Approaches to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Emphases in Biblical Interpretation

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One of the important concerns of contemporary theology is hermeneutics. The term "hermeneutics" comes from the Greek verb *hermeneui5* meaning "to explain" or "to interpret." Hermeneutics refers to the defining of rules and methodologies used in interpreting texts. By the time of Aristotle, certain interpretive principles for understanding written documents had been established. Many of these are still useful. But within Christian circles, the work of Biblical scholars and theologians has shown that rules for "general hermeneutics" must be modified and amplified when the Bible is interpreted. This is due to the varieties of literary forms in Scripture and the need for hermeneutical principles to take into account the different types of Biblical literature. For Biblical interpretation, such concerns as the language used, historical context, literary genre, identity of the author and those to whom the document was written must be taken into account. Added to these may also be the author's aim and how this writing fits into the canon of Scripture as a whole. So hermeneutics has many dimensions.

Hermeneutics is often seen as existing in relationship to "exegesis" and "interpretation." The distinction is sometimes made that exegesis is the study of what the Biblical texts meant for their original authors and audiences. Interpretation is what the texts mean for us today. Hermeneutics then is the methods and rules applied in the movement from exegesis to interpretation. But while this may be the technical definitions of the terms, there is often great similarity in how these terms are used. The rules of hermeneutics and the art of Biblical interpretation are closely bound up together.

Contemporary discussions of hermeneutics can be very technical. Biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, linguists, social scientists and historians all have important dimensions to add from their disciplines. Consequently, writings on hermeneutics can move in many orbits and presuppose multiple levels of knowledge. The following discussion describes three prominent hermeneutical approaches and then outlines some major interpretive emphases that are giving direction to contemporary Biblical interpretation.

Hermeneutical Approaches

There are many ways to describe the numerous theories of hermeneutics common today. C. René Padilla has shown three basic ways of approaching the Bible that find their adherents among scholars and in our churches. These are the intuitive, the scientific, and the contextual approaches. In all of these there are both strengths and weaknesses. They all make certain assumptions about the nature of Scripture, one's contemporary situation and how the bridge between the ancient past of the Biblical texts and the present day reader is built.

1. *Intuitive*. The intuitive approach is common among interpreters who stress the need
for a personal application of the Bible. In commentaries, popular preaching, and devotional materials one often finds the direct application of Biblical texts to the readers' or hearers' own personal situations.

This approach assumes that there is a direct congruence between the situation in a Biblical text and the situation of the contemporary reader. If so, hermeneutics is an easy task. Since there is a direct correspondence between ancient text and contemporary reader, interpretation simply proceeds intuitively or naturally. The Holy Spirit makes the Bible “come alive” in the present. So the Spirit works directly to make a Scriptural application of a text without the need for elaborate interpretive theories or rules. Padilla has diagrammed this approach this way:

In the intuitive model, the words of Scripture are assumed to be directly relevant and applicable for the present-day. Whole verses or parts of verses provide God's direct communication to the reader. An old story shows this approach to its extreme. A man sought to get his “marching orders” from God one morning by opening the Bible at random and resolving to follow the verse his finger lit upon. When he did this, he pointed to the verse: “And Judas went out and hanged himself.” Feeling this somehow was not what God really had in mind, he repeated the process. This time he hit upon the verse: “Go thou and do likewise.” Even more unsettled, the man tried his method again. This time he turned to the command: “What thy hand findest to do, do thou quickly”!

While the story carries this approach to its limit, it does dramatize the view of Scripture, the assumptions, and the non-concern for hermeneutics of the intuitive approach. In some sense, the practice of allegorizing Scripture exhibits this same view. In allegorization, each element of the text is perceived as a symbol with a hidden meaning. But there are no hermeneutical rules to specify how to determine what these hidden meanings are. Thus they can be anything. Milder forms of the intuitive approach are found in sermons or writings that make a direct application of Scripture to a present situation without regard to such things as the Biblical languages, literary forms, setting, context, etc. The approach is ahistorical in its thrust.

2. Scientific. Completely opposite to the intuitive approach is the scientific. In this view, hermeneutics is best approached by using the tools of literary criticism, historical, linguistic and cultural studies. The emphasis here is on the original context of the Biblical texts, their settings in life (Sitz im Leben) and all the other factors that would influence one's abilities to interpret the original meaning of Biblical texts.

The scientific approach is the one adopted by the majority of Biblical scholars writing today. Its basic assumptions are that the Biblical message is in reality what the Biblical authors meant when they wrote what they wrote. The goal of hermeneutics or Biblical interpretation is to ascertain by the use of the finest scholarly tools, what this original meaning was. By use of the grammatical-historical method, scholars may “bridge the gap”
between the original setting and words of the Biblical authors and contemporary readers of Scripture. As diagrammed by Padilla this approach is indicated as³

Of prime importance in this approach is the historical character of Scripture. God's revelation in Scripture took place in history. For contemporary listeners to understand this Word of God, first attention is given to Scripture's original context. The utmost care and energy must be expended to be able to enter as fully as possible into the Biblical writers' minds and the minds of their original audiences so the message of Scripture might be heard today. The New Testament scholar Norman Perrin described this approach when he wrote: "We need to be able to understand the language in which a text is written, the nature of the text itself as a historical and literary artifact, the circumstances in which and for which it was written. We need, further, to understand as far as we can the intent of the author in writing the text and the meaning understood by those for whom the text was written."⁶ Insofar as the scientific approach is concerned with establishing the original, intended meaning of Biblical texts its primary thrust is historical in nature, with the emphasis on the components of the text as it was written in ancient times.

3. Contextual. The contextual approach to hermeneutics recognizes that Biblical texts must be read and understood in terms of their original settings. But it also claims there are factors in the situations of contemporary readers that will have an effect on how a text is understood. In a contextual approach, both ancient and modern contexts are of major importance. Both Biblical culture and contemporary culture must be considered and each play a key role in reading Scripture. A "Biblical message" is not a "Biblical message" apart from its context—and our own. Diagrammatically, the contextual approach looks like this⁷

For interpretation to take place, attention is given not only to how the original author and audience understood the message (and the best critical tools must be used to discern
this) but also to the current cultural context. These both must be understood for the Biblical message to come through today.

Yet Padilla notes what has also become a concern of contemporary hermeneutics. This is the "hermeneutical circle." Here is the recognition of a mutual engagement between interpreter and text. The interpretive process is not simply one-way from text to reader. Readers have their own contexts, their own perspectives. Thus there is a "dynamic interplay" among the elements of this hermeneutical circle. The circle involves a constant dialogue among the elements: the interpreter's historical situation, the interpreter's world-and-life view, Scripture itself, and theology. As Padilla diagrams this:

[Diagram of the hermeneutical circle with arrows indicating the interplay between world-and-life view, Scripture, historical context, and theology]

In this hermeneutical process, one listens to the questions raised within one's own historical context and comes to Scripture asking: "What does God say about this problem?" One's world-and-life view affects the way this question is initially formulated. The better one's understanding of an historical context, the better the question to Scripture will be posed and Scripture's message for this situation come to be known. As Padilla puts it: "If it is true that Scripture illuminates life, it is also true that life illuminates Scripture." When Scriptural answers come forth, there may be an effect on the way the interpreter's initial is formulated. Thus new forms of questions are always on the horizon. The theological context is made up of both the answers to questions from the concrete situation and the questions of Scripture to the situation. The fuller one's understanding of the Biblical text in its historical context, the more clearly Scripture's message may be heard. Changes in one's world-in-life view can thus happen. A new world-in-life view may then ask new and richer questions to Scripture and Scripture may speak back with new, even richer answers. This leads to a better theology for facing the issues of contemporary times.

The recognition of this hermeneutical circle has been an important concern for contemporary hermeneutics. It has led some to despair, believing it is impossible to break out of the circle and hear Scripture speak. Others have appealed to the work of the Holy Spirit as the way by which the interplay among the dynamics of the circle can lead to a hearing of the Word of God. The description of both the historical context of the Biblical text and of contemporary world-in-life views is sometimes labeled the "two horizons." In the fusion of the two horizons, hermeneutics happen and interpretation occurs. So the contextual approach to hermeneutics emphasizes history—both the historical context of the Biblical text and the historical context of the present day reader.
Interpretive Emphases

The three hermeneutical approaches just outlined represent three general ways to come to the Scripture. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Examples of each of these approaches are found in all literature that interprets Scripture.

Among those who develop further, refined hermeneutical techniques certain interpretive emphases have surfaced on the contemporary scene. These hermeneutical discussions often get exceedingly complicated when they rely on sophisticated philosophical or linguistic theories. Their usefulness for the "non-expert" is thus limited unless the theories can be "translated" into understandable language and usable concepts. The following is a very brief survey of some recent interpretive emphases.

1. Theological. The theology of Karl Barth particularly emphasized that the exegesis of Scripture should be a "theological exegesis." This meant for Barth that the speaker in Scripture—God—should be the object to whom exegesis is directed. As Barth wrote: "It would not strictly be loyalty to the Bible, and certainly not thankfulness for the Word of God given and continually given again in it, if we did not let our ears be opened by it, not to what it says, but to what He, God Himself, has to say to us as His Word in it and through it." Exegetical tools must be employed according to Barth. But it is primarily the theological purpose of Scripture that must be honored. For Barth this is the presentation of Jesus Christ: "The object of the biblical texts is quite simply the name Jesus Christ, and these texts can be understood only when understood as determined by this object." Barth's emphasis on the theological interpretation of Scripture continues today through a variety of streams. Others, who do not explicitly identify with the whole of Barth's theology, also come to the interpretive task with a primary eye to the message of Scripture.

2. Historical. The work of Biblical scholars in the past two centuries has been closely tied to the historical-critical method. The emphasis has been on interpreting Biblical texts by discovering what took place in history at the point when the text was written and what was in the minds of the author and the audience who first wrote or encountered these texts. Tools for textual criticism, source criticism and form criticism are highly useful for this work. Despite criticisms of this approach, it will surely continue to have a dominant voice in the process of Biblical interpretation in the future.

A related emphasis recently emerging has been "canonical criticism." In the work of such scholars as Brevard Childs, James Sanders, and James Barr, a crucial ingredient for interpreting a text is how that text, passage or even book of the Bible fits into the canon of Scripture as a whole. What is the "canonical shape" of a particular portion of the Bible? This movement examines the historical development and usage of Biblical texts within the contexts of early Christian communities and seeks to see how they function within the canonical Scriptures of the church.

3. Literary. There are also contemporary approaches that stress the nature of the Biblical works themselves and argue that "the literary/aesthetic dimension of much of the Bible must be plumbed." The "literary approach" to the Bible emphasizes the various ways language functions in human consciousness. The intentionality of the author in choosing cer-
tain "forms" of language (such as narrative, poem or parable) is examined. The ways these forms function to create impressions, visions or actions is seen in this approach to be crucial for understanding. The roles of metaphor, symbol and imagination are key. For form is essential to meaning.

4. Linguistic. A movement that stresses the linguistic dimensions of Biblical texts is Structuralism. Basically Structuralism seeks to apply the principles derived from certain areas of linguistics to other areas of discourse or literary endeavors. This movement when applied to Biblical interpretation analyzes the linguistic components of texts to ascertain their inherent structures, how the elements of the text relate to each other, what function each plays in the whole etc. Texts are seen not as the final results of an historical process of composition and tradition but as complete in and of themselves. The "meaning" of the text arises from the reader's interaction and participation in it. This "participation" has been described as "not mental assent to a tradition but creative, perspective-changing, faith-producing activity involving all of the levels of meaning to which the interpreter is sensitive."22

5. Cultural. Several interpretive emphases can be considered as stressing the cultural dimension of Biblical texts and readers as important dimensions for understanding.

The Social History approach of scholars such as Wayne Meeks, Martin Hengel and Norman Gottwald emphasizes the need for interpreters to be fully familiar with the social world of the Biblical text so that the full impact of the Biblical stories may be heard.23 The focus of a Social Analysis perspective is turned to the interpreter of Scripture. In Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology, the reader of Scripture is questioned to ask if economic location, race or gender is the primary grid through which the interpreter is seeing Scripture.24

The Cultural Anthropology attempt is one that can be called "ethnohermeneutics." In it, not only the literary and linguistic but rather the "total cultural context" must be examined—both of the Biblical writers and contemporary interpreters. Using the tools of cultural anthropology, the interpreter of Scripture probes to understand the "supracultural meanings" of Scripture that are communicated via "cultural forms." The hermeneutical process is "an interactional process with the Bible" involving a "dynamic interaction or dialogue between an interpreter deeply enmeshed in his or her own culture and worldview (including theological biases) and the Scriptures."25

Concluding Perspectives

The developments in hermeneutics today are far-reaching and exciting. New tools are being discovered and utilized to help us better understand the Bible both in its original setting and its meaning for us today. The technical sophistication of some approaches means hard labor may be required to gain new understandings. Yet this should not be a bar to our way. For God tempts us to effort. The Holy Spirit can speak most simply or, at times, in the midst of rigorous academic study to give us a new word from the Lord. To use our whole range of resources means we seek to be faithful to our responsibility for "rightly handling the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). God will surprise us with new insights. Our task is to be vigorous and creative as we listen to God's Word.
FOOTNOTES


2 ISBE, II, 863.


4 Padilla, p. 18.

5 Padilla, p. 19.


7 Padilla, p. 19.

8 Padilla, p. 22.

9 Padilla, p. 22.


11 See Thiselton, pp. 90ff.

12 This is the use of the phrase for the title of Thiselton's, The Two Horizons.

13 See Padilla's discussion of these. I have not attempted to make any critical assessments of the three approaches here.


17 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/2, 727.

18 See for example, the work of G. C. Berkouwer, Holy Scripture and the description in Rogers and McKim, 426-437. Cf. the chapter on "Neo-Evangelicalism: Scripture as Message" in Donald K. McKim, What Christians Believe About the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985).


