

CURRENT HERMENEUTICAL TRENDS: TOWARD EXPLANATION OR OBFUSCATION?

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The following remarks come from an exegetical practitioner, one who does not consider himself a hermeneutical theoretician and has no aspirations toward becoming one. As a practicing exegete, I know the painstaking difficulty of writing a commentary but have only dabbled in the theoretical aspects of hermeneutics. Yet I feel a compulsion to interact with recent works on hermeneutics whose purpose is to furnish the rules to guide my practice of exegesis. In other words, the discussion herein stems from observing the possible effects of recent theories on the practice of Biblical interpretation.

Writing a work such as those that have appeared recently is a yeoman's task. I must express admiration for the diligence of my fellow evangelicals who have recently published hermeneutical volumes and my appreciation for the beneficial material they have provided us. Indeed they have amassed a tremendous amount of data for our use.

Their contributions, however, appear to be having a secondary effect of polarizing evangelicals into two camps. Some recent hermeneutical trends have forced evangelical interpreters to choose between two hermeneutical wavelengths that oppose each other in rather dramatic ways. The difference between the two is comparable to an athletic encounter in which one team abides by the rules of Australian football and the other by those of American football. The two teams do not belong on the same playing field because they have no common guidelines to regulate their encounter.

M. Silva hints at the cleavage I am referring to when he observes that

the vast majority of books and articles dealing with the biblical text continue to place priority on its historical meaning. Especially puzzling is the fact that, from time to time, one may hear a scholar at a professional meeting who seems to adopt the newer approach at least theoretically but whose actual interpretive work does not appear substantially different from standard historical exegesis. In other words, the abandonment of authorial and historical interpretation would be difficult to document from the usual articles published in the recognized journals of biblical scholarship.¹

In essence, Silva says that the challenges to the traditional method of interpretation are thus far only theoretical and that the practical approach of evangelicals to interpretation is the same as it has always been.

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¹ M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (coauthored with W. C. Kaiser, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 234–235.

In referring to “the abandonment of authorial and historical interpretation,” Silva speaks of a departure from the grammatical-historical approach to interpretation.² Such a change in methodology is surprising, coming as it does so closely on the heels of consensus statements by evangelicals in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the grammatical-historical method is the only one compatible with a view that the Bible is without error.³

It was not unusual to encounter missiological and feminist challenges to the grammatical-historical method during the early 1980s,⁴ sometimes coming from outside and sometimes from within the inerrantist camp.⁵ The difference in the 1990s is that evangelical scholars who are theological and Biblical specialists and are solidly within the inerrantist camp are raising questions about the validity of the traditional method.⁶ This new movement toward change has created confusion for a number of reasons, a few of which the following survey will propose.

I. NEW AND CONFLICTING DEFINITIONS

One of the reasons has been an assignment of new and sometimes conflicting definitions for terms whose meanings have been reasonably clear until this new barrage of hermeneutical literature began. The following

² Ibid. 19; cf. Kaiser, pp. 31, 33. The grammatical-historical method, the traditional method, is not equivalent to the historical-critical method as some have erroneously assumed (e.g. K. Halebian, “The Problem of Contextualization,” *Missiology: An International Review* 9/1 [January 1983] 103; A. Johnson, “The Historical-Critical Method: Egyptian Gold or Pagan Precipice?,” *JETS* 26/1 [1983] 3–15; Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 19 n. 2; L. W. Caldwell, “Third Horizon Ethnohermeneutics: Re-evaluating New Testament Hermeneutical Models for Intercultural Bible Interpreters Today” [paper presented to Consultation of Anthropologists and Theologians, Biola University, April 14–15, 1986] 2). Kaiser points out distinctions between the two methods (*Biblical Hermeneutics* 32, 235–236). The distinction lies in the connotation of the term “critical,” which often connotes a skeptical approach to the Scriptures (D. J. Harrington, “Biblical Hermeneutics in Recent Discussion: New Testament,” *RelSRev* 10/1 [1984] 8). Hence historical criticism had to discount inspiration as a factor in Biblical exegesis (K. Froehlich, “Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move,” *WW* 1/2 [1981] 141).

³ Article XVIII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1978); Article XV, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Chicago, 1982).

⁴ C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 123, 129–132, 136–137; S. G. Lingenfelter, “Formal Logic or Practical Logic: Which Should Form the Basis for Cross-Cultural Theology?” (paper presented at the Consultation of Anthropologists and Theologians, Biola University, April 14–15, 1986) 21; L. M. Russell, “Introduction: Liberating the Word,” *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 11, 16; K. D. Sakenfeld, “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials,” *Feminist Interpretation* (ed. Russell) 55–56; E. S. Fiorenza, “Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Theology and Liberation Theology,” *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 93–94.

⁵ W. S. LaSor, “The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation,” *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 266–268, 270, 271–272, 274–275; P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 133–135.

⁶ D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994) 68, 82, 150.

comparisons flow from definitions of terms given and usages of those terms in various parts of this body of literature.

1. *Hermeneutics*. The term “hermeneutics” in one source means “the practice of biblical interpretation,”⁷ but in another it denotes “seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.”⁸ A few pages later, the same source that calls hermeneutics “the practice of biblical interpretation” defines it as “the principles people use to understand what something means”⁹ and the conceptual framework for interpreting correctly by means of accurate exegesis.¹⁰ Yet elsewhere the same work speaks of the goal of hermeneutics as an understanding of the impact of Scripture on ourselves.¹¹ This book in another place says the goal of hermeneutics is “to arrive at *the meaning of the text that the biblical writers or editors intended their readers to understand*.”¹²

Another recent volume says that hermeneutics includes what the text meant and what it means.¹³ The same one says the final goal of hermeneutics is the sermon¹⁴ and that the hermeneutical spiral extends to include exegesis, Biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology and practical theology.¹⁵ In yet another excerpt it identifies hermeneutics as the rules of interpretation.¹⁶

A source in addition to the three already cited furnishes the traditional definition of hermeneutics: the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation¹⁷—but later in an apparent deviation from that definition notes that the hermeneutical task includes exegetical and theological components.¹⁸ It proceeds even further afield when speaking of “hermeneutic” (note the singular) as the meaning of Scripture for our day¹⁹ and of application as an integral part of the hermeneutical task.²⁰ A yet-uncited source agrees that application is part of hermeneutics²¹ but elsewhere refers to “hermeneutical congruence” as an interaction of general and special revelation.²²

⁷ W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) xix.

⁸ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 25; cf. E. A. Nida and W. D. Reybun, *Meaning Across Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 30.

⁹ Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 18.

¹² *Ibid.* 97 (italics theirs).

¹³ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 12, 343.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 353.

¹⁷ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 15.

¹⁸ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 193.

¹⁹ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 231.

²⁰ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 272.

²¹ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 78.

²² *Ibid.* 60.

A further work compounds the confusion even more by offering three senses for the term “hermeneutics”: (1) the actual techniques of Biblical interpretation, (2) the application of these techniques—with the results of that endeavor or the interpretation of the passage, and (3) the whole conception of the nature of the interpretational task.²³

One recent volume seemed to advance a straightforward definition of hermeneutics. It defined hermeneutics as the science and art of interpreting the Bible.²⁴ By “science” the author refers to the principles followed, and by “art” he has in mind the proper observation of those rules.²⁵ Yet by including such observation under the rubric of “hermeneutics,” the author violates his own distinction between hermeneutics and exegesis, the latter of which he equates with the actual interpretation of the Bible.²⁶

Another work avoids this pitfall by defining hermeneutics as the science of textual interpretation of the Bible, but then clouds the picture by allowing issues of philosophy and linguistics to enter the discussion.²⁷

2. *Exegesis.* Another word that has borne the brunt of multiple meanings is “exegesis.” G. Osborne sees exegesis as a subcategory of hermeneutics that is synonymous with a grammatical-historical approach to interpretation and inseparable from practical application.²⁸ G. Fee and D. Stuart, in contrast, define exegesis as “a careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original intended meaning” and see it as quite separate from hermeneutics, by which they refer to practical application.²⁹ W. Klein, C. Blomberg and R. Hubbard (hereafter KBH) take hermeneutics to be a conceptual framework utilized for interpreting correctly by means of accurate exegesis, but at the same time endorse Osborne’s definition of hermeneutics as the overall term that includes exegesis and contextualization.³⁰ The same authors later note that “effective exegesis not only perceives what the message meant originally but also determines how best to express that meaning to one’s contemporaries” and equate this reexpression in the language of today with contextualization.³¹ So at the earlier point they distinguish contextualization from exegesis, but later they incorporate it as an integral part of exegesis.

Without giving a direct definition of exegesis, D. McCartney and C. Clayton appear to view it as a determination of the human author’s meaning plus a divinely intended meaning that stems from a believer’s sensitivity to God for its results.³² According to W. Kaiser and M. Silva, exegesis must take into account current relevancy, application, and contemporary signifi-

²³ M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 9.

²⁴ R. B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor, 1991) 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 20, 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 19–20.

²⁷ E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 8.

²⁸ Osborne, *Spiral* 5, 170, 318.

²⁹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read* 19, 25.

³⁰ Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 170, including n. 25; cf. Osborne, *Spiral* 5.

³¹ Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 174.

³² McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 162.

cance of a Biblical text.³³ Yet Kaiser also notes that use of the analogy of faith must come after exegesis is complete.³⁴ Does this mean that one cannot summarize all that God teaches on a given subject until after he has applied the relevant texts to current situations? Indeed, a cloud of confusion hovers over what one should understand the term “exegesis” to mean.

3. *Meaning.* Even the meaning of the term “meaning,” once a stable way of referring to the author’s intention, has become a source of uncertainty. One now must stipulate whether it is meaning as referent (i.e. what the text is talking about), meaning as sense (i.e. what is being said about the referent), meaning as intention (i.e. what the truth intention of the author is), and meaning as significance (i.e. meaning as contemporary significance).³⁵ To these one could add meaning as value and meaning as entailment.³⁶ So a multifaceted definition of “meaning” has further beclouded the challenge of understanding the Bible. Kaiser himself—the source of the discussion of the multiple meanings of “meaning”—seems to violate his own distinctions later when he comments that the analogy of faith comes into play after establishing the meaning of a passage from its immediate context.³⁷ He does not clarify which of the six meanings of meaning he means by “meaning” in this statement. Silva in the same volume says that “the meaning of a text should not be identified with the author’s intention *in an exclusive and absolute fashion.*”³⁸

In this text Silva also lists no less than eight levels of meaning that in large measure do not correspond with the five (or six) meanings of meaning that his coauthor Kaiser lists.³⁹ McCartney and Clayton join Kaiser and Silva in arguing for the inseparability of meaning and significance, thereby in effect agreeing with them by including significance as a part of meaning.⁴⁰

Osborne on the other hand favors maintaining a distinction between meaning and significance.⁴¹ In line with this definition, he consistently argues that the meaning of a text refers to the author’s intended meaning.⁴² Yet at other points he creates more confusion by lapsing into the “what-it-meant-what-it-means” terminology.⁴³ He further complicates the picture by drawing a distinction between “meaning” and “interpretation.”⁴⁴

W. R. Tate goes even further in advocating that meaning derives from the text itself as well as from the author and the contemporary reader.⁴⁵ Textual

³³ Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 192, 194, 203–204.

³⁵ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 34–44.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 44–45.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 194.

³⁸ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 245 (italics his).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 20–22.

⁴⁰ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 31, 276, 300 n. 47.

⁴¹ Osborne, *Spiral* 7.

⁴² *Ibid.* 219.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 268.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 354.

⁴⁵ W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 210.

autonomy assumes that the text itself, apart from its historical moorings, must yield meaning.⁴⁶ M. Erickson wants to replace “meaning” with the term “signification” and use “meaning” to include signification and significance.⁴⁷

4. *Interpretation.* One of the definitions of hermeneutics is “the practice of biblical interpretation.”⁴⁸ Yet no unanimity prevails regarding the meaning of the term “interpretation.” Even those who define hermeneutics in this way say a little later that hermeneutics provides the conceptual framework for interpreting, which is quite distinct from the practice of interpretation itself.⁴⁹ KBH introduce a further blurring of what interpretation is when they include practical obedience to applied lessons of Scripture as an aspect of interpretation.⁵⁰ They follow this up with a statement that present-day applications must rest on a foundation of principles of sound and accurate Biblical interpretation.⁵¹ This flies in the face of their earlier position that application is a part of interpretation. Could they possibly mean that application rests on application? A later attempt to clarify this area resorts to an already clouded distinction between meaning and significance.⁵²

McCartney and Clayton make the surprising observation that interpretive methodology does not determine the end result of interpretation.⁵³ This determination they attribute to the interpreter’s preunderstanding.⁵⁴ Yet, like KBH, they see obedience as an integral element in interpretation.⁵⁵ This approach sees interpretation as an essentially subjective process with objective elements playing a relatively minor role.

Osborne sees interpretation as involving a uniting of the interpreter’s horizon with the horizon of the text.⁵⁶ He says elsewhere that an interpreter cannot move behind his own preunderstanding to obtain an objective meaning of a passage.⁵⁷ Yet he ends up arguing for the possibility of objective interpretation.⁵⁸ He too is of the opinion that interpretation begins and ends with the meaning of the text.⁵⁹ He equates interpretation with an ascertaining of the extent to which a text is determinative for our own day.⁶⁰ In other words, meaning and interpretation are not synonymous, though they do overlap each other.⁶¹ But interpretation also overlaps relevance or application to people’s lives today.⁶²

⁴⁶ Ibid. xviii–xix.

⁴⁷ Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 20.

⁴⁸ Klein et al., *Biblical Interpretation* xix.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 83.

⁵¹ Ibid. 377.

⁵² Ibid. 401.

⁵³ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 65.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 230.

⁵⁶ Osborne, *Spiral* 318.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 334.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 386, 415.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 353.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 354.

⁶¹ Ibid. 354–355.

⁶² Ibid. 355.

Kaiser and Silva join this chorus in expressing the obligation of interpretation to decide the current relevancy, application and contemporary significance of a text.⁶³ Silva calls exegesis a fancy way of referring to interpretation.⁶⁴ Kaiser joins him in expressing the need that the interpretive task not terminate with just what the text meant to the author.⁶⁵ Yet Kaiser criticizes the error of making application the sole determiner of interpretation.⁶⁶ Silva is not altogether sympathetic with this opinion, however, because he allows that interpreters in some sense contribute to the meaning of the Bible from their own context.⁶⁷

5. *Summary of definitions.* The variations in definitions listed above are not exhaustive of the panorama of possibilities in recent books telling how to understand the Bible, but they are sufficient to illustrate the uncertainty that this body of literature has created. A summary of ideas regarding the four crucial terms will help crystallize the dilemma.

(1) The meaning of "hermeneutics" is at least fourfold: (a) a philosophical and linguistic mind-set,⁶⁸ (b) a set of principles,⁶⁹ (c) an interpretive use of these principles,⁷⁰ and (d) an application of the resulting interpretation to contemporary situations.⁷¹

(2) The meaning of "exegesis" includes the following: (a) an implementation of valid interpretive principles,⁷² (b) an aspect of hermeneutics,⁷³ (c) an implementation of valid interpretive principles plus a subjective sensitivity

⁶³ Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 10.

⁶⁴ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 21.

⁶⁵ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 41–42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 179.

⁶⁷ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 267.

⁶⁸ Erickson suggests this in his reference to the whole conception of the nature of the interpretational task (see n. 23 *supra*).

⁶⁹ Johnson (cf. n. 27 *supra*), Zuck (n. 24), Klein *et al.* (nn. 9, 10), Osborne (n. 16), Silva (n. 17) and Erickson (n. 23) are supportive of this category in their references to the science of textual interpretation of the Bible, the science and art of interpreting the Bible, the principles people use to understand what something means, the rules of interpretation, the discipline that deals with the principles of interpretation, the conceptual framework for interpreting correctly by means of accurate exegesis, and the actual techniques of Biblical interpretation.

⁷⁰ Klein *et al.* (nn. 7, 12), Erickson (n. 23) and Osborne (n. 13) acknowledge this category in their references to the practice of Biblical interpretation, a quest to arrive at the meaning of the text that the Biblical writers or editors intended their readers to understand, the application of interpretive techniques in Biblical interpretation, and a study of what the text meant.

⁷¹ Fee and Stuart (n. 8), Klein *et al.* (n. 11), Osborne (nn. 13, 15) and McCartney and Clayton (n. 21) support this use of "hermeneutics" in their references to the process of seeking contemporary relevance of ancient texts; an acquiring of an understanding of the impact of Scripture on ourselves; a study of what the text means; an inclusive investigation of exegesis, Biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology and practical theology; and the practical application of the text.

⁷² Klein *et al.* (n. 30), Fee and Stuart (n. 29) and Osborne (n. 28) in support of this definition refer to an implementation of the conceptual framework of hermeneutics; a careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover the original intended meaning that is separate from hermeneutics; and a grammatical-historical approach to interpretation.

⁷³ Osborne (n. 28) and Klein *et al.* (n. 30) in support of this connotation speak of the term as a subcategory of hermeneutics and a basis for contextualization.

to additional divinely-intended meanings,⁷⁴ and (d) an application of the results of interpretation to contemporary situations.⁷⁵ It is worthy of note that meanings (a) and (d) are identical with meanings (c) and (d) assigned to hermeneutics.

(3) The meaning of “meaning” includes the following: (a) a referent (what the text is talking about),⁷⁶ (b) a sense (what is being said about the referent), (c) an intention (the truth intention of the author),⁷⁷ (d) a significance (contemporary application),⁷⁸ (e) a value (an expression of preference and priority), (f) an entailment (a related consequence associated with Biblical words), (g) the connotation of the text as an entity independent of its source and its readership,⁷⁹ and (h) the signification of the text.⁸⁰

(4) “Interpretation” has the following variations: (a) an understanding of the authorial intention,⁸¹ (b) an understanding of the authorial intention and the present-day relevance,⁸² (c) an understanding of the present-day relevance,⁸³ and (d) a practical compliance with the contemporary application.⁸⁴

To one who thought he understood these four terms, the proliferation of ramifications now attached to them is bewildering. As a practicing exegete, I thought that hermeneutics was as (1) (b) above defines it (a set of principles), that exegesis was as (2) (a) speaks of it (an implementation of valid interpretative principles), that meaning was as (3) (c) describes it (the truth

⁷⁴ As parts of exegesis McCartney and Clayton (n. 32) include a determination of the human author’s meaning plus a divinely intended meaning stemming from a believer’s sensitivity to God.

⁷⁵ Osborne (n. 30) and Kaiser and Silva (n. 33) support this meaning by referring to a contextualization of the results of exegesis and seeing exegesis as incorporating elements of current relevancy, application, and contemporary significance of a Biblical text.

⁷⁶ Kaiser (nn. 35, 36) supports (a) through (f) as meanings of “meaning.”

⁷⁷ In addition to Kaiser, Osborne (nn. 42, 43) endorses this meaning of “meaning” by referring to the author’s intended meaning and what the text meant in its origination.

⁷⁸ Osborne (nn. 43, 44) and McCartney and Clayton (n. 40) are among those who support this meaning of “meaning” when using expressions like what the text means, the meaning of the text in the eyes of the contemporary reader, and something different from interpretation.

⁷⁹ Tate (n. 45) has this in mind in his discussion of textual autonomy.

⁸⁰ This is Erickson’s view of meaning (n. 47).

⁸¹ Klein *et al.* (nn. 49, 51), Osborne (n. 57), Silva (n. 64) and Kaiser (n. 66) support this understanding of “interpretation” with their expressions speaking of a practice based on the conceptual framework provided by hermeneutics, sound and accurate basis for present-day applications, an understanding of the objective meaning of the text, the same as exegesis, and nondependence on application.

⁸² Silva (n. 67), McCartney and Clayton (nn. 53, 54), Osborne (nn. 56, 57, 61, 62) and Kaiser (n. 65) have references to interpretation as partially dependent on application; dominated by subjective elements with objective principles playing only a minor role; a process that cannot lead to the objective meaning of a passage because of the interpreter’s preunderstanding; a uniting of the interpreter’s horizon with the horizon of the text; an overlapping with application to people’s lives today, but not synonymous with application; dependent on the interpreter’s preunderstanding for its end result; inclusive of more than what the text meant to the author; and an overlapping with the meaning of “meaning,” but with some distinction between the two.

⁸³ Osborne (n. 60) and Kaiser and Silva (n. 63) support this shade of meaning for interpretation by their words calling it a determination of the extent to which a text is determinative for our day and a judge of current relevancy, application, and contemporary significance of a text.

⁸⁴ The approximate wording of Klein *et al.* (n. 50) and McCartney and Clayton (n. 55) that indicates this in their seeing interpretation to be inclusive of practical obedience to applied lessons of Scripture and obedience as an integral element in interpretation.

intention of the author), and that interpretation was as (4) (a) declares it to be (an understanding of the authorial intention). I am happy to be in the company of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* in my understanding.⁸⁵ But I discover that current hermeneutical literature has three or more other definitions for each of these words.

No one intentionally created this state of confusion, but it is a shame that the propounders of new hermeneutical approaches did not utilize new terms for the new meanings rather than assigning new meanings to old terms. It is almost as if there is an unconscious desire to retain a continuity with the past where little or no continuity exists. This practice of assigning new meanings to old words has resulted in an unusually high degree of uncertainty in communication among evangelicals.⁸⁶ To what can we attribute this confusion?

II. NEW AND CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES

The emergence of conflicting definitions seems to have accompanied the invasion of the disciplines of philosophy and modern linguistic theory into the field of Biblical hermeneutics. A dissatisfaction with the goal of discovering authorial intention began in 1946 with the work of W. K. Simsatt and M. Beardsley and gained impetus through the work of H.-G. Gadamer in 1960.⁸⁷ P. Ricoeur stepped up the invasion in 1965.⁸⁸ Kaiser's appraisal is that the impact of these has changed the whole complexion of the interpretive enterprise during the last half of the twentieth century.⁸⁹

The roots of the new subjectivism and relativism that have become a part of hermeneutics go back to the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose system was so persuasive that no intellectual discipline could escape its influence.⁹⁰ Many years ago Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Bultmann, like Kant, proposed the existence of two realms of reality.⁹¹ It has taken evangelical Biblical exegetes a while to catch on, but now they have begun to incorporate Kant's dualism into their systems.⁹² The present view of hermeneutics is that the discipline is a matter of self-understanding.⁹³

⁸⁵ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th ed.; Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1993) gives the following relevant definitions; hermeneutics—"the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible)" (p. 543); exegesis—"an explanation or critical interpretation of a text" (p. 406); meaning—"a: the thing one intends to convey esp. by language; PURPORT; b: the thing that is conveyed esp. by language; IMPORT" (p. 720); interpretation—"the act or the result of interpreting; EXPLANATION" (p. 612).

⁸⁶ Even J. M. Robinson changed "hermeneutics" to "hermeneutic"—i.e. plural to singular—when he proposed a new meaning for the term ("Hermeneutic since Barth," *The New Hermeneutic*, vol. 2 of *New Frontiers in Theology* [ed. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, Jr.; New York: Harper, 1964] 1–77, esp. 4, 6; cf. Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 231).

⁸⁷ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 28–29.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 29–30.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 31.

⁹⁰ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 241; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 99.

⁹¹ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 99–101, 103.

⁹² Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 241.

⁹³ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 102.

Probably the most conspicuous difference in the field of Biblical understanding has been the rise to prominence of preunderstanding, which has been defined as “hermeneutical self-awareness.”⁹⁴ Most consider this addition to the arena of hermeneutical guidelines to be an absolute necessity and a healthy development.⁹⁵ The special attention devoted to the interpreter is ultimately the result of the Kantian emphasis on subjective reality as distinct from objective reality.

With many, preunderstanding is the ultimate determiner of one’s eventual understanding of Scripture.⁹⁶ With others, it is possible to overcome preunderstanding partially and approximate the text’s objective meaning to some degree.⁹⁷ But with almost all, if not all, preunderstanding as a starting point for hermeneutics is here to stay.⁹⁸

What then is preunderstanding? For Silva, it is another name for prejudice and a commitment to the traditional view of inspiration,⁹⁹ but it also includes such things as a dispensational theology.¹⁰⁰ Another definition cited above is hermeneutical self-awareness,¹⁰¹ by which Osborne includes the impact of Church history, contemporary meanings of word symbols, personal experiences, one’s confessional tradition, and rational thinking.¹⁰² McCartney and Clayton use “presuppositions” to speak of the same thing as “preunderstanding” and define them as one’s views regarding life and ultimate realities and about the nature of the text being studied.¹⁰³

KBH, following Ferguson, define preunderstanding as “a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it.”¹⁰⁴ They distinguish these from presuppositions, including in the latter such things as the inspiration of the Bible, its authoritativeness and truthfulness, its spiritual worth and effectiveness, its unity and diversity, its clarity, and a fixed canon of sixty-six books.¹⁰⁵ How this differs from preunderstanding is difficult to decipher, especially in light of their use of the same point—one’s view of the miraculous—as an illustration of both preunderstanding and presuppositions.¹⁰⁶

Johnson lists five hermeneutical premises that he apparently equates with preunderstanding: the literal, the grammatical, the historical, the tex-

⁹⁴ Osborne, *Spiral* 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 267, 286–287; Klein et al., *Biblical Interpretation* 7; Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 264.

⁹⁶ E.g. McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 65; R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 19; Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 88.

⁹⁷ E.g. Klein et al., *Biblical Interpretation* 115.

⁹⁸ Osborne, *Spiral* 286–287, 294; Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 88.

⁹⁹ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 237, 245.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 264.

¹⁰¹ Osborne, *Spiral* 7.

¹⁰² Ibid. 14, 266, 267, 292.

¹⁰³ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 13.

¹⁰⁴ Klein et al., *Biblical Interpretation* 99; cf. D. S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986) 6.

¹⁰⁵ Klein et al., *Biblical Interpretation* 88–93.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 94, 100. They distinguish preunderstanding from prejudice also by making the latter a subcategory of preunderstanding (ibid. 99 n. 34, 100).

tual design, and the theological.¹⁰⁷ McQuilkin's name for preunderstanding is presuppositions. He gives the following: As a supernatural book, the Bible is authoritative and trustworthy; as a natural book, it uses human communication.¹⁰⁸ Tate refers to preunderstanding as the interpreter's present horizon of understanding—that is, the colored lenses through which the reader views the text.¹⁰⁹ He seems to distinguish preunderstanding (at least to some extent) from presuppositions, which he classifies as reader presuppositions and theological presuppositions.¹¹⁰

Uncertainty among hermeneutical theoreticians regarding what constitutes preunderstanding is widespread, resulting in multiple preunderstandings of preunderstanding. They agree only regarding its influence on the outcome of the interpretive endeavor. In line with this acknowledged subjectivism, most advocate that one must view his own interpretive conclusions as tentative.¹¹¹ This relativism leads easily to divesting Scripture of any value in stating propositional truth, though one writer would limit the uncertainty to ambiguous areas such as sovereignty and responsibility, the millennial issue, and church government.¹¹² Others pass off this uncertainty as tolerance of fellow believers for the sake of unity—that is, "I don't agree with your conclusions . . . , but I concede your interpretation."¹¹³ If allowed to progress to its logical end, however, this outlook may lead eventually to a realization that what we have considered to be cardinal dogmas—such as the deity of Christ, his second coming, his substitutionary atonement—are merely the myopic conclusions of western, white, middle-class, male interpretations.¹¹⁴ Such a hermeneutical approach would spell the end of meaningful Christian doctrine.

The state of affairs among evangelicals is a far cry from the certainty God intended his people to have. He gave revelations to Paul and others "that we might *know* the things freely given to us by God" (1 Cor 2:12; italics mine), not that we might tentatively theorize regarding what God may have given us. Whence the uncertainty, then? Where have we gone wrong hermeneutically in handling the Scriptures?

III. RIGHT AND WRONG CENTERS OF ATTENTION

1. *Two foci.* The evident problem is that evangelicals have subtly changed their focus in interpreting the Bible. They have reverted to the mind-set of secularists in allowing culture to judge Scripture rather than

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* 31–53.

¹⁰⁸ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying* 20–23.

¹⁰⁹ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation* 166.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 166–170.

¹¹¹ E.g. Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 306; Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 88; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 164; Osborne, *Spiral* 307.

¹¹² Osborne, *Spiral* 287.

¹¹³ Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 150–151; cf. 139–144.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 125.

seeing Scripture as the judge of culture.¹¹⁵ This is another way of saying they have magnified the human element in inspiration above the divine. They have portrayed the Bible as a book that is subject to strictly human limitations.

Another way of viewing the problem is to perceive it as an effort to integrate secular disciplines, such as philosophy and modern linguistics, with the Bible. In this and all similar integrative undertakings the uniqueness of the Bible is inevitably the loser. What philosophic and linguistic theory have to offer inescapably waters down the contribution of the Bible to human understanding. After all, secular disciplines with antisupernaturalistic persuasions are bound to have some negative effect on a Christian discipline with its supernaturalistic understanding (cf. Col 2:8; 1 Tim 6:20).

A recent and highly publicized contemporary drama presents an analogy. Robert Shapiro and Johnnie Cochran and their defense team in the O. J. Simpson trial did a masterful job of diverting attention away from their client and focusing much by way of investigative energy on the police officers and their qualifications and motives, the lab technicians, the capability of the whole Los Angeles police department, communicative breakdowns within the district attorney's office, many others involved in law enforcement and prosecution, and even the judge himself. Indeed, one wonders who was on trial in that case: Simpson, the district attorney and police, or the judge.

Philosophy and modern linguistic theory have done the same with hermeneutics, a discipline that has traditionally concentrated on the text of Scripture and God's ability to communicate with his people. It is now the interpreter who is under investigation rather than Scripture—his limitations in regard to language as a means of communication, his predisposition to distort, his conceptual distance from the text, his incapacity to know anything with certitude, his inability to comprehend communication originating in another culture, and so on. In essence, hermeneutics has become an exercise in probing anthropological finitude instead of an attempt to grasp the meaning of a written revelation originating with an infinite God.

2. *God's purpose to communicate.* Perhaps a few looks at the other side of the picture will help to apply a corrective to this unfortunate imbalance. As one text has put it, the creation of humans in God's image implies their ability to exchange communication with him and each other.¹¹⁶ Another recent observation has been that human weakness will never thwart the purposes of the Creator.¹¹⁷ God will be a success in whatever he sets out to do in spite of human limitations—in this case, to communicate his revelation to his people.

¹¹⁵ J. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 168; cf. V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (ed. M. Silva; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 175.

¹¹⁶ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 25; cf. W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 299–300.

¹¹⁷ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 248.

Some draw proof of a western male interpreter's limitations from his blindness to issues raised by female or nonwestern interpreters.¹¹⁸ This does not prove human limitation, however. It merely signals the incompleteness of the exegetical task. The claim to have received God's communication does not mean that the task of Biblical exegesis is over. Exegesis is an ongoing task with the interpreter's understanding being progressively enlarged. But enlargement does not necessitate changes in earlier conclusions. Rather, it represents increasing refinements in how one grasps the truths already learned. The exegete welcomes innovative approaches to the text to stimulate investigation from new perspectives. This is how he grows and how the body of Christ grows in its understanding of God. His knowledge of truth is absolute, not relative or tentative, but it can become more and more definitive.¹¹⁹

3. *Illumination by the Spirit.* Divine revelation and inspiration lie behind the writing of Scripture, and divine illumination functions in connection with man's ability to understand what is written.¹²⁰ If the divine factor in this communicative process prevails, the Holy Spirit can prevail as a part of his illuminating ministry to erase a faulty preunderstanding in the minds of persons possessing a new nature in Christ.¹²¹ The fall defaced the image of God in man, to be sure, but God provided divine illumination to restore whatever reasoning capacity man has lost. "The spiritual man discerns all things" (1 Cor 2:15) regarding the "deep things" (2:10; cf. John 16:13) of God's revelation. Recent trends have been to assign the Holy Spirit a different role. Some say he helps interpreters in their "transcendental" interpretations or discovery of the *sensus plenior* of a text.¹²² Another says he helps believers in making correct applications of the interpreted text.¹²³ In both of those proposed functions, no concrete data exists to corroborate the Spirit's guidance. Why then should we deny the help of the Spirit in a comparable ministry of removing subjectivity in our quest for the objective meaning of a text of Scripture?¹²⁴ In this case abundant concrete evidence is available to reinforce his illumination and help one follow the path to objectivity. This certainly requires no more of him than the other suggested functions—that is, suppressing what is already there instead of creating new ideas.

Surely a believer has freedom from a blinded mind that plagues the unbeliever and keeps him from a balanced grasp of the gospel (2 Cor 4:4). He

¹¹⁸ Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 148–149; Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 124–125.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* 288 n. 30.

¹²⁰ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 45.

¹²¹ Cf. Osborne, *Spiral* 341; J. M. Frame, "The Spirit and the Scriptures," *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 232.

¹²² McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 162, 164; cf. Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 139, 145–150; Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 267.

¹²³ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 167–168.

¹²⁴ Cf. H. A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 30–31.

has an anointing that frees him from misinterpretations that cause some professing Christians to wander away from the truth (1 John 2:20). What else can this be but a release from bias and an opening to enter the realm of objectivity in one's handling of Scripture? Christian interpreters have access to a divinely enabled objectivity, so to speak.

Agreed, this is not the way we would approach other literature. But the Bible is not just another piece of literature. It is the Word of God transmitted through human instrumentality. Of all people, evangelicals should acknowledge the distinctiveness of this divine transmission of information through revelation, inspiration and illumination.

4. *Neutral objectivity.* The oft-repeated protest that neutral objectivity does not exist is familiar.¹²⁵ One idea is that Christian commitment in itself constitutes subjectivity and partiality. This, however, is a concession to the position that the Christian God is nonobjective.¹²⁶ Who determines true objectivity: God, or the secularists? Who is the final determiner of truth? The questions require no answer. Neutral objectivity originates with the Creator of all things and is available through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

It is common to cite the frequent disagreements in interpreting the Bible as evidence of the impact of preunderstanding on interpreters. Why not look the other way to the measure of agreement achieved among interpreters throughout Church history? How has this happened if preunderstanding is such a dominant force in hermeneutics? How did exegetes deal with Scripture before Kant?

A constancy of Church doctrine has prevailed through the centuries. In a variety of locations and cultures and of time periods when thought patterns and backgrounds of interpreters have differed radically, the cardinal doctrines of the faith based on objective hermeneutics have remained unchanged. If prejudgments had been a major factor in their interpretive decisions, interpreters would not have experienced such consistency. Instead a normative method of exegesis has dominated to accomplish a near unanimity. Without preunderstanding playing a formal hermeneutical role, their understanding of Scripture has remained untainted in a controlling number of cases for over 1,900 years.

No one is ready to trash the theological heritage of orthodox Christianity. We have much to learn from interpreters of the past.¹²⁷ Most of them did without the benefits of post-Kantian enlightenment and yet were able to reach conclusions regarding the meaning of the text that still merit respect among theorists who insist that it is impossible to return to pre-Kantian

¹²⁵ Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 230–231, 244; Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 115; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 99; Osborne, *Spiral* 290, 295, 334; B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) 157.

¹²⁶ Contra Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 79, 83.

¹²⁷ Cf. Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 149, 386; Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 252; McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 74–75; Osborne, *Spiral* 292.

approaches.¹²⁸ The earlier originators of our theological heritage are concrete evidence that God has successfully communicated objective truths to his people and that human limitations have not been a distorting impediment to the process, as is currently being alleged.

IV. PARTING SUGGESTIONS

In light of the foregoing discussion, the following are suggestions from an exegetical practitioner¹²⁹ to hermeneutical theorists.

(1) Please get together with one another and agree upon some definitions for key hermeneutical words, or else return to what has been the traditional connotation of those words and create a new vocabulary to cover the subjects you must treat. Until you do, you have left us practitioners in utter darkness.

(2) Please come to some agreement regarding what constitutes preunderstanding and how to counteract it. Or, better still, drop the subject completely. As matters now stand in your systems, we are fast losing touch with absolute Biblical truth.

(3) Please let Biblical hermeneutics be Biblical hermeneutics rather than making it a philosophical, linguistic, cultural, anthropological, psychological, literary, sociological, missiological investigation of human limitations. We have treated the Bible as just another humanly generated piece of literature long enough. Though Kantian dialecticism may be necessary in other realms, it is inappropriate wherever divine revelation requires that reality in the subjective realm correspond to reality in the objective realm.

(4) Please stop dwelling on the inevitability of subjectivism and focus more on the potential for objectivity. During the last century, M. Terry wrote extensively about this potential in hermeneutics. At one point he says:

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures *ought* to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.¹³⁰

In other words, this essay joins hands with Terry and issues a plea: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The grammatical-historical system of hermeneutics

¹²⁸ E.g. A. D. Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 323; *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 87.

¹²⁹ Some may say that I have indulged in a discussion of hermeneutical theory in my remarks above. This is probably true, but I see myself as unqualified to be a hermeneutical theorist in the fullest sense, especially in comparison with the impressive qualifications of those who have written so knowledgeably and extensively regarding hermeneutical theory.

¹³⁰ M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 595. See pp. 152–154 for more of Terry's relevant remarks.

has proven itself adequate for a long time. It smacks somewhat of vanity for this generation to think it has outgrown that method. If the retort comes that it does not work in today's world, the immediate reply must be, "Have you really tried it?" The only thing that has changed from Terry's day to the present is a present scarcity of those willing to pay the price of diligent exegetical study. It is much easier to blame exegetical conclusions on preunderstanding than it is to do the hard work of culling out objective exegetical data to arrive at the meaning that God and the human author intended in a given passage.

Kaiser has observed:

It is usually easier to propose theories than to implement them. In many ways, that is also true of books on Bible interpretation. Nevertheless, it is the practice, not the ability to state more theory, that makes perfect in this instance. There is no substitute for attention to detail and experience in more and more biblical texts.¹³¹

Our present need is for more people to do the latter—that is, practice exegesis. When they do, then we will have better foundations for improving our hermeneutical theory.

The following analogy may help portray what an approach to hermeneutics should be. In the realm of sanctification, rather than expending all our energies explaining why we cannot attain absolute holiness, let us set our sights on the target of being holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:16). Just because we cannot attain unblemished holiness does not excuse us from continuing to pursue it without becoming preoccupied with reasons why we must fail. So it is in hermeneutics and exegesis. Our goal is the objective meaning of Scripture. Let us not become distracted from pursuing it. It is within the capability of the Spirit-illuminated believer to arrive at objective meaning—that is, the meaning God intended to transmit through his human authors.

A rejection of this plea to let unbiased exegetical data have their way will mean a transformation of interpretation from being an explanation of the meaning of Scripture (its proper function) into an obfuscation of that meaning—exactly what the body of Christ does not need. Hermeneutics needs to accentuate the positive value of objectivity and eliminate negative concessions to subjectivity.

¹³¹ Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 282.