

A Hermeneutical Perspective

Basic Assumptions and Patterns

Crossing the Meaning Gap

Judging from recent missiological literature,¹ evangelicals have taken seriously at least one of the issues raised by the proponents of the new hermeneutic. They accept the notion that one's preunderstanding necessarily affects the way in which we understand, interpret, and communicate the meaning of a given biblical text.² Accordingly, the interpreter's initial task is to seek to span the gap between the horizon of his own culturally bound mode of understanding and the horizon of understanding established by the cultural context in which the text was formulated. The gap must be crossed in such a way as to meet the demands of the interpreter's horizon without violating the intention emanating from the horizon of the text. Once this text-informed understanding has been achieved the interpreter may attempt to communicate that understanding across contemporary cultural boundaries. The complexity of the interpretive and communicative challenge involves three cultures—

1. See, e.g., Donald A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

2. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

that of the source (the ancient Near East), that of the interpreter/communicator (in our case North America), and that of the listener (e.g., the North American Eskimo). How effectively can someone brought up in the asphalt jungle of New York City communicate the meaning of the agrarian parable of the sower to an Eskimo?

Any attempt to communicate biblical content cross-culturally will involve us in an initial stage of contextualization, the process of minimizing intercultural meaning-discrepancy³ as well as the interference occasioned by our own search for transcultural understanding. Once the gospel has been successfully implanted in a given culture, as individuals are converted and incorporated into a new and developing church, contextualization assumes an added dimension. It must be unfolded with appropriate meanings for that culture. Ultimately this is the theological responsibility of the church embedded in the cultural matrix to which the gospel has been applied. In many cases these will be the so-called younger churches which have developed out of the cross-cultural missionary outreach of European and North American churches. In other cases it will involve established churches in their struggle to maintain relevancy in an ever-changing world. Although expatriate missionaries should not be charged with the development of appropriate forms and theologies, they are directly involved in both and for that reason have a responsibility to at least help evaluate the outcome of this process of maturation. We are being called upon to observe and help evaluate our fellow believers' attempts to bridge the gap between their own horizon of understanding and the horizon of Scripture and to do so from the vantage point of a third, our own, horizon.

Our task, then, is one of hearing, understanding, and encouraging rather than of merely passing judgment. However, this advisory role is not without its special dangers and pitfalls. It would, for example, be all too easy for the missionary to insist, directly or indirectly, on maintaining some "proven truths or methods" assumed by his own organization and thereby overlook or even reject indigenous developments which are not at variance with Scripture. On the other hand, the Third World believer's desire for independence may cause him to reject as Western certain ideas or concepts which are required by Scripture. In either case, it is the authority of Scripture which is both appealed to and subsequently abandoned in favor of the interpreter's preunderstanding. If the normative basis of scriptural authority is rejected, such discus-

3. Mathematical theory of communications which measures the amount of information transferred in terms of the decrease or elimination of ambiguity. See Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

sions will devolve to the level of an exchange of opinions in which personal preference and cultural givens are used to determine the meaning of Scripture. Certain basic hermeneutical assumptions and patterns should be considered to provide a more stable, scripturally determined framework for discussion. Such tools facilitate the evaluation of attempts at contextualization and avoid, at least to some degree, the potentially introverting effects of unchecked preunderstandings.

Basic Assumptions

The Supracultural Validity of the Truth of the Gospel

According to the Book of Acts we have every right to assume the supracultural validity of the Christian gospel. The gospel was presented to Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and a host of other nationalities (Acts 2:5-13) on the day of Pentecost. It was later conveyed to Samaritans (8:4-8), to Romans (chap. 10, esp. vv. 34-35, 45), and to Greeks (11:19-21). Without denying or violating the cultural trappings in which it was couched, the truth of God's revealed plan of salvation was presented to and understood by representatives of an amazingly diverse group of cultures.

Although few would question the fact of the gospel's validity, there has been considerable difference of opinion as to the sphere or extent to which the elements of the gospel are valid cross-culturally. Little is to be gained by attempting to identify supracultural elements of the gospel and its culturally bound parts. Cultural conditioning affects us as we formulate and present these elements. Our own preunderstandings always tend to skew the results of that screening process. The evaluative responsibility to which we have referred does demand that a framework be established for making decisions about the degree of faithfulness to Scripture achieved or maintained in any contextualization attempt. For that reason it may be more useful to our view of the truth of the gospel if we distinguish two types of validity—categorical and principal—each equally true but each differing from the other in its scope and modus of actualization.

1. Categorical validity can be ascribed to those aspects of the Christian message which are absolutely nonnegotiable. They can be grouped into two broad types.

First, consider those aspects of the truth necessary for justification by grace, such as the sacrificial death of Christ, faith, repentance, and conversion. Certainly these truths have to be presented in culturally relevant terms. But however presented, the sacrificial death of Christ must be shown to be a vicarious death which is the sole source of salvation within any culture. As Bruce J. Nicholls puts it, "the distinct

work of the Creator-Savior must be maintained." Che Guevara, who, according to José Míguez-Bonino's report, may indeed have resembled Jesus in some respects, was nevertheless not *the Christ*.⁴ To allow or encourage an understanding of these essential truths of the gospel which vary significantly from the meaning prescribed by the horizon of the biblical text would make impossible an active participation in the work of Christ.

This, it would seem, is precisely what is being proposed by some Latin American contextualizers. Rather than starting theological investigation with the horizon of Scripture it is being suggested that socioanalytical tools of Marxism can be used as the interpretive horizon of departure. Biblical exegesis is relegated to the status of second step, is dominated by contemporary preunderstanding, and yields results which compromise the categorically nonnegotiable validity of the gospel. The concept of salvation is redefined by modern sociopolitical jargon as humanity's newfound freedom to transform the world and participate in God's saving activity by struggling against "sinners" on behalf of the "sinned against." Surely every believer should be sensitive to sociopolitical injustice. But this reinterpretation leads (a) to an offer of a salvation which requires faith in the implementation of political theory rather than in the salvific work of Christ, (b) to an aggressive (if not violent) grasping for what is perceived to be one's right rather than humbly accepting undeserved grace, and (c) to a perpetuation of the evils denounced since salvation is offered to only one segment of society, the oppressed, leaving the oppressors to their own devices.

Second, consider that which, by nature of its form or symbolism, cannot be altered without losing its meaning. The sacraments offer a good illustration. In the case of baptism the use of water is tied to the meaning which the sacrament seeks to convey and must be retained unaltered throughout the process of contextualization. In the Lord's Supper, however, the form of the elements could conceivably be altered without changing the basic meaning of the ordinance. For example, a legitimate celebration of communion, if not otherwise altered, might be possible if strawberry juice were substituted for wine and yams for bread. This would be possible in a cultural setting in which neither of the biblically prescribed elements were available and in which strawberry juice and yams were not already associated with concepts or practices which would trivialize or violate the gospel. Although we might concede some latitude of expression, the original form of the sacrament dictates the limits of possible contextualization. Substitut-

4. José Míguez-Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 2-3.

ing cola and chips for the traditional elements in a North American college dormitory celebration would hardly be acceptable. In other words, there may well be something sacred about the form—in spite of what Charles H. Kraft has suggested—depending on how closely related form and meaning are in a given text.

2. *Principal validity* can be ascribed to those aspects of revealed truth which grow out of the implications of new life in Christ. Again they can group into two broad subcategories.

First, we encounter those elements of the truth of the gospel which have *explicitly stated and logically necessary implications* for godly living, walking worthy of our calling, separation from the world, and keeping the moral law. Nothing should be taught or changed to undermine the basic moral and ethical implications of the gospel. Our concern for the oppressed, although valid, cannot be allowed to develop into a theologically anchored hatred of the rich or the oppressors. That would violate an explicit command of our Lord to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Yet this concept does give us the freedom to retain biblically supported practices already present in the receptor culture. On this basis Tim Matheny rightly suggests that Arab (Muslim) practices such as honoring one's parents, hospitality, and giving to the poor be incorporated into the new believer's expression of faith.

Second, we have to deal with those aspects of the gospel's truth which, although clearly outgrowths of the believer's life in Christ, are *not explicitly stated* and for that reason allow considerable latitude of expression. The particular form or mode of expression could be changed or determined by the respective culture in which it has been implanted. Here we are aided by the principalization or the universalization of the concepts presented in Scripture. In the case of certain parables, for example, the connection to Palestinian culture is obvious. To convey their meaning we have to determine the principle involved through careful exegesis and channel that meaning along a culturally relevant path. Similarly we are encouraged by Scripture to worship but are given little explicit instruction as to how this is to be done. Matheny is again within this latitude when he advocates the incorporation into Christian worship of certain Muslim practices such as sitting on the floor, removing one's shoes in the place of worship, and bowing prostrate when praying.

The Cross-Cultural Communicability of the Gospel

That the gospel can be communicated cross-culturally assumes that the interpreter can bridge the gap back to the horizon of the text and accurately understand its intended meaning. If this were not the case, the commands to keep Christ's teaching and to proclaim the gospel to all nations would be both meaningless and impossible. It further as-

sumes that the interpreter/communicator can fuse his own horizon with the horizon of his cross-cultural listener sufficiently to enable an accurate transmission of an understanding of the text. If this cannot be maintained, then, by implication, no meaningful communication of any kind can be expected. It also assumes that the listener, when properly instructed, can himself reach back to the scriptural horizon and thus validate or complement the initial interpreter's understanding, that is, contextualize it. This also provides the framework for the cross-fertilization of contextualization attempts.

Additional assumptions can be made about the communicability of the categorical and the principal aspects of the gospel. First, in the case of the categorically valid aspects, we assume that they can be understood by all men in all cultures. Since there is one God, and since the plight of man is the same in all societies, and since his yearning for release is answered in the sacrificial death of Christ, these essential elements of the gospel will correspond to universally known elements of the human dilemma. On the basis of this fundamental continuity it seems reasonable to assume that all men possess the thought categories which will enable them to understand and accept at least those elements of the Christian message which have salvific import.

Second, with regard to the principally valid aspects of the gospel, we assume that genuine faith has the same ethical implications for daily life in any society in which one lives. The moral law, keeping the commandments, and certain ethical principles are universally applicable. Certainly one will have to determine who one's neighbor or enemy is in each respective society, but the command to love both does not lose its applicability when communicated cross-culturally.

Hermeneutical Patterns

To determine which category of validity a specific scriptural command or teaching fits we will first have to determine the meaning of the words as used in a given text (context). This involves the spectrum of meaning of which a word is capable (public meaning), as well as the specific sense prescribed by its use in the text (user's meaning). If the interpreter (hearer) ascribes to the text a meaning which generally accepted usage does not include, or favors one possible meaning over the author's intended meaning, the text ceases to communicate anything other than what is foisted upon it by the interpreter.

Public Meaning

The effective use of any language depends on a "latitude of correctness," that is, the correct or generally accepted use of speech. One is

free to insist that he rides to work in a sardine can. But this arbitrary redefinition of a term not usually used of transportation wrecks the communication process. Some meaning could be salvaged if the redefined term were in some way related to the broad limits of acceptable usage. "Sardine can" could refer to a very crowded bus, in which case the speaker would have to give clear indication of that figurative use. Another possibility would be for the user of such private language to carefully explain his terms. But how can we be sure of the meaning of the explanation? And how could this private redefinition be presented as the meaning intended by anyone else?

It is this kind of arbitrary redefinition of key theological terms that has made much recent deliberation so frustrating and fruitless. For example, Kosuke Koyama's discussion of the "beginning of faith" (see p. 84¹) is based on the assumption that the German term *Anfechtung* in Luther's commentary on Matthew 15:21-28 could be translated by the English word *assault*. However, this meaning of the word usually translated *temptation* breaks out of the latitude of correctness prescribed by the German language. It would appear that Koyama has based his contextualization on a contrast which is generated by his own redefinition (translation) of the term *Anfechtung*.

Recent interest in conversion within ecumenical circles serves as another case. "Having recognized the necessity of rethinking conversion as a goal of mission" ecumenical scholars determined to "redefine the term and fill it with new theological content."⁵ And that is precisely what has happened. The redefinition has taken the following form:

1. Conversion is a "personal reorientation towards God."
2. Since this has social implications, turning to God necessarily entails a simultaneous turning towards humanity.
3. That in turn binds one to participation in the movement towards God's ultimate goal, his kingdom.
4. The authenticity of conversion can thus be measured by the individual's willingness to assume political responsibility and to actively participate in society's problems, as well as in the struggle for liberation.⁶

The first statement certainly falls within the generally accepted biblical use of the word. And since conversion does have an effect on one's

5. Johannes Tnebel, *Bekehrung* (Erlangen: Verlage der lutherischen Mission, 1976), 150-52.

6. *Ibid.*

relationship to other men, the second statement could be related to the broad limits of acceptable usage. The third and fourth statements, however, explode the limits of correct usage by referring to the conversion, not as a gift or new creation, but as a binding responsibility or law and by introducing the word *kingdom*, itself redefined in sociopolitical terms. Conversion is no longer a result of God's grace but participation in God's historical dealings with humanity.

The User's Meaning

Although a word's meaning must be limited to that of which it is capable, its actual meaning in speech is controlled by the user. "Within the latitude of correctness marked out by public usage, or even slightly beyond it, he determines the sense of the words he uses. . . ." To ignore this principle is to fall into the trap of the intentional fallacy, supposing that a writer meant something other than he has actually written.

Context, tone, and referent show, for example, that Jesus intended as exclusive and absolute his claim to be "the way" (John 14:6). When injected into the debate on Christianity's relationships with other religions this can be quite distasteful to our tolerant, secular contemporaries. For many the apparently intended meaning is untenable. There are, of course, ways to justify rejection of the obvious meaning. One can argue that the intended sense falls outside the latitude of correctness. Ernst Troeltsch argued that Christianity, being historical and thus relative, can make no absolute claims.⁸ One can appeal to the complexity and grandeur of the non-Christian religions which make the traditional and exclusive attitude inadequate.⁹ After all, "in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. The Muslims worship God, who is one living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men."¹⁰

Once the perspicuous meaning is rejected the attempt to explain the "real" meaning begins, that is, something has to be invented to put in the place of what is rejected. John Hick, for example, claims that since truth is emotive (and personal) and not cognitive, Jesus is indeed the Christ, just as Gautama is the Buddha, Ramakrishna the Avatar, and

7. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 49.

8. Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (Munich: Kaiser, 1969), 64ff.

9. Lothar Litpay, "Christianity and Other Religions," *Communio Viatorum* 22 (Spring/summer 1979): 60ff.

10. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Kleines Konzilskompendium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 356.

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Muhammad the Prophet. This is so to the extent that they all stimulate feelings of worship and belongingness.¹¹ Karl Rahner, while admitting that Christianity claims to be the only true religion, allows for legitimate religion outside Christ and for anonymous Christians who cannot be approached as though they had not been touched by the grace and truth of God.¹²

It is our right to reject the author's intended meaning "but if we try, without evidence, to penetrate to a meaning, more ultimate than the one the writers intended, that is our meaning, not theirs or God's."¹³ What then remains of God's revelatory communication?

Principles Involving Changes of Meaning

We have already seen that meaning is determined in part by the limits of correct definition which, in turn, are delineated by current usage. But since usage is subject to change, latitude of correctness and ultimately meaning are themselves in a constant state of flux. Failure to keep pace with these changes, which either broaden or narrow a word's scope, undermines our ability to understand and communicate with others. If, for example, one insists on using the term *secularization* in its original sense (the transfer of clerical rule and administration to worldly powers) in a current debate where it refers to the process whereby ideas and behavioral patterns are loosed from their religious context and derived on the basis of logic, then misunderstanding is inevitable.

Since the presentation of the gospel depends so decisively on an accurate understanding of certain key terms, we are well-advised to trace any shifts in their meaning (usage). The following is a brief description of such changes in the German language:

1. *Repentance* was used in the New Testament to describe the total reorientation of a person's thoughts and life, involving a turning away from evil and a turning toward God. Later it was used to refer to the reparation of a religious transgression. It is currently understood as a quittance for some misbehavior which, after remitted, frees the offender from all guilt and allows him to proceed on his original path. The original meaning is thus lost, putting repentance on the same plane as paying a parking ticket.
2. *Sin* originally referred to a state of rebellion and separatedness

11. John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between World Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1974), 77-95.

12. Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, 136-58.

13. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 61.

from God, having totally missed his standards for life. It is currently thought of in terms of isolated misdeeds which are easily corrected, as opposed to a state of being.

3. *Faith*, which first was used to describe the total trust awarded a knowable Savior and thus the prerequisite for inclusion in that salvation, has deteriorated to an acquiescent admission of ignorance. It is that which one cannot know cognitively and may, but not necessarily, come to know experientially. In the absence of rational and empirical evidence one simply believes and so has faith.
4. *Conscience* at one time denoted man's ability to make moral judgments about himself in the light of Christ's redeeming sacrifice and in accordance with his standards of right and wrong. Modern usage has divorced this ability from any outside influence, making it totally individualistic and subjective.

Since a presentation of the gospel using the terms of sin, repentance, and faith is liable to be misunderstood or not comprehended at all, the communicator will have to define his terms carefully or develop a new supplementary vocabulary. This involves choosing an understandable but neutral word and filling it with new meaning. The term *course correction* is understandable and is not burdened or loaded with too specific a meaning. It could, therefore, be used to explain the biblical idea of repentance. *Misbehavior*, again a very broad and perhaps vague term, could be useful in presenting the concept of sin. Current usage has not confined the term *conscience* to a religious corner and lends itself to the idea of programing. Our ability to make moral judgments has to be *reprogrammed* by a relationship to Christ if it is to function properly.

The search for new supplemental terminology is an endeavor fraught with danger. It requires precision and creativity. It is, however, necessary in light of the shifts in meaning, which have made so much of our communication of the gospel incomprehensible.

Faithfulness to Scripture is our primary standard for evaluating contextualization. This raises the question of what aspects of the truth of the gospel have cross-cultural applicability. We have suggested that the gospel can be viewed in such a way as to enable us to distinguish between its categorically valid and principally valid aspects. To determine which type of validity applies to a given biblical teaching we have proposed the use of several hermeneutical principles which involve public meaning, the user's meaning, and changes in meaning.