

VARIATION ON A THEME: HISTORY'S *nth* GREAT HERMENEUTICAL CRISIS

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Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation, especially of written texts. As an academic discipline with profound practical outworkings it both reflects and influences our culture, and thus our lives, both within and without the Church. It is also a discipline of considerable complexity and sometimes unprofitable effect. This makes it tempting either to disparage or ignore it. But a better response would be to consider (1) the crisis in which hermeneutics finds itself, (2) the configuration of the battle lines characterizing this crisis for those who wish to engage it critically rather than simply curse or surrender to its confusion, and (3) a practical rationale for such critical engagement in light of our respective individual stations in life. I will take up each of these three subjects in turn.

I. HERMENEUTICAL CRISIS

While human nature has remained surprisingly uniform across millennia and cultures, each successive period does evince telltale distinctives. In this century one of these distinctives in the west is the rhetoric of crisis. There are sound bases for the rhetoric. With the rise of modernism in its Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment forms, and then that same modernism's quasicollapse in recent generations, thinkers with Christian concerns felt the very existence of Christian theism to be threatened, in part because they saw the future of western civilization with its historic Christian underpinnings imperiled.

In theology, crisis rhetoric began in the wake of the First World War's catastrophic devastation, which shattered the cultural euphoria shared by the great western powers of the nineteenth century. Historians of theology will recall that dialectical, or neo-orthodox, theology was also known as crisis theology in its formative years.¹ And no sooner was the remembered apocalypse of World War I fading from a hideous nightmare to just a vivid memory in Europe than a no less savage sequel slowly grew to its full terrifying stature. Try as we may, we can never fully plumb the depths of sacrilege and human misery unleashed along the time line beginning with

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¹ At that time "crisis" referred primarily to the existential plight of the individual. But the personal plight was not unrelated to the political and social crises of those years and their implications for theology.

Hitler's *Machtergreifung* of 1933, extending through the reciprocal atrocities inflicted by Hitler's and Stalin's troops locked in no-quarter conflict, climaxing in the revelations of Auschwitz and Dachau, and concluding with a whimper in the Pyrrhic victory signaled by Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

By the twentieth century's midpoint, two international conflicts of unparalleled scale and ferocity convinced most thoughtful persons that the human race was at a crossroads. It faced a crisis. And we are still facing it today. It is hardly necessary to recite the many faces of that crisis as we encounter it daily in the modern press, academic literature and—unless we are blind—practical life. If terms that point to this ongoing crisis no longer seem angular and gut-wrenching to us—words and phrases like ethnic cleansing, mass starvation, overpopulation, violent crime, divorce, abortion, industrial pollution, unemployment, secularization, jihad, drug addiction, racism, poverty, environmental destruction—then it is only because apathy or perhaps cognitive overload render these and other present threats bearably remote from us personally. But that we live in the midst of an unprecedented and for all we know comprehensively lethal, global shakedown is hardly to be contested. As Francis Schaeffer once wrote, "It's dark out there."²

A small but significant subcategory of current overarching crisis is today's hermeneutical crisis. Along with most other endeavors of human thought, the ravages of twentieth-century reality have shaken it to its core. For Christians especially, hermeneutics is a discipline of foundational importance. For they know that God has chosen to mediate saving knowledge of his redemptive acts, and indeed of his very person, primarily through a particular set of written texts, the definitive collection of which we call Holy Scripture or the Bible. If the difference between eternal redemption and eternal perdition lies in proper appropriation of the life-giving message that Scripture conveys, and if that Scripture is patent of either proper appropriation or disastrous wresting, then nothing more important can be imagined than that we get God's message straight. The current crisis in modern thought's hermeneutical theories and procedures is thus a crisis for the Church, too, which by God's own design is called to seek and promulgate redemptive understanding in the century, the decade, and indeed the very year in which God has placed it, not in some wished-for yesterday or hoped-for tomorrow.

It is not hard to give tangible shape to the crisis in which we stand. A survey of a typical recent issue of *New Testament Abstracts* attests to the prolific but chaotic state of hermeneutics in the area of formal NT study.³ In just the four-month period it summarizes, no less than thirty-eight articles dealing generally with NT interpretation appeared. Note that this does not include monographs or exegetical studies—that is, how we should approach particular texts or what their message is. Moreover it is limited to the field of NT, leaving to the side the parallel masses of studies centering more on OT, comparative religion, or philosophical hermeneutical themes. Here is

² F. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968) 131.

³ Reference here is to *NTA* 38/3 (1994).

a listing of the focus of these thirty-eight pieces (some topics, like feminist or Roman Catholic interpretation, are addressed in more than one article): (1) feminist hermeneutics, (2) historical-critical methods and Roman Catholic authority, (3) historical-critical methods and Eastern Orthodox authority, (4) determining Scripture's original sense, (5) rhetorical approaches to the NT, (6) how to read an apocalypse deconstructively, (7) what is universally applicable in Scripture and what is historically conditioned, (8) why Southern Baptists should not be inerrantists, (9) biculturalism and Biblical interpretation, (10) postmodernism in NT interpretation, (11) reading the Bible as the word of God, (12) role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, (13) reader-response criticism, (14) interpretive differences and agreements in Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialogue, (15) relation between Scripture and experience, (16) sociological methodology and the NT, (17) Greimassian semiotics, (18) a hermeneutics of reconstruction, (19) hermeneutics in Reformed theology in the Netherlands, (20) the use or nonuse of the Bible in the United Church of Christ, (21) Marxist materialist interpretation, (22) Catholicism's critique of fundamentalist interpretation.

Now complexity alone is not necessarily tantamount to crisis. It might rather reflect some wonderful diversity of reflection and exchange characterizing current scholarly discussion. But fuller investigation would reveal that fundamentally different conceptions are at loggerheads. The culture wars of society's various factions are mirrored in the more specialized, but no less pitched, battles between schools of interpretation. The sheer volume and sometimes tone of remonstrance reveals the presence not so much of a richly variegated orchestra of harmonious interpretive tones (though obviously there are agreements among some scholars) as of a cacophony of mutually excluding viewpoints. P. J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer correctly observe: "Today, more than at any other period in the history of interpreting the Bible, the number of approaches or methods is proliferating."⁴ And we see not simply multiplicity and contrast but conflict.

II. BATTLE LINES

What is the nature of the strife reflected in current literature? No full answer can be given here, but a concise and significant one may be suggested. Hermeneutics is torn between the two conflicting and almost equally vital senses of loyalty: (1) on the one hand, loyalty to the clear claims of its subject matter, in this case the NT; (2) on the other, loyalty to the sense of truth, or meaning, or maybe only relevance, that pervades modern thought and existence—what some have termed modernity. Should hermeneutics, at least as applied to Scripture, help us see our present world and personal status in the light of the NT's presentation of Jesus Christ and his call to repentance, faith, and revolutionary Christian living? Or should it rather

⁴ P. J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer, "Introduction," *New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 1.

help us see the NT's claims in the light of a particular band of the spectrum of distinctively modern experience?

Process theologian Delwin Brown has spoken of a hermeneutical posture that reads the Bible, and incorporates it into a theological system, using distinctively modern reference points as definitive guides. In this approach "theology is the appropriation of a past, in faithfulness to the present."⁵ In this statement, truth as conceived of in (at least some quarter of) the modern world serves as arbiter of the veracity of the truth claims addressed to the modern world by Scripture. Brown goes on to propose that with David Tracy we let the modern university community, or with Schubert Ogden contemporary human experience more broadly conceived, furnish the criteria for truth and meaning for Biblical interpretation and theological construction. As Langdon Gilkey put it years ago, we must determine the truth question prior to and independent of any reference to the Bible.⁶

A different and I think more satisfactory outlook would see things otherwise. I would urge that when we make contemporary learning in whatever discipline(s) the necessary criterion for the truth and import of the message Scripture addresses to us, we run the risk of editing Scripture based on our higher commitment to immanent cultural self-understanding rather than to transcendent revealed divine understanding.

Some years ago Helmut Thielicke spoke of Cartesian and non-Cartesian approaches.⁷ In the Cartesian approach, the knowing self has its own independent access to truth through some immanent divine presence or rational faculty. Rationality, and in particular the ascendant contemporary academic rationality, reigns supreme. It serves as the gatekeeper to what texts, including the Bible, may or may not be understood to express.

In the non-Cartesian approach, modern consciousness and learning do play a role, as they do for example in Thielicke's own theology. But this approach does not, as Delwin Brown's essentially does and as some evangelical approaches increasingly seem to, locate a significant portion of revelation in modern man's self-consciousness. It rather enters into serious and humble dialogue with Scripture's message instead of editing it on the basis of *a priori* commitments to some aspect, tenet, or dimension of modernity. The result is a stance, reportedly expressed by Adolf Schlatter, of standing neither over nor on but "under the Scripture."

In principle there is every reason to look favorably on the project of integrating modern learning and the contents of Scripture as the Church properly understands and articulates them. There is much light shed on our condition and on the Bible's message by the piercing beams of contemporary academic inquiry. As Anthony Thiselton has written: "Biblical interpretation can never outgrow the work of the biblical specialist. But neither can biblical hermeneutics ever again be isolated from these broader yet fun-

⁵ D. Brown, "Transforming the Tradition: History, Creativity, and the Task of Theology," *The Iliff Review* 41/3 (1984) 13.

⁶ L. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961) 194-205.

⁷ H. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena: The Relationship of Theology to Modern Thought Forms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

damental interdisciplinary questions"—questions that the modern age has posed with riveting urgency to all trained interpreters of Scripture.⁸ Mark Noll has movingly documented the acute need for evangelical Christian thinkers to be about the sacred ministry of cultivating the life of the mind, as he terms it.⁹ His appeal, at once both a jeremiad and a battle cry, constitutes a hermeneutical manifesto for all future evangelical academic labor. And it is an appeal calling for radical openness to the whole world of higher learning rather than the traditional "safe" authority figures of conservative ideas, institutions and leaders.

But it is incumbent on us who wish to remain faithful to Christ, and to the Bible that by the Spirit mediates Christ to the Church, that we be shrewd as serpents in how we respond to the typically imperialistic expectations of the various non- or quasi-Christian *Zeitgeiste* that abound. The essence of today's prevalent hermeneutic is to prop the gates open to these *Geiste* and even appoint them the gatekeepers who supervise all expressions of thought and therefore ultimately faith. Typical results are an implacable hostility toward the theological, traditionally conceived, and "viewing of the Bible akin to a realistic novel"—that is, rendering reality in nonreferential terms.¹⁰ These results ultimately entail the final outcome voiced by Francis Watson: "Theories offering a comprehensive account of significant reality prove unable to maintain their totalitarian claim in the face of the irreducible heterogeneity of reality as currently experienced."¹¹ In other words, a contemporary commitment to hermeneutical pluralism if not anarchy is demanded by postmodern experience, with a primary casualty being God's Scriptural witness to his unified, redemptive and knowable presence in the world. Ironically this postmodern demand, itself totalitarian in its *a priori* debunking of all prior interpretive strategies, seeks sympathy by posing as the victim of totalitarian excess.

The spirit of Christ, on the other hand, in the light of the mind-transforming word of God, furnishes the will to see these ephemeral shades for what they are, refuse them authority over God's people, and if necessary join battle against them lest they wreak havoc by detracting from the focus on God that is due him, with all the human loss that typically attends such a theological mistake. And, as Noll suggests, that same spirit can generate at least the beginnings of theoretical alternatives to challenge modernity's grand intellectual syntheses—in the past built on Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud, but today drawing on names like Friedman, Saussure, Kuhn, Derrida¹²—and produce more God-glorifying alternatives for future generations from the ranks of evangelical thinkers.

⁸ A. Thiselton, "Hermeneutics," *New Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright; Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988) 297.

⁹ M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/InterVarsity, 1994).

¹⁰ B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992) 19.

¹¹ F. Watson, "Introduction: The Open Text," *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (ed. Watson; London: SCM, 1993) 3.

¹² Noll, *Scandal* 17.

Such, in very rough outline, are the battle lines. But where should Christians be standing, and why?

III. RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS: A PRACTICAL RATIONALE

1. *Demystifying the crisis.* A first step in constructive thinking about the current crisis is to demystify it. Admittedly these are perilous times. Brilliant thinkers abound who propose dazzling ideas with momentous consequences, some of which we may sense are problematic but feel powerless to resist. But while we may well be shaken, we must not succumb to the mesmerizing appeal of modernity's hermeneutical syntheses. We are, after all, in most cases only witnessing variations on an old theme of human cleverness doing its impressive damndest to construe reality apart from reality's ultimate King. It is just that various factors have conspired to make today's modernity unique in its technological support, international uniformity, and advocacy at times even by the Church, which since the Enlightenment has probably done more to imperil the Christian future than any other single institution. But like a welder's mask with its smoked-glass eye slit, recollection of hermeneutical history can enable us to gaze intently on today's methodological meltdown without losing our sight as a result. Let us ponder a slice of that history for a moment.

The OT points to a consistent stream of hermeneutical deception stretching from Cain forward to King Saul, the prophet Micah, and beyond. In this trajectory the common coin of external observance as expressed by adequate but rebellious sacrifice is substituted for the fuller and priceless gift of a total life submitted wholly to the Lord. But as Samuel told Saul, "To obey is better than sacrifice." In the various short runs that make up the major periods of Israel's history it seems that commitment to external observance continually triumphed over the true faith possessed by God's remnant. Prophets like Jeremiah agonized over the hermeneutical legerdemain of the false prophets and priests whom, Jeremiah wailed, the people loved so dearly. But by God's grace Jeremiah was not blinded by the light of the deceiving synthesis of his day. He demystified it with implicit appeals to the Torah and a steadfast if sometimes desperate grasp on the God he loved though often could not understand.

Jesus took the beguiling wind out of pharisaical sails, undeterred by the seemingly compelling appeal to irrefutable traditions stretching back to Moses. "If you believed Moses, you would believe me," Jesus responded with what could only have been infuriating finality. Believe Moses? Of course they did. Their whole faith was based on a Mosaic synthesis. But this appeal to Moses was, from Jesus' point of view, formal and not material. In the same way various apostles opposed rival claims to Christian understanding, asserting that to accept these claims would be de facto denial of Christ. Examples here would be Paul's resistance to the Judaizers in Galatia and the bogus servants of righteousness at Corinth, John's to libertine proto-gnostics, and Jude's to unidentified antinomians.

The drama of hermeneutical antitheses continues unabated through Church history. Heresiologists like Irenaeus and Origen took mature gnos-

ticism to task. Rival schools of interpretation developed at Alexandria, characterized at its worst by Origen's neo-Platonic musings, and at Antioch, where a more workable and less fanciful historical-grammatical exegesis held sway. Athanasius upheld the whole Christological counsel of Scripture against Arius, to be followed by the likes of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus. Centuries later Thomas Aquinas worked out a synthesis capable, he hoped, of doing full justice to both Church teaching and the Aristotelian thought then flooding Europe's fledgling universities.

Approaching the modern period, one need only cite the names of the Socinians, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger to call forth an image of intellectual brilliance and hermeneutical subtlety pushing human understanding into ostensibly new frontiers—but uniformly calling for radical reinterpretation if not dismantling of Christian faith in classical form. Counterparts to this pantheon of cultured despisers would include the Reformers, Hamann, Kierkegaard, Hodge, Schlatter, Cullmann and Thielicke, all of whom worked out or assumed contrasting hermeneutical postures to critique and counteract the reigning syntheses they faced.

The point of this searchlight flash across intellectual history is to refresh our recollection of the gospel's perennial power to elicit sophisticated constructs that ultimately stand in opposition to Biblical truth and faith. Today's hermeneutical crisis is chronologically novel but essentially ancient. Since Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church, some current approaches to reality and texts are sound. At the same time some are untenable, and many are at the moment somewhere in between, awaiting the verdict of time and careful examination to sift their usefulness and, for Christians, viability in the light of revealed certainties. We do well to be respectful of current hermeneutical trends, but we do no less well to retain the demystifying critical distance to them that an historical perspective offers.

2. *Particularizing our calling.* Given the current crisis, where should Christians be standing? There is no uniform answer, because vocations and giftedness vary. There is great danger here in thinking monolithically, supposing that all Christians in at least this or that locale ought to have a unified posture toward or even awareness of today's hermeneutical battles. Christians are diverse, even within the same apparently narrow confession or denomination. There are old people, children, teenagers, parents, females, males, young marrieds, singles, university students, manual laborers, IBM engineers, secretaries—we could extend the list indefinitely and then compound the complexity by observing that every one of these persons is at a different stage of spiritual growth, faces different life challenges, and has a unique call and giftedness in Christ. How can we hope to urge on even a particular church one single response to current hermeneutics, taking the word in its disciplinary sense, where we might speak of a Bultmannian or Gadamerian or Wittgensteinian hermeneutical approach? The fact is that in one sense Christians do not need a formal hermeneutic at all and need not trouble themselves with the battle. They have and are much better

served by what Thomas Oden has called “the classical Christian faith (or ancient ecumenical orthodoxy),” summarized by Lancelot Andrewes in the sixteenth century as follows: “one canon, two Testaments, three creeds [the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian], four [ecumenical] councils, and five centuries along with the Fathers of that period,” meaning “Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom in the East; and Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great in the West.”¹³ I would want to add the best insights of the Reformation and since as a sixth body of reflection and practice furnishing a framework for fruitful and faithful understanding of Scripture in our time.

We must be cautious, then, in promoting any particular merely hermeneutical rationale for coping with today’s crisis as necessary or normative for Biblical interpretation or healthy Christian life. My six-year-old son does not need Walter Brueggemann’s mildly liberationist and deconstructionist synthesis to help him understand the Bible,¹⁴ as erudite and influential as his synthesis may be in its academic milieu. And I do not want to hear preaching that works hard at giving me a Brueggemannian-authorized rendering of Biblical texts and their meaning, even though it might make the preacher feel more like an up-to-date intellectual by doing so.

I want to remind us, then, that where perhaps most Christians ought to be standing in this crisis is untroubled by it. It will pass, or be replaced by more of the same, while the Biblical mandates of worship and mission and the spiritual resources to pursue them are before us in abundance.

Yet among certain strata of Christians, like those in seminary or university study and church or parachurch leadership, there is indeed the need for ongoing informed and constructive engagement with current hermeneutical trends, their promise when we can identify it, and their fallout when they produce it. What that engagement ought to look like depends on the sphere in which the Lord calls us to be active participants in today’s hermeneutical debates. I would like to explore two related but broadly different scenarios.

3. *Hermeneutics as a function of general revelation.* “Jesus said to him, ‘Do not forbid him; for he who is not against you is for you’” (Luke 9:50).

If we are Christians called to involvement and especially leadership in spheres impinged upon by the crisis, we can be reminded that Christ is aware of and ultimately sovereign over the battle’s clash in every conceivable corner of human endeavor. And he has called some of his servants—namely, us—to be in that battle’s proximity. We should move forward with both fear and confidence, knowing that if we turn away from our Lord all is lost, but that as we trust him he is with us even to the end of the age and therefore also to the limits of whatever interaction with hermeneutical reflection he may bid us to take up.

¹³ T. C. Oden, “On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age,” *No God But God* (ed. O. Guinness and J. Seel; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 202.

¹⁴ See e.g. W. Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993).

All persons are made in God's image, flawed though it now be, and the rankest anti-Christian hermeneutical musings may contain many a word of wisdom. As Jesus' enemy Caiaphas spoke truer than he knew in arguing that Jesus should die for the sake of the people so that the whole nation might not perish, Nietzsche offers many a rich resource for calling Christians to repentance and shedding light on Biblical passages. Like literature generally, hermeneutical literature of all stripes is a valuable tutor in the school of life. This may be the result of genuinely solid insight, or it may be a matter of learning the most from those with whom we disagree. In either case, if we see God's hand in creation as Romans 1 and other passages teach us, we can expect to see it especially in the hermeneutical activities of creation's crowning beings, perhaps unregenerate sinners but nevertheless made only a little lower than the angels themselves.

We desperately need solid Christian thinkers deeply aware of the latest hermeneutical trends for several reasons. One is to keep the rest of us who need specialized knowledge apprised, as Anthony Thiselton¹⁵ has so admirably done in Great Britain, along with Roger Lundin¹⁶ and a host of others on a lesser scale in the United States¹⁷ and elsewhere.¹⁸ Another is to furnish a critical mass of Christian thinkers in nonchurch centers of discussion, typically universities and colleges or policy-setting institutions like government agencies or school boards, who can engage in what one research professor of NT has called "destabilizing the hegemony," raising questions about today's presumed certainties as hermeneutics advances them that might never occur to non-Christians. Another is to help mediate the legitimate insights of modernity that hermeneutics might capture to the Church, which under Scripture's authority and the Spirit's protection is eminently free to incorporate these insights into its thought and practice when it is God-glorifying to do so.

Yet there is a subtle occupational hazard here. Os Guinness has written: "All psychology assumes an anthropology and thus a theology."¹⁹ The same is true of hermeneutics in its current major forms—existentialist and phenomenological, ontological, sociocritical, and reader-response.²⁰ At their heart all these approaches assume the individual interpreter's radical autonomy from external divine authority and the irrelevance of divine revelation to the hermeneutical enterprise. To the extent that there are absolutes, they will be either unacceptably materialist or mystical from the Christian point of view. In other words, any given hermeneutical synthesis presumes

¹⁵ Most recently in *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹⁶ R. Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

¹⁷ See G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991); W. C. Kaiser, Jr., and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993).

¹⁸ From Germany comes G. Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

¹⁹ O. Guinness, "America's Last Men and Their Magnificent Talking Culture," *No God But God* 128.

²⁰ These, along with Romanticist, are the categories used by Thiselton, "Hermeneutics" 293–297, to summarize hermeneutics since Schleiermacher.

a certain view of God, humans, sin and the world. To incorporate the synthesis too fully necessarily means incorporating the underlying or overarching hidden certainties that the hermeneutic presupposes. While all truth is God's truth, no truth rivals Biblical truth for redemptive efficacy. Any truth used to eclipse Christ's primacy and Scripture's veracity has moved from the status of general revelation to anti-Christian polemic.

The point here is that under God's general superintendence of this fallen world there is a burgeoning enterprise of reflection concerning the modes and meaning of textual understanding. There is no *a priori* reason for all Christians to remain aloof from this discussion, though by far most are excused. On the contrary, Christians whose callings require their involvement should commit themselves wholeheartedly to the highest possible level of understanding and contribution to the debate. But they should keep in mind the great gulf fixed between human cultural activity generally, an enterprise that is ultimately destined for judgment because it will not bow the knee to Christ, and Christ's saving work in the world through the gospel and the Church. General human cultural activity, like psychological or sociological or hermeneutical reflection, often glitters with shards of truth and meaning that inhere throughout the composition of this shattered world. But as David Wells has written:

Christ's work on the cross and the glory of his person are the sole criteria that we have for reading what God is doing in the world today. Anything that does not arise from Christ's saving death as interpreted by Scripture, that does not promote God's glory as understood by the apostles' teaching, that does not bear the stamp of his grace as seen in obedience to his Word, love of his gospel, commitment to his church, and service to others cannot rightly be characterized as the work of God.²¹

It may be helpful here to make use of a pair of military terms by way of analogy. A strategy is the overall game plan that informs and supports military engagement. Tactics, on the other hand, are the smaller-scale actions carried out in the interest of the strategy.

Christian involvement in the general hermeneutical debates of our time is tactical. The sphere of general revelation—that is, nature and human cultural activity in general—is not the kingdom of God. He is not in any direct way bringing his eternal redemption of our sinful world to pass by modern pagan discussion of hermeneutics, though he can certainly use that discussion to bring about his desired ends, and Christians may well be used by God to steer that discussion in ways that he wishes.

Christian involvement in the current secular discipline of hermeneutics is therefore not strategic. That is, it does not expect to win the world through such involvement, or to discover there essentially new ways of construing texts—in particular Biblical texts—that will revolutionize Church confession, proclamation and practice. Admittedly there are always those voices calling for the Church to adopt as its strategy the strategy of various

²¹ D. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity, 1994) 183–184.

secular disciplines like hermeneutics. To obey such voices is to overlook the precious trust of special revelation, to which in closing we now turn.

4. *Hermeneutics in the sphere of special revelation.* “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Luke 11:23).

Today’s hermeneutical crisis calls for every Christian to be steadfast in glorifying Christ in all of life despite pressures, usually subtle, that modern hermeneutical uncertainty helps produce. Instead of glorifying Christ, there is the very real danger that we will compromise. Any number of books on the market currently say that evangelical Christians already have. One of them outlines a four-step descent by which compromise occurs. First there is assumption. That is, an idea or practice is assumed that is ultimately inimical to truth as it is in Jesus. Perhaps the person who makes this assumption does not do it intentionally. He or she thinks they are proposing a genuinely Christian insight because their Biblical and theological knowledge is inadequate for them to see the weakness of the idea or practice they propose. An example here might be a sermon I heard in chapel at a Christian college that made the (liberation theological) assumption that God was active redemptively in the intifada of the Palestinians, just as he was in the ministry of Jesus in those same hills in Biblical times.

Next comes abandonment. Something new and modern—say, a radically egalitarian understanding of Gal 3:28—is assumed, so necessarily what it conflicts with has to go. Other Pauline passages that conflict with the new assumption are essentially abandoned, at least as formerly understood, to accommodate the newer and truer.

Third is adaptation. Here adjustments are made in other places to comport with the assumption and abandonment that have now taken place. An example might be a church-growth move to make nominally churched people feel more comfortable in the worship services they attend. Under the assumption that mention of sin is discomfiting to people nowadays, and following the abandonment of such mention, there is now adaptation of preaching and worship to assure that sin will no longer be a part of the worship focus. Thus that church might cease the practice of a corporate confession of sin.

Finally there is assimilation. In this last step a Christian assumption that was at first just set to the side for a different assumption in step one is now altered, replaced by the modern assumption and the cognitive world it assumes. To use our church-growth example again, sons and daughters of the church grow up with no firm conviction about the miserable prospects for persons outside of Christ. Like their fellow worldlings they no longer believe that they or anyone else is a sinner without hope bound for an eschatological collision with God’s wrath unless he mercifully intervenes. As Os Guinness puts it: “The gospel has been assimilated to the shape of the culture, often without remainder.”²²

I would not want to predict where current hermeneutics, either in general or in specific cases, is going. That is a matter of God’s superintendence

²² O. Guinness, “Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth,” *No God But God* 166–167.

in the world at large, and he alone knows the future. But I can reliably predict what will happen when any nongospel-based strategy of construing texts is commended to the Church as a better way of understanding and appropriating its charter document, God's Word, than it has previously possessed. Mainline churches in both Europe and North America eloquently attest that this is the surest recipe for secularization and apostasy that could be prescribed.

This calls for a dual strategy of response from Christian leadership. Pastors and others whose primary sphere of activity is the Church need to defend their flocks from the encroachments of today's hermeneutical innovations, keep them as informed as necessary to allow them to make the right kind of judgments in their own spheres of life where these innovations are having an impact, and where appropriate be prepared to make use of contemporary hermeneutical findings in ways that are appropriate to God's purpose and goals in the Church. For example, liberation hermeneutics has critiqued bourgeois thought and practice that is sometimes much in evidence in churches. This cultural critique can be of value for and in the Church as long as it is used with care. Or as Carl Armerding has written regarding structuralism, "some fresh insights in how to study the Bible have emerged in the wake of the new discipline. If nothing else, the text itself, rather than some putative form of reconstructed earlier version, has again become the focus of attention, surely a needed emphasis in contemporary biblical scholarship."²³ The various toxins of chemotherapy can be aids to health, but only when painstakingly administered by people expert in their use and potential danger to life.

The temptation for those of us who are professionally authorized to interact extensively with current hermeneutical proposals is that we will overhastily commend them to other Christians as methods or modes of understanding that in the end displace the gospel. This lamentable dilettantism occurs regularly in Christian circles and is perhaps the most wide-open door to secularization affecting the leadership of evangelical churches and groups. Today there is widespread ignorance among educated Christians of the theologically necessary distinction between general and special revelation. "All truth is God's truth" has come to mean that the Christian scientist extrapolating from social statistics can easily make just as valid inferences about the meaning or application of a Biblical passage as the trained exegete. And it goes without saying that in this understanding no mere theologian can tell the social-science expert anything about the Bible's implications for the social sphere.

Of course it is true that the social sciences can contribute to understanding both the Bible and human existence in the world today. But if they do, and if they do so in a way to be commended to the Church, it must be on Christ's gospel's terms and not on the terms dictated by social science's typical premises and aims.

²³ C. Armerding, "Structuralism," *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 665.

The same holds true for hermeneutics. Two hundred years of dedicated effort by the west's most noted intellectuals to transform theology into mere religion and to define the divine presence in the world, if allowed a place at all, as the best religious efforts of humans has failed miserably, judged not only by theological but also by social standards. In what was ninety years ago hailed as "the Christian century," the twentieth-century harvest of total dead from war and war-related causes was recently put at 187 million by British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm.²⁴ And the century is not over yet. Significantly, European cultures most intent on defying their Christian past were responsible for by far the most carnage. And now these same western cultures, notably Germany and France, with their cousins Britain and North America increasingly joining in, have been and continue to be in the vanguard of modern and postmodern hermeneutical proposals.

Today the Church may be holding its own in some quarters, but it is unlikely that we have modern hermeneutics in itself to thank where this is the case. While there is promise in insights from current hermeneutical syntheses warily sifted, Christians who know the difference between integration and syncretism will beware of the trend toward cultural accommodation that is, some maintain, the single most prominent feature of evangelical existence at the end of the Church's second millennium.

²⁴ As quoted in *Time International* (December 5, 1994) 93.