

THE HERMENEUTIC OF E. D. HIRSCH, JR. AND ITS IMPACT ON EXPOSITORY PREACHING: FRIEND OR FOE?

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Homiletics deals with the construction and communication of sermons. As a communicator, the preacher borrows from rhetoric, the social sciences, and communication theories. Yet because he handles religious content, he must also involve himself with hermeneutics. A homiletician, therefore, cannot merely ask, “How do I get the message across?” He must also ask, “How do I get the message?”¹

The foregoing quote by Haddon Robinson, a preacher and professor of preaching, underscores the necessary relationship between hermeneutics and homiletics. It is a relationship also recognized by others outside the area of sermon preparation and delivery. For instance, David Dockery comments: “Our understanding of hermeneutics, or the task of interpretation, focuses on discovering the historical meaning of the Biblical text. The task of preaching relates the ancient text to the people to whom the preached word is now spoken again as the living word.”² Expository preaching, in particular, is dependent upon the hermeneutical process to an even greater extent, because of its attention to the message in a specific passage of the Bible as the word delivered to a contemporary audience. Again, Robinson notes, “Since effective expository preaching deals largely with the explanation and application of Scripture, it reflects exegesis and hermeneutics on every hand.”³

It is important for the expository preacher to be well versed in the subject of hermeneutics and its impact on the process of the preparation of expository sermons. This familiarity includes noting and understanding the contributions of individuals within the field of hermeneutics. One such person of notoriety is E. D. Hirsch, Jr., literary scholar and professor of English at the University of Virginia. While Hirsch’s focus is on the field of literary

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¹ Haddon W. Robinson, “Homiletics and Hermeneutics,” in *Making a Difference in Preaching* (ed. Scott M. Gibson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 69.

² David Dockery, “Preaching and Hermeneutics,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (ed. Michael Duduit; Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 142. Donald Senior, from a Catholic perspective, notes the same relationship: “few would disagree that the Bible and its interpretation are fundamental ingredients for good preaching” (“Scripture and Homiletics: What the Bible Can teach the Preacher,” *Worship* 65 [Sept. 1991] 386).

³ Robinson, “Homiletics and Hermeneutics” 71.

criticism, his influence is felt in other areas, including Biblical hermeneutics.⁴ Because expositors are dependent upon the interpretation of Scripture, one might naturally assume that his work would find its place in the discussion of expository preaching. It is my contention that the hermeneutic of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. does indeed have much to offer expository preachers. In what ways and to what extent this is the case are ancillary questions which need addressing as well. The following discussion, therefore, will seek to answer several questions: What are the basic hermeneutic contentions of Hirsch? In what particular areas does his work affect expository preaching and how? Finally, how receptive should expositors be toward Hirsch and his theories?

I. THE HERMENEUTIC OF E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

With the 1967 publication of *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch offered a welcome defense of determinate meaning and the authority of the author against those who assaulted their relevancy. Stating that Hirsch is regarded by many Biblical exegetes as “the preeminent champion of the author and of objectivity in interpretation,” Kevin J. Vanhoozer develops his defense of meaning and interpretation in light of the author’s intention following Hirsch’s work.⁵ But one must use caution before wholeheartedly accepting Hirsch’s theories espoused in *Validity in Interpretation*, because in later writings he modified or, as some would decry, changed his views. W. Edward Glenny, for instance, expresses the necessary approach to Hirsch in his evaluation of divine meaning: “Since he has been quoted often by evangelicals in discussions about meaning, it is important that we understand how and why he changed his position.”⁶ It is also prudent to keep this development in mind when confronting Hirsch’s work in relation to preaching.

1. *In defense of the author.* Although Hirsch’s stated purpose in *Validity in Interpretation* is to provide a means of validating individual interpretations of literary texts, it is clear that his was an attempt to confront the New Criticism by arguing for the necessity of the author’s intention in any interpretive endeavor.⁷ Hirsch calls the notion that a text means what

⁴ Dockery elsewhere notes that “[Hirsch’s] influence in biblical interpretation is praised by many scholars of diverse traditions” (“Study and Interpretation of the Bible,” in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation* [ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Matthews, and Robert Sloan; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994] 46).

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 74.

⁶ W. Edward Glenny, “The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations,” *JETS* 38 (1995) 486.

⁷ Georgia Warnke points out that while Hirsch does argue against the anti-intentionalism of the New Criticism, he agrees with their attack of an overly-psychological conception of the author’s intent. “In equating textual meaning with an author’s intention, Hirsch does not follow Schleiermacher in identifying that meaning with the mental acts and experiences that occurred in the author’s mind at the time the text was written. He rather appeals to the phenomenological concept of ‘intentionality’ to formulate a notion of ‘verbal meaning’ that is the self-identical object of various mental acts. Verbal meaning, in other words, is the meaning the author intends through certain mental acts, not those acts themselves” (*Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987] 43–44).

its author meant a "sensible belief."⁸ He further claims that when the author is banished from the interpretative process, subjectivity and relativism become prevalent and "no adequate principle [exists] for judging the validity of an interpretation."⁹ Again, to remove the author as the determinant of meaning is "to reject the only compelling normative principle that [can] lend validity to an interpretation."¹⁰ He therefore calls for the resurrection of the author's meaning "on the fact that it is the only kind of interpretation with a determinate object, and thus the only kind that can lay claim to validity in any straightforward and practical sense of the term."¹¹

An important step for Hirsch in re-establishing the importance of the author in interpretation is to evaluate arguments made against it. There is first the contention that the meaning of a text changes, even for the author. Hirsch concedes that "if any theory of semantic mutability were true, it would legitimately banish the author's meaning as a normative principle in interpretation."¹² In short, can an author subsequently change his mind about his own earlier meaning in a text? It is here where Hirsch offers his crucial distinction between meaning and significance: "*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation or indeed anything imaginable."¹³ In the situation where an author might modify his meaning in a text, Hirsch asserts that no change in meaning has taken place, rather "the *significance* of the work of the author has changed a great deal."¹⁴

A second argument against the author's intent asserts that what really matters is what an author's text says, not his meaning. The objection is inextricably tied to semantic autonomy, which holds that meaning is independent of a fixed author and varied, depending on each individual interpreter. Although Hirsch insists that one critique of semantic autonomy is that it prevents an adequate criterion of validity, he claims that the decisive objection is found "within the theory itself and in the faultiness of the arguments used to support it."¹⁵ The argument is based on the so-called "intentional fallacy," introduced in an article by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.¹⁶ Hirsch first argues that the more popular version of the intentional fallacy moves beyond the scope of Wimsatt and Beardsley. Hirsch agrees that

⁸ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1967) 1.

⁹ *Ibid.* 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 27.

¹² *Ibid.* 6.

¹³ *Ibid.* 8 (author's emphasis). Meaning and significance, therefore, represent a dichotomy between two distinct concepts, one static, the other dynamic: "Significance always implies a relationship and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means. Failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory."

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (author's emphasis).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁶ See W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954) 3-18.

it is indeed applicable for evaluative purposes, for instance, to determine whether an author effectively conveys the actual meaning he intended, but claims that it does not render void the idea that meaning is dependent on the intent of the author. Rather, Hirsch focuses on dismantling an assumption beneath the intentional fallacy, the concept of public consensus: “the confident belief that the ‘saying’ of the text is a public fact firmly governed by public norms.” This “myth,” according to Hirsch, ignores the notion that no public consensus exists:

The idea of a public meaning sponsored not by the author’s intention but by a public consensus is based upon a fundamental error of observation and logic. It is an empirical fact that the consensus does not exist, and it is a logical error to erect a stable normative concept (i.e. *the* public meaning) out of an unstable descriptive one. The public meaning is nothing more or less than those meanings which the public happens to construe from the text. Any meaning which two or more members of the public construe is ipso facto within the public norms that govern language and its interpretation.¹⁷

A third argument voiced against authorial intended meaning is based on the inaccessibility of the author’s meaning, that is, that it is both impossible and unverifiable for interpreters to reproduce intended meanings in themselves. The key for Hirsch is the question of whether the author’s intended meaning can be known with certainty. Conceding that the argument is “self-evidently true,” Hirsch nevertheless states that “this obvious fact should not be allowed to sanction the overly hasty conclusion that the author’s intended meaning is inaccessible and is therefore a useless object of interpretation.”¹⁸ Rather, “the aim of the discipline must be to reach a consensus, on the basis of what is known, that correct understanding has *probably* been achieved. The issue is not whether certainty is accessible to the interpreter but whether the author’s intended meaning is accessible to him.”¹⁹ In general, no text could ever contain all the meanings an author had in mind when writing, so that interpretation should be concerned with *shareable* meanings, not *unconscious* meanings. “The only question that can be relevantly at issue,” asserts Hirsch, “is whether the verbal meaning which an author intends is accessible to the interpreter of his text.”²⁰

Hirsch finally tackles the argument that in some cases even the author does not know what he or she means. The situation might arise in one of two cases of authorial ignorance. First, an interpreter who claims to understand an author’s meaning better than he does might only have a better grasp of the subject matter the author was addressing. The meaning/subject matter distinction is an important one: “If we do not make and preserve the distinction between a man’s meaning and his subject matter, we cannot distinguish between true and false, better or worse meanings.”²¹ A second

¹⁷ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* 13 (author’s emphasis).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 16–17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 17 (author’s emphasis).

²⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

²¹ *Ibid.* 20.

case arises when dealing with components of an author's meaning of which he or she is not conscious. An interpreter might claim to have perceived meaning of which the author was not conscious, but such an assertion does not necessarily obviate the author's intended meaning. Hirsch clarifies the distinction:

There is a difference between meaning and consciousness of meaning, and since meaning is an affair of consciousness, one can say more precisely that there is a difference between consciousness and self-consciousness. Indeed, when an author's meaning is complicated, he cannot possibly at a given moment be paying attention to all its complexities. . . . No example of the author's ignorance with respect to his meaning could legitimately show that his intended meaning and the meaning of his text are two different things.²²

In asserting that the author's intent is the most appropriate norm for interpretation, Hirsch offers an expanded definition of verbal meaning as possessing the necessary characteristics of reproducibility and determinacy. Reproducibility allows an author's meaning to be actualized by another. Against critics who base their objections on psychologistic and radical historical arguments, Hirsch holds that the author's intended meaning is indeed reproducible. It is also determinate, exhibiting two further characteristics: "[I]t is an entity which is self-identical. Furthermore . . . it is an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next—that it is changeless."²³

Hirsch then offers his definition of verbal meaning "as a *willed type* which an author expresses by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols."²⁴ The inclusion of the phrase *willed type* reflects Hirsch's broadened understanding of meaning, which takes into consideration that "verbal meaning can be (as it is) a determinate object of consciousness and yet transcend (as it does) the actual contents of consciousness."²⁵ A type is an entity having a boundary which allows one to determine what belongs to it and what does not. Furthermore, it can be represented by different instances or varying contents of consciousness. Clearly, Hirsch's definition of verbal meaning moves beyond its identification with linguistic signs and allows interpreters maneuverability in their search for the author's meaning.

Concomitant with Hirsch's definition of meaning as a willed type is his discussion of genre as "that type which embraces the whole meaning of an utterance."²⁶ Several aspects of his evaluation of genre are worth noting. First, genre study is imperative for both the speaker and the interpreter. Each "must master not only the variable and unstable norms of language but also the particular norms of a particular genre."²⁷ Second, genre has

²² Ibid. 22.

²³ Ibid. 46.

²⁴ Ibid. 49 (author's emphasis).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. 71.

²⁷ Ibid.

important implications for the interpretive process. Individual interpreters have generic presuppositions when approaching a text, which are refined as interpreters further examine the text as part of the hermeneutical circle. These presuppositions about the genre to which a text belongs can mislead the interpreter. They may also be confirmed or jettisoned as the text is studied further.

Third, Hirsch posits his definition of intrinsic genre as “that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy.”²⁸ While identifying the intrinsic genre is not identical with determining meaning, it does allow one to do so. Fourth, Hirsch’s description of intrinsic genre plays a vital role in determining the validity of an interpretation, in particular whether an interpretation is implied in a meaning. Implications, unlike significances, are found within meanings; they are part of the whole of the willed type of the author. The difficulty of validating whether an interpretation can be considered an implication of an author’s intended meaning is made simpler by means of the text’s intrinsic genre: “[W]e may now say that the implications of an utterance are determined by its intrinsic genre. The principle by which we can discover whether an implication belongs to a meaning turns out to be the concept of intrinsic genre.”²⁹ A particular interpretation fits within the type of meaning offered by the author if it properly addresses the intrinsic genre and its accompanying conventions.

2. *A Hirschian “shift.”* With the 1976 publication of *Aims of Interpretation*, Hirsch experienced criticism from those questioning whether he had moved beyond his previous defense of authorial intention and a strict distinction between meaning and significance.³⁰ Although he appears to maintain the difference between the two,³¹ Hirsch expands the discussion beyond the situation described in *Validity in Interpretation*. For instance, Hirsch comments that his prior evaluation of the distinction between meaning and significance was restricted to his defense of original meaning, but claims such a defense was “a special application of a conception that is in principle universal. For the distinction between meaning and significance . . . [is] not limited to instances where meaning is equated with the author’s original meaning; it holds as well for any and all instances of ‘anachronistic meaning.’”³² He furthermore claims that his “earlier definition of meaning was too narrow and normative only in that it restricted meaning to those

²⁸ Ibid. 86.

²⁹ Ibid. 89–90.

³⁰ Hirsch rejects the criticism that he has revised his previous work: “I do not object to revising my earlier views and would welcome the chance to recant some of them: recantation is such a rare occurrence in theoretical discussions that it has a certain appeal as a proof of one’s reasonableness and bona fides. Nonetheless, these essays do not, in any respect that I am aware of, represent substantive revisions of the earlier argument” (E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976] 7).

³¹ He states, “[T]he term ‘meaning’ refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and ‘significance’ to the textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on. In other words, ‘significance’ is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself” (ibid. 2–3).

³² Ibid. 79.

constructions where the interpreter is governed by his conception of the author's will."³³

Such statements have rightly caused some to call into question Hirsch's commitment to his previous defense of the author. Dale Leschert takes up the question in his article, "A Change of Meaning, Not a Change of Mind." In his opinion, Hirsch has beneficially expanded his definition to include situations which *Validity in Interpretation* did not address.³⁴ He discusses Hirsch's broadened definition from *Aims of Interpretation* as a necessary step in order to allow him to "gain a hearing with his former critics who either regarded his earlier distinction between authorial meaning and significance as artificial or countered with a metaphysical position of dogmatic historicism that the reconstruction of authorial intention is impossible."³⁵ Leschert particularly notes the flexibility of Hirsch's definition that allows him to deal with the distinction between meaning and significance in all interpretation, even where the interpreter ignores or misconstrues the author's meaning. The earlier definition was dependent upon authorial intent as a means of determining significance. Here, "nonauthorial meanings may quite possibly be designated as 'meanings' in the broad sense. They can maintain the necessary, stable self-identity for the interpreter, who may very well be trapped inside the hermeneutical circle, while at the same time allowing in changes in significance."³⁶ In addition, Leschert claims that Hirsch emphasizes the meaning of the author as the goal of interpretation in his former book for practical reasons. In his later book, Leschert argues, Hirsch does so for ethical reasons: "Since speech is an extension of personhood, to use the words of another for one's own purposes without respect for the meaning of their author is analogous to treating that person as a means to one's own ends."³⁷ Leschert concludes that Hirsch's "hermeneutical developments" are "perfectly consistent with his former theory. In fact, they actually strengthen it by dealing with situations that his earlier book did not address."³⁸ Regardless of Leschert's defense, it remains a valid question whether or not Hirsch is now as staunch a supporter of authorial intent as his previous writing seems to suggest.

If a question lingers regarding E. D. Hirsch's commitment to the intent of the author, none should exist concerning his earlier clear distinction between meaning and significance. A 1984 article clearly indicates that his strict dichotomy between the two has now been bridged, at least in part. In "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," Hirsch revises his previous distinction between meaning and significance. What led to this revision was "[his] realization, very gradually achieved, that meaning is not simply an affair of consciousness and unconsciousness."³⁹ As users of language, we

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Dale Leschert, "A Change of Meaning, Not a Change of Mind: The Clarification of a Suspected Defection in the Hermeneutical Theory of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.," *JETS* 35 (1992) 184.

³⁵ Ibid. 184-85.

³⁶ Ibid. 185.

³⁷ Ibid. 187.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984) 202.

intend for our verbal utterances to go beyond what we are conscious of at any given moment. Although Hirsch claims he still holds to his previous distinction between meaning as a “self-identical schema whose boundaries are determined by an original speech event” and significance as a “relationship drawn between that self-identical meaning and something, anything, else,” he nevertheless states that it needs elaboration.⁴⁰ There are instances where an author specifically intends for his speech event to be open-ended, not fixed within its original context. Speaking is such a future-directed intention, because “the present of the listener will come after the present of the speaker.”⁴¹ The result is a domain of fixity and one of variability. Purpose is fixed, but future fulfillments are variable. The result is an amending of his previous distinction between meaning and significance by a rejection of his “earlier claim that future applications of meaning, each being different, must belong to the domain of significance. That was wrong, because different applications do not necessarily lie outside the boundaries of meaning.”⁴² Certain applications may therefore belong to a text’s meaning rather than its significance.⁴³

In “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” Hirsch provides a qualified and deepened emendation of his arguments in favor of authorial intention expressed in *Validity in Interpretation*. Maintaining a broad sense of the intent of the author, he argues for an allegorical element in determining meaning. Allegory, or the ability to find “meanings that neither the original author nor the original audience would have directly construed,” is an implicit feature “in the interpretation of all writings that are intended to apply across time—the kinds of writings, that is, that are found in literature, law, and religion.”⁴⁴ Hirsch introduces two groups for whom allegory is not needed: the originalists and the anti-originalists. The former “wish to bind interpretation to the explicit (and implicit) content of the original meaning,” while the latter “wish to dispense with authorial intent altogether.”⁴⁵ Hirsch finds fault with both, and prefers an Augustinian “third way,” which takes into consideration unforeseen contemporary meanings controlled by the principle of authorial intention. Hirsch’s openness to allegorical interpretation, however, does not amount to an endorsement of relativism: “An allegory is wrong if it is untrue to the spirit of the original intent. Interpretation must always go beyond the writer’s letter, but never

⁴⁰ Ibid. 204.

⁴¹ Ibid. 206.

⁴² Ibid. 210.

⁴³ Hirsch thus moves closer to Gadamer’s view of meaning and application. He claims, “I am now very much in agreement with Gadamer’s idea that application can be part of meaning” (ibid. 212). He does, however, disagree with Gadamer’s belief that meaning is different in every interpretation. While Gadamer believes that application necessitates a difference in meaning, Hirsch holds that meaning possibly remains the same with varying applications. Application thus splits significance and meaning. Rather than meaning remaining stringently fixed, as his earlier work supports, Hirsch now holds “that meaning can tolerate a small revision in mental content and remain the same—but not a big revision” (ibid. 221).

⁴⁴ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994) 552.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 555.

beyond the writer's spirit."⁴⁶ Those refusing the necessity of using allegory as a tool for interpreting "transoccasional writings" risk "turning our written inheritance into a dead letter," while those refraining from any constraint on allegory, "or its fraternal twin anti-intentionalism," risk "turning a literary work or the Constitution into a 'blank piece of paper.'"⁴⁷

II. HIRSCHIAN HERMENEUTICS AND EXPOSITORY PREACHING

In their article "Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and Proclamation," Jerry Vines and David Allen acknowledge the important interplay involved in preparing and delivering sermons:

Hermeneutics, exegesis, and proclamation form the crucial triad with which every pastor must reckon. A proper Biblical hermeneutic provides the philosophical underpinnings which undergird the exegetical task. Likewise, a proper exegetical methodology provides the foundation for the sermon. Then, of course, proper sermon delivery is necessary to carry home God's truth to the hearer.⁴⁸

As pastors and preachers, they stand together with others who acknowledge the contribution of E. D. Hirsch to the task of preaching.⁴⁹ What follows is an evaluation of three areas in the preparation of expository sermons that are affected by Hirsch's hermeneutic. It is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis, but understanding Hirsch's implications on authorial intent, application, and genre study are sufficient to grasp his importance for expositors.

1. *Authorial intent.* Nigel Watson, in his defense of authorial intent, asserts that "[i]t is surely no exaggeration to say that the quest for authorial intention represents the fundamental aim of historical-critical exegesis. . . . Furthermore, until the rise of the so-called New Criticism in Britain and America some sixty years ago the quest for the meaning intended by the author was generally accepted as the fundamental aim of all literary studies."⁵⁰ Biblical expositors, then, stand in line with the historical approach to the Biblical text which seeks the author's intended meaning.⁵¹ For example, Haddon Robinson's trademark "Big Idea" is formed with

⁴⁶ Ibid. 558.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 562.

⁴⁸ Jerry Vines and David Allen, "Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and Proclamation," *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Spring 1987) 309.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 316. See also Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981) 30–34; Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988) 107.

⁵⁰ Nigel Watson, "Authorial Intention: Suspect Concept for Biblical Scholars?," *AusBR* 35 (1987) 6.

⁵¹ There are some expository preachers who do not explicitly call for determining the author's intended meaning in a text. While Stephen F. Olford claims that "[a]t the heart of expository preaching is a commitment to expose and proclaim the truth that is *there* in the text of God's Word," he does not specifically mention the author's intention (*Anointed Expository Preaching* [Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998] 101–2). This is all the more surprising because of his attention to Greidanus's work, which asserts the central role of the author in

regard to the author's intent: "Throughout the analysis and synthesis, therefore, you will ask, 'Exactly what is the biblical writer talking about?'"⁵² In addition, Wayne McDill, who includes determining the author's meaning as one of the essential skills a preacher must master, states:

The preacher who wants to preach the Bible must make sure his aim is to discern the message of the original writer. . . . The writer had a purpose and chose his words accordingly. There were needs, problems, and conflicts which called forth the ideas he expressed. His vocabulary, his audience, his concerns, his argument, and the progression of his thought were all related to his moment in time. His message was bound in history and is opened today like a time capsule from another age. That capsule contains, however, a revelation from God that speaks in the present moment of both generations.⁵³

Bryan Chapell, supporting a grammatico-historical approach to sermon preparation, comments that "[o]ur task as preachers is to discern what the original writers meant by analyzing the background and grammatical features of what they said."⁵⁴ Furthermore, Harold T. Bryson echoes the expositor's necessary attention to the Biblical author: "Anyone who preaches from a Bible passage stands in the present while interpreting ideas that came from the past. The student of the Bible needs to discover as much as possible about what each word and statement meant to the original writer and to the original readers."⁵⁵ Despite David G. Buttrick's contention that focus on the intended meaning of the author is a "bug-a-boo,"⁵⁶ it is quite evident that for the majority of expository preachers, authorial intention is a key concept, and thus supported by the work of E. D. Hirsch.

There are, however, two issues related to authorial intention and Hirsch of which expositors need to be aware. The first deals with the extent of the Biblical author's intention, in particular, can there be a fuller sense of his meaning? While there are notable scholars who reject any assertion of meaning outside the explicit purview of the author,⁵⁷ it is important for

determining both the purpose and theme of the text (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* 135–37). For a position similar to Olford's, see Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: The Development and Delivery of Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 1999) 91.

⁵² Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 66. The big idea of a text is found by forming a subject and compliment, both of which reflect the author's intended meaning: "When a proposed subject accurately describes what the author is talking about, it illuminates the details of the passage; and the subject, in turn will be illuminated by the details" (67).

⁵³ Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills of Great Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 67.

⁵⁴ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 70.

⁵⁵ Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995).

⁵⁶ David G. Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Int* 35 (1981) 54, n. 23. Buttrick supports an audience-centered approach: "we are not suggesting that we can probe passages for authorial intent. What we do suppose is that passages may be analyzed as to how they might have operated in the consciousness of an audience."

⁵⁷ Kaiser is perhaps the most notable in this camp.

expository preachers to understand that the nature of the Bible, with God as its ultimate author, dictates that sometimes a *sensus plenior* will be evident. Raju D. Kunjummen emphasizes this characteristic of Scripture, stating that it is an extreme position “which balks at the notion that God as the principal author could have meant more by the words of Scripture than the human instrument did.”⁵⁸ Building on Hirsch’s hermeneutic, he proposes a balanced view of authorial intent in light of the nature of the Bible, concluding, “a principle like, ‘the Bible is to be interpreted by the same rules as other books,’ is not an absolutely valid dictum for biblical interpretation when it comes to authorial intention. Divine accommodation in the use of human language is not tantamount to divine self-reduction of authorial intent to the understanding of the biblical writer.”⁵⁹ This is also the position of Philip B. Payne, who, although he claims that “[m]ost of the meaning of the Biblical text is identical with the human author’s intention,” still asserts that “in spite of the crucial role the author’s intention has for the meaning of a text his conscious intention does not necessarily *exhaust* the meaning of his statements, especially in more poetic and prophetic writings. Ultimately, God is the author of Scripture, and it is his intention alone that exhaustively determines its meaning.”⁶⁰

A second issue concerning Hirsch and the defense of authorial intended meaning focuses on the recent use of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle’s discussion of speech act philosophy.⁶¹ The recent trend in evangelical hermeneutics is to move beyond Hirsch’s work in defending the necessity of the author in interpretation to make use of the idea of language as a communicative act. Vanhoozer, for instance, finds within the notion of language-as-communicative-act the means of securing both the author and determinate meaning.⁶² From Searle, he uses speech act theory to recover the necessity of the author’s intent in interpretation, because the author is a communicative agent. Vanhoozer therefore defines meaning as “a three-dimensional communicative action, with form and matter (propositional content), energy and trajectory (illocutionary force), and teleology or final purpose (perlocutionary effect).”⁶³ The goal of understanding thus becomes “to grasp what

⁵⁸ Raju D. Kunjummen, “The Single Intent of Scripture,” *GTJ* 7 (Spring 1986) 96. Kunjummen specifically calls into question the proposals of Walter Kaiser.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 109.

⁶⁰ Philip B. Payne, “Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author’s Intention,” *JETS* 20 (1977) 243 (author’s emphasis). Payne perhaps goes too far in mitigating the role of the author’s intent: “Intention should guide exegesis only tentatively and as the text is opened up. Ultimately the *text* is the source from which the exegete draws meaning.” A better approach for the expositor is to focus on the author’s intent unless the textual features, as a secondary consideration, give evidence of moving beyond the human author’s intent.

⁶¹ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2d ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁶² See also Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) 95–126.

⁶³ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 218.

has been done, together with its effects; the possibility of attaining such understanding is the presupposition of communicative action."⁶⁴

Vanhoozer considers a text an act, and notes four distinct ways in which meaningful action resembles a speech act. First, "doing" an action relates to the locution; as speaking is fixed by writing, an action is fixed by doing. Second, actions have "propositional content"; someone does something to someone when an action is done. Actions have an objective content. Third, actions have force; a particular stance is taken by an agent towards the object of the action, therefore corresponding to the illocutionary force. Finally, actions have both planned and unexpected effects. These effects correspond to the perlocutions of utterances.⁶⁵ Vanhoozer concludes that "understanding texts is ultimately a matter of interpreting human action. My point is twofold: (1) If we can interpret actions, then we can interpret texts; (2) we can only interpret actions in light of their agents."⁶⁶ It is quite possible that in the future, Hirsch will no longer have the preeminent place in the defense of the author that he once had. Instead, the discussion might primarily focus on writing as a speech act and its proponents.

2. *Application in preaching.* Dockery states that "[t]he most important contribution Hirsch's theory has made to biblical studies is the distinction between meaning and significance."⁶⁷ Is there, however, a connection between this contribution and preaching? Elsewhere, Dockery notes such a correlation between the meaning/significance distinction and the difference between exegesis and preaching: "Exegesis focuses on the primary normative meaning of the biblical text. Preaching entails expounding the fuller meaning or significance of the text in accord with the way the early church read Scripture."⁶⁸ Vines and Allen draw an even clearer relationship: "Hirsch's categories of 'meaning' and 'significance' are important and helpful for us. When the biblical exegete comes to a text of Scripture, he can proceed on the premise that there is a determinate meaning there. His job is to discover this meaning through exegesis. Having done this, there remains the further task of applying this meaning to modern day man."⁶⁹

Expositors, however, should not be ignorant of the debate which continues to surround the question of just how definite a clear line between meaning and significance should be drawn. Hirsch's shift on this question has already been noted, and confusion still exists as to the place of application in the process of discovering meaning. It is my contention, along with V. C. Pfitzner, that a major part of the problem lies in the many definitions of the term hermeneutics, including its distinction from exegesis. Pfitzner's definitions are common among interpreters:

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 221.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dockery, "Study and Interpretation of the Bible" 47.

⁶⁸ Dockery, "Preaching and Hermeneutics" 147.

⁶⁹ Vines and Allen, "Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and Proclamation" 315.

The task of exegesis is to ascertain exactly what the author wished to say in the precise historical situation in which he was, in which he was himself translating the message of the Gospel. The hermeneutical question already begins with the task of translating the original words of the text, of understanding what they meant then, but it is really felt only when the exegetical task is completed and we are left with the task of understanding this text for ourselves, of understanding its message in our precise historical situation.⁷⁰

Others differ in the way they define exegesis and hermeneutics. Kaiser, for instance, states:

While hermeneutics will seek to describe the general and special principles and rules which are useful in approaching the Biblical text, exegesis will seek to identify the single truth-intention of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences as they make up the thoughts of paragraphs, sections, and, ultimately, entire books. Accordingly, hermeneutics may be regarded as the *theory* that guides exegesis; exegesis may be understood in this work to be the *practice* of and the set of *procedures* for discovering the author's intended meaning.⁷¹

Which of these definitions should be followed by the expositor? It appears that the term exegesis properly covers the first task of expository preaching, discovering the author's intended meaning in a Biblical text irrespective of any contemporary application or significance. If one prefers to view hermeneutics as the discovery of the text's meaning for a contemporary audience, that is, its relevance for modern hearers, then significance and application are part of the hermeneutical process. If, however, one defines hermeneutics as the *science* that governs exegesis, significance is the exclusive domain of hermeneutics and seen as an ancillary procedure.

Two further points are important for the preparation and delivery of expository sermons in light of Hirsch's discussion of meaning and significance. First, regardless of how the expositor views the distinction, if any, between meaning and significance in Biblical texts, he must include a text's significance for his audience as application in his sermon. John A. Broadus, in his seminal work on preaching, begins his chapter on application with the often-cited comment, "[t]he application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but it is the main thing to be done."⁷² Hendrik Krabbendam also notes the importance of application in preaching: "in preaching, God's truth is integrally brought to bear upon the life of the hearer. The bottom line, therefore, is that both the meaning of the text and its significance are transmitted. Preaching as communication of truth encompasses not only exposition, but also

⁷⁰ V. C. Pfitzner, "The Hermeneutical Problem and Preaching," *CTM* 38 (June 1967) 348.

⁷¹ Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* 47 (author's emphasis). For a similar discussion, see Brian A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line between Hermeneutics and Application," *Master's Seminary Journal* 8 (Spring 1997) 83-105.

⁷² John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926) 245. For an extended explanation of the necessity of application in expository preaching, see Hershail W. York and Scott A. Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" *SBJT* 3, no. 2 (1999) 70-84.

application.”⁷³ Furthermore, J. I. Packer, in discussing which characteristics make preaching authoritative, notes that application is inherent in proclamation: “[P]reaching is more than teaching—not less, but more! Preaching is essentially teaching *plus* application . . . and where that *plus* is lacking something less than preaching takes place.”⁷⁴ If the expository preacher wishes to fulfill his purpose of delivering God’s Word to God’s people, it is imperative that application be a central part of his sermon.

The second important point for the expositor is that when determining applications for his sermon, he should keep in mind the author’s meaning in the text. The expository preacher’s task is to relate the “then” of the Biblical author’s meaning to the “now” of the preacher’s audience. Hirsch himself comments on this necessity in *Validity in Interpretation*: “So long as the meaning of [the author’s] utterance is our object,” he writes, “we are completely subservient to his will, because the meaning of his utterance is the meaning he wills to convey. Once we have construed his meaning, however, we are quite independent of his will. . . . We can relate his meaning to anything we want and value it as we please.”⁷⁵ Hirsch’s statement is reflected in Thomas A. Jackson’s description of application in the sermon: “The exegetical task comes to fulfillment when one has come to an understanding of what the author intended to say. . . . But we have not completed our task, if our intention is to preach from the text, until we have ‘listened’ to the author’s meaning and have some sense of what the text is saying to the people of God past and present.”⁷⁶ In summary, the expositor is bound to the Biblical text not only for the content of his explanation, but also as the driving force behind the applications made from the text to his audience.

3. *Genre and sermon preparation.* If the expository preacher must be committed to determining and delivering to his audience the meaning of a Biblical text as intended by its author, then he must further be committed to those methodologies which help ensure that he will be able to do so. A crucial aspect of Hirsch’s validation of interpretations is the concept of genre, in particular a text’s intrinsic genre. His comment that an interpreter must master not only the rules of language in general, but also the particular rules associated with the genre of an utterance finds its counterpart in the expositor’s need to approach the interpretation of the Bible with the understanding that it is written in many genres, each with their own literary characteristics.

⁷³ Hendrik Krabbendam, “Hermeneutics and Preaching,” in *The Preacher and Preaching* (ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr., Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986) 229.

⁷⁴ J. I. Packer, “From the Scriptures to the Sermon,” *Ashland Theological Journal* 22 (1990) 45.

⁷⁵ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* 142.

⁷⁶ Thomas A. Jackson, “From Text to Sermon: The Proper Use of the Bible in Preaching,” *Faith & Mission* 3 (Fall 1985) 16. Krabbendam echoes Jackson: “The significance of the text is squarely based upon and is to be derived from the meaning of the text. If the interpreter fails to reproduce either the proper or full meaning of the text, the search for its significance will be either sidetracked before it starts or seriously hampered. Conversely, if the asserted significance is not anchored in the meaning of the text, it cannot be said to set forth its truth” (“Hermeneutics and Preaching” 230).

In general, Biblical hermeneuticians would agree with Hirsch's injunction that "one principle does remain universally applicable: valid interpretation depends on a valid inference about the properties of the intrinsic genre."⁷⁷ For instance, Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart underscore a generic approach in their widely-read *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*: "We affirm that there is a real difference between a psalm, on the one hand, and an epistle on the other. Our concern is to help the reader to read and study the Psalms as poems, and the Epistles as letters. We hope to show that these differences are vital and should affect both the way one reads them and how one is to understand their message for today."⁷⁸ Grant R. Osborne agrees, stating that "the application of ancient characteristics (and of those modern devices that supplement and uncover the historical approach) is a necessary hermeneutical technique."⁷⁹

The principal benefit of genre study to Biblical interpreters is to hone their skill in deciphering the author's intended message in Scripture. Osborne builds on Hirsch's concept of intrinsic genre:

Genre functions as a valuable link between the text and the reader. . . . As readers study a particular text, their expectations are increasingly defined as they narrow the possibilities to identify the proper genre to which the text belongs. The process proceeds by trial and error, as the text progressively revises the reader's identification. By applying to the text the potential extrinsic genre-types (those imposed on the text from outside) the interpreter eventually determines the intrinsic, originally intended genre and thereby is able to utilize the correct "rules" for understanding that text.⁸⁰

Robert H. Stein, evaluating Biblical genres as individual "games" with their accompanying "rules," decidedly states, "Apart from a correct analysis of the literary form of a text and an application of the rules governing that genre, a correct understanding of the author's meaning is impossible."⁸¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard take a similar position: "Literary competence is the ability to discern cues within the text that indicate what kind of literature we are working with and, hence, what to expect from it. The Bible student who knows the formation and function of each literary type is in the best position to interpret correctly and to avoid serious misunderstandings."⁸²

⁷⁷ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* 121.

⁷⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 9–10.

⁷⁹ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 149–50.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 150. Osborne analyzes the genres of the Bible in seven categories: narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, apocalyptic, parable, and epistle.

⁸¹ Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 56. Stein also includes idioms, hyperbole, and treatises, laws, and songs for analysis.

⁸² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 260. For an expanded treatment of the interpretation of individual Biblical genres, see John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

As expositors are no less dependent upon hermeneutics to fulfill their task of disseminating God's Word to a contemporary audience, they must be faithful in their sermon preparation to take a text's genre into consideration when determining the Biblical writer's meaning. The message of genre study to expository preachers is clear: "When you are studying in a particular book of the Bible, know the literary form."⁸³ For the expositor and his sermon preparation, genre study plays both a negative and a positive function. From a negative standpoint, understanding a text's particular genre prevents the preacher from drawing inappropriate conclusions from his text. Chapell notes this benefit from knowing the text of a genre, claiming that "[m]any an error has been made by interpreting proverbs as promises, prophecy as history, parables as facts, and poetry as science."⁸⁴ From a positive standpoint, genre recognition plays ancillary function in properly determining the author's intended meaning in a text, which is then proclaimed in the expositor's sermon. Claiming that the preacher is greatly aided by an understanding of a genre and its literary characteristics, Olford asserts that "genre recognition helps the preacher be sensitive to how literature works and what to look for in the more detailed aspects of study."⁸⁵

Bryson sees three principal reasons for the expositor engaging in genre study in his sermon preparation: (1) it aids in theological interpretation; (2) it helps with practical application; and (3) it determines how a particular book is to be analyzed. In his description of how to implement genre study in the preparation of expository messages, Bryson evaluates the Biblical genres in three broad categories. Sequential books include both OT and NT narratives, collection books comprise psalms and proverbs, and epistolary books mainly contain the NT letters of Paul, John, Jude, and Peter.⁸⁶ Although his defense of and attention to the importance of genre in sermon preparation is appreciated, Bryson's tripartite division of the Biblical genres is too broad and does not recognize the major differences which apply within his three divisions. Expositors are better served by Greidanus's *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, which discusses Biblical genres under the categories of Hebrew narratives, prophetic literature, the Gospels (which includes the book of Acts), and the Epistles. Although his analysis may lack the breadth of some hermeneutics texts, he does an excellent job describing the nature of each genre, analyzing their individual literary characteristics, and giving helpful advice on preaching from each genre.⁸⁷

Hirsch's aim in discussing genre is to implement the notion of intrinsic genre in determining the validity of interpretations. The ability to narrow the nature of the intrinsic genre that one encounters in a text enhances the prospect that the interpreter will correctly handle the text itself. The concept of genre is equally valid and important for the expository preacher. He

⁸³ Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* 99.

⁸⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* 72.

⁸⁵ Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* 111.

⁸⁶ Bryson, *Expository Preaching* 123–28.

⁸⁷ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* 188–341.

is committed by the nature of his task to determine faithfully the author's intended meaning in the Biblical text in order to prepare an expository sermon. Hirsch's work in the area of genre is thus directly related to expository preaching and a treatment with which expositors should be familiar.

III. CONCLUSION

Raju Kunjummen rightly notes that "E. D. Hirsch has figured prominently in recent discussions on hermeneutics."⁸⁸ Along with commending Hirsch for his defense of authorial intent and determinate meaning, Kunjummen cites as positive contributions to the field of hermeneutics his distinction between meaning and significance, his difference between meaning and implication, and his discussion of intrinsic genre. Hirsch's significance, however, should not be restricted to either literary criticism or Biblical hermeneutics. His contributions affect the art and science of the preparation and delivery of expository sermons as well. Expository preachers, therefore, should be aware of both Hirsch's program of hermeneutics and its impact on their task.

First, Hirsch's defense of authorial intent in interpretation is to be applauded by expositors, although they should keep in mind that his analysis in *Validity in Interpretation* is to be hedged against his expansion in *Aims of Interpretation* and a later article. Nevertheless, Hirsch provides a beneficial hermeneutical foundation for the primacy of the Biblical author's intent in preparing the expository sermon. Although the discussion of authorial intent may be moving in the direction of language as a speech act, Hirsch's work still deserves its rightful place in the debate.

Second, his distinction between textual meaning and its significance directly relates to the defense and practice of application in expository preaching. It is somewhat troubling that Hirsch has moved in the direction of Gadamer's blending of meaning and application, but it is a cautious drift, taking into consideration the nature of certain literary types. Further work is needed in order to make a final determination of whether the Bible and any *sensus plenior* explicitly confirm Hirsch's concession that the interpreter's application can be factored into determining a text's meaning.

Finally, Hirsch's discussion of intrinsic genre and its importance in judging the validity of an interpretation underscore the necessity for expositors to give rightful attention to the literary characteristics of individual Biblical genres in their search for authorial meaning.

Is Hirsch therefore friend or foe to the expository preacher? In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, expositors should welcome the work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and integrate his contributions into a deepened understanding of their task.

⁸⁸ Kunjummen, "The Single Intent of Scripture" 84.