a right to foist into his expositions of Scripture his own dogmatic conceptions, or those of others, and then insist that these are an essential part of divine revelation. Only that which is clearly read therein, or legitimately proved thereby, can be properly held as scriptural doctrine.²⁸

In his classic work on hermeneutics, Terry insisted on letting the text speak for itself, without allowing ideas foreign to the text to intervene in its interpretation. Though he lived long before the notion of beginning the exegetical process with a preunderstanding of what it was going to say had made its appearance among conservatives, he clearly sought to obtain an objective awareness of what biblical writers intended when they penned the words of Scripture. The only assumption he made was unavoidable: he was dealing with an inspired book, not an uninspired one.²⁹

That has always been the goal of grammatical-historical interpretation until the recent changeover in hermeneutical principles among some evangelicals. The method consciously seeks to rule out any personal biases or

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2nd ed. (reprint; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, n.d.), 171-72, 583-84.

²⁹ Ibid., 137-50.

predispositions in order to let the rules of grammar and the facts of history behind each text speak for themselves. That quest for objectivity has allowed the Bible to yield propositional truths that constitute a sure foundation for evangelical Christianity.

The present state of affairs among evangelicals is a far cry from the certainty God intended His people to have, however. He gave revelations to Paul and others “that *we might know* the things freely given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12, emphasis added), not that we might tentatively theorize regarding what God may have given us.

Exegesis is not an exercise designed to correct my preunderstanding as the hermeneutical circle or hermeneutical spiral approaches contend. It is rather a scientific exercise designed to allow the text to speak for itself.

Often I hear the objection, “Impossible! A person cannot divest himself of a preunderstanding about what a text should mean. Every person is biased. He should recognize his own bias and let the text correct it. He should continue going back and forth between a corrected preunderstanding and the text a number of times, each time getting closer to what the text means.” Note the frequency with which current evangelicals refer to the “Hermeneutical Circle” or the “Hermeneutical Spiral.” Since the Reformation, Protestants have proposed that the interpreter should begin with a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, and let the text speak for itself. Yet some still say, “Impossible.”

The following analogy may help portray what an approach to hermeneutics should be. One’s quest for objectivity in interpretation resembles his quest for Christian sanctification. Rather than expending all his energies explaining why he cannot attain absolute holiness, he should set his sights on the target of being holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). The fact that he cannot attain unblemished holiness does not excuse him from continuing to pursue it without becoming preoccupied with reasons why he must fail.

So it is in hermeneutics and exegesis. The goal is the objective meaning of Scripture. We cannot become distracted from pursuing it. It is within the capability of the Spirit-illuminated believer to arrive at objective meaning—i.e., the meaning God intended to transmit through His human authors. This is possible, not because we are so expert in our interpretations, but because God is an expert communicator in His Word. A failure to have objectivity as a goal is just as serious as a failure to have Christian sanctification as a goal because of the lesson learned from Paul through 2 Timothy 2:15. If Paul taught that lesson to Timothy in his study of Scripture, it certainly is a lesson for twenty-first-century Christians.

Traditional grammatical-historical guidelines possess sufficient principles to enable exegetes to dispense with the “Circle” and the “Spiral” approaches to hermeneutics.

The Source of Preunderstandings

With the variety of understandings of “preunderstanding,” settling a single source or even a specific number of sources for preunderstanding must be very selective, because each person’s preunderstanding will differ from the next person’s. Yet the probability is high that most preunderstandings draw from the disciplines at Levels 3 and 4 in the Theological Schema.

For example, a homiletician [i.e., Levels 3 and 4] might come up with a polished outline for the passage from which he wishes to preach before accomplishing his exegetical analysis. His exegetical analysis must then conform to the communicatively effective outline he has discovered. Suppose his exegetical study does not match his preconceived outline. That has a deleterious impact on his exegesis.

Were someone to come to a text with the preunderstanding that the Gospel of John is the only place in the Bible that gives the pure gospel (a Level 3 application), or that John 6:47 contains the minimum content of necessary information in the gospel (another Level 3 application), he has inserted his own preunderstanding at Level 1. Such a sequence of exegetical study leads inevitably to wrong understandings of a text’s meaning.

The contemporary basic problem is that a discussion of a crossless gospel is carried on at Level 3 with nothing more than a superficial attention to the other categories at Level 1. For example, if an adequate job had been done at Level 1 before getting to Level 3, an interpreter would realize that Jesus had spoken earlier about the content of the gospel. An investigation of historical background would point to Jesus’ references to His coming crucifixion and substitutionary death long before He died on the cross (Matthew 20:28). He began making direct predictions of His death shortly after He uttered John 6:47. He hinted about His coming death and resurrection much earlier (John 2:19), as did John the Baptist (John 1:29, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*). He told people how to be saved in other books besides the Gospel of John. Level 3 conclusions based on shoddy work at Level 1 are to blame for bad interpretations.

As suggested earlier in this discussion, Dispensationalism—another Level 3 discipline—can be a preunderstanding that needs to be corrected in the exegetical process. With some this may be true. Personally, I have leaned over backwards to keep a theological system separate from an exegetical analysis of a passage. In doing so, every effort is exerted to be first and foremost a grammatical-historical practioner. In implementing grammatical-historical principles, I find myself in the dispensational camp at Level 3. Yet I need to beware lest at any time the order should be reversed. If it should become reversed, I am as guilty as the covenant theologian, the new covenant theologian, the kingdom theologian, or the progressive dispensational theologian in allowing preunderstanding a role in Level 1.³⁰

A hot issue in contemporary society—a Level 3 category—is the effect of global warming on the environment. If one is convinced he needs to deal with this in his biblical exposition, he will search high and low to find a passage that teaches the danger of global warming. Since he has made up his mind what he

³⁰ Note my article in the Spring 2009 issue of *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, titled “Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square.”

will find it in a text, the principles of grammatical-historical exegesis will fall by the wayside as he looks for a text dealing with that topic.

In the realm of historical theology—another Level 3 category—at a recent point in church history, the practice of historical criticism became prominent. If one is convinced that an inerrantist can use this device to enhance study of the Gospels, that will become his preunderstanding at Level 1. Yet that preunderstanding has proven to be badly mistaken.

Any pet subject, theological or otherwise, can become a preunderstanding at Level 1.

The above four suggestions amount to taking disciplines rightly belonging to Levels 3 and 4 and inserting them at Level 1 as preunderstandings, thus throwing the whole exegetical process out of balance. These are but a sampling of the endless number of assumptions that throw evangelical interpretations into a quagmire of subjectivism in tune with the contemporary deconstructionism of this postmodern era.

Principles of Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics Frequently Undermined

With no pretense of being exhaustive, one could list a number of grammatical-historical principles that are violated by the new evangelical hermeneutics:

1. Cultural uniqueness of the biblical texts means that there is something special about the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek text of Scripture.³¹
2. The uniqueness and superiority of special revelation demands that special revelation always deserves ultimate priority over anything that general revelation has to offer.³²
3. The principle of single meaning, the single meaning intended by the author and understood by the immediate readers, has dominant control over any legitimate practical application.³³
4. The distinction between interpretation and application is must be maintained; that application must be completely distinct from interpretation but controlled by correct interpretation is mandatory.³⁴
5. Certainty resting on the biblical text is an exegete's responsibility. Scripture was given that we may know, not that we may question which meaning is correct.³⁵
6. Any personal addition to the grammatical-historical foundation of exegesis is a distortion.³⁶

³¹ Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 214-17.

³² *Ibid.*, 124-31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 142-55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 201-03, 226-27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 208-14.

7. Perspicuity of the biblical text—use of sound, not secret-coded, principles—13 will yield the correct meaning of the text.³⁷
8. Historical accuracy of the biblical text means that a correct hermeneutics yields precise facts of history.³⁸
9. Literal understanding is assumed unless the text justifies a nonliteral approach. Literal meaning is the first resort, not a last resort.³⁹
10. Inerrancy of the text is the first and only legitimate preunderstanding of a biblical text.

Recently Emerging Bogus Systems

Evangelical Hermeneutics describes five systems that have arisen in recent years, whose origins are traceable to the new evangelical hermeneutics. They are:

1. Progressive Dispensationalism⁴⁰
2. Evangelical Feminism⁴¹
3. Evangelical Missiology⁴²
4. Theonomy⁴³
5. Open Theism⁴⁴

The list is growing at a rapid, not to say alarming, rate. With the growing inroads of preunderstanding at Level 1 in theological studies, the rate is bound to increase. Since *Evangelical Hermeneutics* was released in 2002, evangelicalism has already experienced the impact of such “-isms” as the “New Perspective on Paul,”⁴⁵ the Emerging Church, New Covenant Theology, a new allegedly based Noncessationist Movement.⁴⁶ Three new “-isms” that are currently arising among evangelicals are speech-act theory, intertextuality, and spiritual formation. All of this has happened since the incorporation of the new evangelical hermeneutics in the 1970s and early 1980s. When examined

³⁷ Ibid., 281-91.

³⁸ Ibid., 274-80.

³⁹ Ibid., 229-33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 351-72.

⁴¹ Ibid., 373-405.

⁴² Ibid., 407-49.

⁴³ Ibid., 451-71.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 473-505.

⁴⁵ See Robert L. Thomas, “Hermeneutics of the New Perspective on Paul,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 16/2 (Fall 2005): 393-16.

⁴⁶ See Robert L. Thomas, “Hermeneutics of Noncessationism,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 14/2 (Fall 2003): 287-310.

closely, each of these has its own preunderstanding that throws the exegetical process all out of whack.

The Needed Response

That theological slippage is targeting the evangelical church today as it did in the days of Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 is without question. Very obviously, the slippage results from the new evangelical hermeneutics that began taking its toll in the 1970s and 1980s.

May God awaken His church to her need of restoring sound interpretative principles that let the biblical text speak for itself without imposing meanings foreign to immediate context!

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