

Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics

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**Hermeneutical Presuppositions  
and Interpretational Method**

The rumblings of debate and theorizing that vibrated through the scholarly world of biblical criticism had a sharp impact on evangelicals, whose scholarship was no less profound but was pursued in a more cautious way. They were not willing to open the hermeneutical door to unchecked winds of change; they sensed the danger that everything they valued would be swept away before they could take stock or count the cost.

However, evangelicals unavoidably addressed the question of hermeneutics and culture with increasing urgency during the decade of the seventies. Basic texts in biblical hermeneutics from this period all deal with the cultural factor in understanding and applying the Bible. During this decade evangelicals interacted vigorously with the contemporary hermeneutical discussion, questioning the presuppositions of radical and moderate relativist approaches, and probing into the basic issues raised by the deliberations. The roles of the interpreter's preunderstanding and of the original writer's intent in the hermeneutical process were carefully considered, particularly in their implications for the evangelical view of Scripture as inerrant verbal propositional revelation.

Some evangelicals adopted the basic constructs of the contemporary approach to hermeneutics, despite the relativizing consequences for Scripture's content. Those thinkers who were convinced that biblical language is

in essence culture-bound were faced with the problem of denying or re-defining inerrancy, while at the same time continuing to affirm Scripture's inspiration and authority.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the hermeneutical discussions, evangelicals offered suggestions for spanning the hermeneutical gap, proposing as vital links between the culture of the message and that of the hearer the nature of God, humankind, language, and Scripture.

### Hermeneutical Presuppositions

In their critique of historical relativism, evangelicals shifted the discussion from the doctrine of the inspired Scripture as eternally valid propositional revelation to a critical analysis of historical relativism itself and its implications for such basic concepts as revelation, truth, meaning, inspiration, and authority.<sup>2</sup> Carl F. H. Henry contends that a radical historical relativism, in which verbal communication of meaning is impossible from one age to another, deintellectualizes and dehumanizes humankind.<sup>3</sup> He sees the existential hermeneutical approach as essentially nihilistic because it destroys the normativity of any and all communication and so in the end is self-destructive of even existential theory. W. Harold Mare criticizes radical historical relativism, saying that generally we recognize that an authority with maturity of mind can write literature with a message which is essentially meaningful for people in his or her own day and a time one hundred or two hundred years removed. We assume this is true for Plato and Aristotle. Why not the Bible?<sup>4</sup> In criticizing Dennis Nineham's historical relativism, Anthony Thiselton says that Nineham's difficulty with the category of miracle is not just a matter of historical distance (differences of worldview) but a theological difference between Scripture and himself over the nature of reality. Thiselton too makes a comparison with classical studies and says classicists would not tolerate radical historical relativism.<sup>5</sup>

If the interpreter's present-day self-understanding becomes decisive for the text's meaning, then the interpreter's subjective response to the text, rather than the text itself, determines the message that comes through.

1. James D. G. Dunn, "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," *Churchman* 96 (1982): 99-122, 201-25.

2. See the essays in the following works for the content of the previous evangelical discussion: Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959); Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946); Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Bible, the Living Word of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968).

3. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976-1979), 4:304.

4. W. Harold Mare, "The Meaningful Language of the New Testament," *WTJ* 37 (1974): 95-105.

5. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description, with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 57, 60. See also Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 22-24.

There is no meaning independent of the interpreter's preferences. For Henry, the Christian response to such an approach is to "champion the indispensable importance of historical and philological exegesis in identifying the content of the scripturally given revelation, and . . . acknowledge the authorial cognitive intention is ultimately definitive for textual meaning."<sup>6</sup>

Henry also criticizes historical relativism as self-contradictory. If the theory of historical relativism is true, it logically follows that its primary assertion must be false, for relativism, by definition, denies that there is transcendent objective truth. Yet, to assert that relativism is valid is to make such a truth claim. The proponent of relativism must claim a special privilege for the theory, asking one to accept as absolute the proposition that all human statements are historically relative.<sup>7</sup>

Henry argues that nothing in history or culture precludes transhistorical truth; hence the absolutists have grounds as valid as do the relativists for their claims concerning the particular character of truth. In fact, the absolutists' grounds are stronger because of transcendent divine revelation. God has demonstrated the reality of historically transcendent truth by intelligibly disclosing in the Scriptures his transcendent will to human beings.

### Truth and Meaning

The issue of truth also had to be addressed. Some scholars identified the root philosophical difference between those who hold to full inerrancy and those who do not as the rejection or acceptance of Kant's dualism, since this difference seems to determine one's view of truth. For the evangelical holding to full inerrancy, true statements are those that correspond to the facts, to reality, and the Bible communicates just such true verbal propositions. Others, as W. D. Beck describes them, argued that "the Bible is eternal, religious truth known only to faith."<sup>8</sup> The definition of truth in this case is faithfulness, or lack of deception. Proponents of this view hold that the Bible may err in the sense of being historically or scientifically inaccurate.

6. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:314. John S. Feinberg also argues that the use of a conventional (positivist) or contextual approach to meaning is unsatisfactory: "There needs to be some kind of referential element in order to tie language to the world. Without it there seems to be no reason other than pure convention as to why a certain utterance and not another is appropriate for performing a given speech act. . . . My utterance might be nothing more than a reflection of what is going on in my mind, and it is that lack of necessary relation between language and world which troubles me about use theories" ("Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 35).

7. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:53.

8. W. David Beck, "A Response to Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 66.

However, in the biblical understanding of the term, the Bible does not err. It is faithful—that is, not “swerving from the truth and upsetting the faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Proponents of full inerrancy challenged this concept of Scripture’s truth. They proposed that for the biblical writers “the correspondence theory in some form seems to be foundational to what they wrote . . . [i.e.,] statements are true or false, and what makes them so is their congruity or incongruity with states of affairs. Truth is relation between word and world.”<sup>10</sup> Still other evangelicals viewed the biblical concept of truth as having a polymorphous character, including both faithfulness and correspondence with reality.<sup>11</sup>

A variety of approaches to semantics also developed as evangelicals sought to deal with the complexity of that issue and, at the same time, to choose the theory of meaning that identified the locus of meaning most useful for interpreting the words. Carl Henry, Norman Geisler, and Walter Kaiser appear to assume the traditional sign theory, as they discuss the nature of meaning.<sup>12</sup> Geisler’s exposition of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy affirmation of Scripture’s single, definite, and fixed meaning illustrates this view, and his explicit statements on theory of meaning strongly contend that the conventionalist (functionalist) theory (i.e., the meaning of words is a product of public behavior, normal usage in a given cultural context) is false and inconsistent with inerrancy.<sup>13</sup>

Carl Henry has demonstrated the role of context in the communication of meaning, pointing out that when considered in isolation, words carry a range of possible meanings. This is the *usus loquendi* of the sociocultural context in which they function as part of the culture’s vocabulary stock. The grammatical-literary context must be engaged to determine a word’s meaning in any given statement. Henry goes on to contend that when words are employed in statements, they gain a precise meaning that is single, fixed, definite, and an expression of the writer’s intent. According to John Feinberg, such meaning requires an extralinguistic referential component.<sup>14</sup>

9. Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 181.

10. Feinberg, “Truth,” 18. 8. Norman Geisler contends that the correspondence view of truth is indirectly taught in Scripture (“A Response to Truth: Relationship of Truth to Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 55; see also Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 287–302; Norman L. Geisler, “The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate,” *BS* 137 [1980]: 327–39).

11. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 411–15; Alan F. Johnson, “A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 260.

12. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 3:389ff.; Norman L. Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 893. Walter Kaiser’s emphasis on an author’s single intended meaning also seems to be built on such a theory (*Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 24–34, 44–45, 106–14); see also Geisler, “The Relation of Purpose and Meaning in Interpreting Scripture,” *GTJ* 5 (1984): 230–31.

13. Geisler, “A Response to Truth,” 54–55.

14. Feinberg, “Truth,” 35.

Such an element makes intelligible communication and valid interpretation possible by tying language to the world. The author’s language is pointing to something outside itself to which the hearer can refer and so receive the communication. The extralinguistic factor also provides a basis for validating interpretation, which in the final analysis is a check to see whether the hearer understands the verbal statements in the way the author intends them to be understood.

Moisés Silva investigates the usefulness for hermeneutics of the referential (traditional sign theory) and the structuralist approaches to meaning.<sup>15</sup> He observes that only a small number of words in a culture’s vocabulary stock—such words as proper names (*Julius Caesar*) and technical terms (*sin, law*)—refer to only one thing and so can be fully understood by analyzing that referent. The majority of words, while having a more or less precisely defined referential dimension, can be understood best through structural analysis of the linguistic context. The interpreter identifies meaning by analyzing the relationship of the sense of one word to the sense of other words in the grammatical-literary context (syntagmatic relations) and the sense of similar words in the vocabulary stock (paradigmatic relations). For example, one would learn the meaning of “the woman is running quickly” by analyzing the paradigmatic relation of “woman” to “man” and “boy,” and the syntagmatic relation it is in as the subject of “is running.”

Anthony Thiselton detects the severe limitations in a referential theory of meaning and contends that the functionalist approach is the most fruitful one.<sup>16</sup> A word’s meaning is located in its *use* in a given linguistic context within a given “language game,” the set of life surroundings in which it is spoken. Public behavior provides the currency of meaning, for the structure of language is determined by the particular functions it has to perform to meet human and social needs.<sup>17</sup> Thiselton is quick to point out that such an approach should not be applied to biblical content in a way that reduces it to the terms of this narrow area of meaning, public human behavior. The referential dimension of meaning still has an important part to play, because New Testament writers make truth claims that go beyond “merely functional considerations.” Indeed, questions of reference remain an important factor in hermeneutical inquiries.

John Feinberg concludes with John Lyons that no single theory is entirely satisfactory. Any account of meaning must include “the notions of reference, use within a context, the performance of a speech act, and the idea of conventions of language.”<sup>18</sup>

15. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 105–9.

16. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 123–24.

17. John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1:249.

18. Feinberg, “Truth,” 35.

In the matter of relating theories of meaning to theories of truth, there were again several approaches. For John Feinberg, "no theory of meaning necessitates any particular theory of truth."<sup>19</sup> Geisler disagrees; he sees a definite connection. Since only meaningful statements may be judged true or false, the nature of the meaning of a statement does have a necessary influence on the nature of its truth.<sup>20</sup> And though he does not explicitly indicate which theory of meaning he considers foundational, he does insist that it cannot be a theory in which the meaning of statements is arbitrary or conventional.<sup>21</sup> It must be an approach that affirms meaning as objective and essential. Thiselton, as we have seen, qualifies his functionalist approach so that the truth claims of Scripture can be properly dealt with, his chief concern being that theories of meaning not be so extended in their use as to make judgments about the truth claims of the biblical text.

### *Biblical Inspiration and Authority*

The evangelical affirms that the Scripture's meaning is conveyed by the ordinary communication processes, through human language. But with this affirmation comes the challenge to explain how the Bible, developed in a given language system, can claim to be divinely inspired and authoritatively valid for people of all language systems. In answer, Vern Poythress proposes that divine inspiration is congruent with the human verbal communication. A particular verbal meaning is generated by choices the original writer makes within the structures and constraints that are the contextual features of a given language system. "The doctrine of verbal inspiration, then, says that in the case of the Bible the choices of word-sequences are all choices that God made. Of course, it is true in addition that the human author made the choices. At the same time God takes responsibility for those choices of the human author."<sup>22</sup>

In the face of relativism, which would treat all biblical content as culturally conditioned, evangelicals affirmed the full scope of scriptural authority. Carl Henry, while insisting that the main concern of Scripture is God's self-revelation of his nature and will, and that therefore its authority is basically theological and ethical, goes on to assert that the scope of scriptural authority coincides with what the inspired writers teach, no matter the

19. *Ibid.*, 40.

20. Geisler, "A Response to Truth," 55.

21. Geisler, "Relation of Purpose," 230-31.

22. Vern S. Poythress, "Adequacy of Language and Accommodation," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 363.

subject. If it impinges on astronomy, botany, economics, geography, history, or politics, it is trustworthy, though not comprehensive. "On whatever themes it speaks in God's name, Scripture is not to be relativized."<sup>23</sup>

It was acknowledged throughout the discussion of presuppositions that one's view of Scripture determined the direction of one's hermeneutic.<sup>24</sup> The point of difference was whether that view was determined by Scripture's teaching about itself<sup>25</sup> or by the interpreter's evaluation of the phenomena of Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

## Interpretation

### *The Context of the Ancient Text*

Evangelical interpretation of Scripture manifested increasing precision with regard to cultural factors. There was also a growing awareness of the need to study the implications of the "biblical world" for interpretation—that is, the writer's literary, historical, and cultural setting and the general historical situation facing author and audience.<sup>27</sup> The components of this world were identified as thought-forms, expectations, fears, tensions, as well as institutions, laws, social customs, and religious practices—in short, all cultural factors that made up the original writer's preunderstanding. As evangelical interpretation recognized more and more that "biblical writers were influenced by their culture and reflected its effect upon them,"<sup>28</sup> the interpreter's task broadened "to genuinely appreciate the factors involved in the mentality of the ancients."<sup>29</sup>

23. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:42-43. Dunn disagrees because he finds cultural relativity in the content of Scripture: "We must recognize that what was the Word of God in and to a culture and time very different from ours (New Testament as well as Old Testament) may well no longer be the Word of God to our culture and time. In such cases, the normative force of the scripture will lie more in how God spoke to their situation and context than in what he said" ("Authority of Scripture," 217).

24. James I. Packer, "Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority," *Themelios* 1 (1975): 3-12; Alan F. Johnson, "History and Culture in New Testament Interpretation," in *Interpreting the Word of God Today*, ed. Samuel J. Schultz and Morris A. Inch (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 130.

25. John W. Wenham, "Christ's View of Scripture," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 3-38; and Edwin A. Blum, "The Apostles' View of Scripture," *ibid.*, 39-56.

26. Dunn, "Authority of Scripture," 201ff.

27. J. Julius Scott, Jr., "Some Problems in Hermeneutics for Contemporary Evangelicals," *JETS* 22 (1979): 73; Alan F. Johnson, "History and Culture," 143; C. Hassell Bullock, "Introduction: Interpreting the Bible," in *The Literature and Meaning of Scripture*, ed. Morris A. Inch and C. Hassell Bullock (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 16; Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 79.

28. Bullock, "Introduction," 16. Note that Virkler refers to a "philosophical gap" in interpretation, since views of life, circumstances, and the nature of the universe differ among various cultures (*Hermeneutics*, 16).

29. James E. Jennings, "Interpreting the Historical Books: 2 Samuel 1:17-24; 2:1-4, 12-16," in *Literature and Meaning*, 47.

R. C. Sproul presented his concerns about the cultural factor in Scripture in a series of questions: Does Scripture reflect views of life, the history, and the cosmos of antiquity? Does that mean it teaches outmoded views as true? Is the cultural perspective part of the essence of Scripture's message? Or does "reflect" mean that the interpreter should read between the lines, understanding such things as phenomenological language and perceiving the cultural setting in which a culture-transcending message is placed? The ultimate question then becomes: "To what extent is the Bible's relevance and authority limited by changing human structures and perspectives in the biblical text?"<sup>30</sup> Gordon Lewis answers the difficulty: The inspired writers used their own powers of self-transcendence and received God's transcendent guidance in writing Scripture. Therefore the biblical message is not culture-bound.<sup>31</sup>

Most discussions in evangelical circles focused on ways in which background data could help explain the meaning and significance of ancient cultural customs and practices recorded in Scripture,<sup>32</sup> and even of scriptural injunctions. Not many evangelicals recognized the full implications of such a procedure: how the examination and assessment of biblical content in the light of extrabiblical cultural information could lead to the undermining of biblical authority. In fact, some evangelical scholars used extrabiblical cultural information to indicate the differences between ancient and contemporary cultures, and in that way sought to demonstrate the inappropriateness of directly applying some scriptural injunctions.<sup>33</sup> Labeling certain parts of the Bible as cultural practices had definite implications for scriptural authority.

The increased historical interest served to call attention to the diverse and culturally particular character of the literary genres in Scripture.<sup>34</sup> Previously, evangelicals had distinguished between teaching sections (the Epistles), which may be directly applied, and historical sections (the Gospels and Acts), which could be applied only on the level of principles. Now this

30. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1977), 103.

31. Gordon R. Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions of Non-Evangelical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 619.

32. Bullock, "Introduction," 16; Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 79. Evangelicals were also aware of the potential contribution of linguistics to word study (Simon Kistemaker, "Current Problems and Projects in New Testament Research," *JETS* 18 [1975]: 17-28; Silva, *Biblical Words*).

33. Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 175. Fee gives the example of the lack of educational opportunities for women in ancient times as explaining in part the need for the prohibition against women teaching in church (1 Tim. 2:9-15). Since the cultural situation no longer exists in Western cultures, Fee suggests that the prohibition may be no longer binding. Note Carl Henry's judgment concerning the cultural factor in general: "Yet we know too little about sociological conditions in the first century Greco-Roman world to draw up any confident listing of what must or must not have been merely cultural behavior on the part of the early Christians" (*God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:56).

34. Scott, "Some Problems," 74; see also Fee, "The Genre of New Testament Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Word*, 105-27.

distinction was breaking down. The Epistles began to be viewed by many as occasional literature written with a particular purpose to a particular people in a particular situation. Some transcultural principles may be clearly identified in Scripture, but most have to be uncovered by separating them from the specific applications in which they are presented.

The implications for biblical authority when a genre of Scripture is characterized as occasional are clear. If the intended direct application is understood as culture-specific, that is, limited to the particular situation, its present-day application is diminished to the level of broad ethical principle.

Study of the genre of gospel narrative raised issues concerning the nature of Scripture's truth. In his commentary on Matthew, Robert H. Gundry concluded that many portions of that Gospel were midrashic, following the pattern of a Jewish religious exposition combining history and nonhistory—in this case, first-century history and Matthew's theological and instructional embellishment. Gundry reasoned that since historical and non-historical material can communicate truth separately, it follows that they can do so in combination, "provided their mixture was a recognized and accepted mode of communication. Ancient midrash and haggadah show that it was. . . . Hence, 'Jesus said' or 'Jesus did' need not always mean that in history Jesus said or did what follows, but sometimes may mean that in the account at least partly constructed by Matthew himself Jesus said or did what follows."<sup>35</sup> Ancient cultural expectation and practice provide the basis for concluding that Scriptures may contain factual fabrication and still be considered true.

Evangelical reaction to Gundry's views followed at least two lines of thought. Douglas Moo, even though he rejected the idea that Matthew was midrash, declared that midrash could not be ruled out a priori as a genre found in inerrant Scripture, because inerrant meaning exists within the limits of the literary genre used.<sup>36</sup> In fact, it would be inappropriate to apply modern historical methods to midrash because that form is not history. Norman Geisler, on the other hand, argues that midrash, by definition, violates inerrancy, "because in practice Gundry's midrash view rejects a correspondence view of truth implied in an inerrancy commitment (a report of an event must be factually true, especially an inspired report)."<sup>37</sup>

35. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 630.

36. Douglas J. Moo, "Matthew and Midrash: An Evaluation of Robert H. Gundry's Approach," *JETS* 26 (1983): 32. See D. A. Carson's discussion of midrash, in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, EBC 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 39-41.

37. Norman L. Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method? A Rejoinder to Robert H. Gundry," *JETS* 26 (1983): 102.

Throughout these exegetical discussions, evangelicals continued to maintain that the original writer's intention, as recovered by the grammatical-historical-literary method, governs the text's meaning.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Interpreter's Context*

The second part of the interpretation process, communicating the text's meaning in the interpreter's context, challenged evangelical thinkers. In defining the hermeneutical task in general, they took into account the role the interpreter's preunderstanding and presuppositions play in the enterprise. They also conceived of the hermeneutical bridge as already formed and in place because of the nature of God, humankind, language, and Scripture.

### *The Hermeneutical Task*

\* Anthony Thiselton conceived of the interpretational task as an active, meaningful engagement between interpreter and text, leading to a fusion of the horizons of both.<sup>39</sup> In the process, the interpreter's own horizon is corrected, reshaped, and enlarged. The Bible can and does speak today, but this does not mean that the horizons of the text and the interpreter will fuse and become identical. There is a clear distinction between the *exegetical* and *hermeneutical* meaning of the text, between the text understood in terms of its own horizon and the text understood in terms of the interpreter's horizon. And though the lines of understanding meet at points, and sometimes even intersect, they remain distinct and separate.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart proposed another link between the meanings extrapolated from the two horizons. For them the exegetical meaning of the text as recovered by grammatical-historical-literary analysis controls the hermeneutical meaning for the present time. The Bible cannot mean now what it never could have meant to its author and readers.<sup>40</sup>

For Carl Henry and Walter Kaiser the interpretational task involves discovering the single meaning of Scripture. "The truth of God can be stated in all cultures," writes Henry; "it does not need to be restated in any culture

38. I. Howard Marshall, "How Do We Interpret the Bible Today?" *Themelios* 5, no. 2 (1980): 9; Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense," 168. Donald Bloesch disagrees, saying that "the ultimate norm is not simply what the human writer intends but what God intends . . . though there is always a certain congruity between the latter and the former" ("Crisis in Biblical Authority," *TT* 35 [1979]: 460).

39. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, xix. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart claim that biblical interpretation is demanded by "the tension . . . between [Scripture's] eternal relevance and . . . historical particularity." There is a two-step process: finding out "what it meant," its historical particularity, and "what it means," its eternal relevance (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 19).

40. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 27.

except by way of linguistic translation and repetition." By "restated" he means a conscious adaptation of biblical thought-forms to those of a modern culture. He points to Rudolf Bultmann's imposing the category of myth upon, and the liberation theologians' injecting Marxist ideology into, the interpretation process as examples of a "comprehensive subordination of Scripture to a culturally rooted conceptuality." The danger here is that a regard for the whole or part of the intellectual *Zeitgeist* "as indispensable to the biblical view will only admit into the circle of revelation what is unstable and inadequate as a foundation for life and society."<sup>41</sup> For this reason evangelical concern should never be to Africanize Christian theology, for example, but rather to biblicalize it so that the universal validity of the Christian revelation may be maintained. The Christian interpreter's task should be simply to state "by way of linguistic translation" the biblical message for the contemporary culture.

Walter Kaiser fully agrees: "To interpret we must in every case reproduce the sense the Scriptural writer intended for his own words. The first step in the interpretive process is to link only those ideas with the author's [words] that he connected with them. The second step is to express these ideas understandably." Kaiser sees his personal reception and application of an author's words as a secondary and separate act from the initial understanding of those words. Kaiser here follows closely the distinction between meaning and significance made by E. D. Hirsch. But Kaiser warns of the danger of thinking that what the text *means* and what the text *meant* are not identical. Such a conclusion would reduce all knowledge "to the horizon of one's own prejudices and personal predilections. This is true whether it is done for 'spiritual' or for philosophical reasons; both approaches usurp the author's revelatory stance and insert one's own authority for his."<sup>42</sup>

### *The Interpreter's Preunderstanding*

A key factor in the hermeneutical process is the interpreter's horizon or preunderstanding—one's world-view, presuppositions, and personal predilections. All evangelical exegetes acknowledge the importance of this element. The interpreter's preunderstanding, according to Thiselton, particularly one's prior understanding of the subject about which the text speaks, is a necessary condition for any understanding of the text to take place, for no one comes to the task of expounding a text without a frame of reference, a pattern of assumptions derived from sources outside of Scripture. The interpreter's preunderstanding or horizon is the context in terms of which the text's meaning is understood.<sup>43</sup>

41. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:53, 59–60.

42. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, 118, 122. See also E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1–13, 79–81.

43. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 114.

Because the interpreter's preunderstanding derives largely from extra-biblical sources, many evangelicals contended that this faculty must submit to a critique by Scripture before it can be effectively used in interpretation. Gordon Lewis suggests that all interpreters—evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike—should test their presuppositions against the criteria of truth. Presuppositions must exhibit coherence with the teaching and referents of Scripture without logical contradiction. They must also fit empirically and be experientially viable. In such a climate, Lewis is confident, a dialogue could open up among interpreters that would bring them out of their hermeneutical circles. This would be a true breaking out of the hermeneutical circle because an interpreter's preunderstanding would be confirmed or disconfirmed. Lewis proposes a hypothesis-verification approach, in which the biblical data are accepted as primary sources of theology and the human mind is viewed as self-transcendent, that is, so constituted as to understand and also assess the truthfulness of one's presuppositions. Such an approach would provide common ground on which interpreters of all persuasions could work and interact with one another. The interpreter would no longer simply assert his or her presuppositions but rather would propose them and then test to see if they make a coherent fit with the biblical data.<sup>44</sup> It should be noted in passing that preunderstanding would include the interpreter's traditional interpretations of the text.

Just how does one critically evaluate and correct one's preunderstanding so that it may function efficiently in the hermeneutical process? As Fred Klooster counsels, the interpreter must try to detect presuppositions from the contemporary *Zeitgeist* that distort or silence the message of Scripture.

Every synthesis of Christianity with Aristotle, Plato, Common Sense philosophy, idealism, existentialism, process thought, or any other type of non-Christian thought, must be eradicated so that the Christian preunderstanding will fully conform to the Word of God. . . . Every interpreter . . . must be alert . . . to the constant danger of a fusion of horizons that results even if one unwittingly reads Scripture through the spectacles of the *Zeitgeist*.<sup>45</sup>

James Jennings demonstrates how this distorting or silencing can take place unconsciously in the interpreter. All readers interact with written history in terms of their understanding of how that history occurred. This

44. Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions," 623, 625. Lewis derives his method from epistemological studies in his *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody, 1976). He applies it in *Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, and Practical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), vol. 1, chap. 1. Millard J. Erickson presents similar steps for developing presuppositions ("Presuppositions of Non-Evangelical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 610).

45. Fred H. Klooster, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutical Process: The Relationship of the Spirit's Illumination to Biblical Interpretation," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 464-65.

means blocking out matters one knows little about or does not appreciate and focusing on what one readily identifies with. Unless one becomes consciously aware of this mental filter—the preunderstanding through which the text passes—and acts to correct it, one probably will misinterpret and misapply the text's content. It is necessary to attempt consciously to divest oneself of the contemporary mental baggage that hinders comprehension of the ancient documents and make every effort to genuinely appreciate the factors involved in the ancient mentality.<sup>46</sup>

Klooster offers a positive suggestion in this matter. "Scripture must be interpreted through the spectacles of Scripture; the pre-understanding with which the interpreter approaches Scripture must wholly conform to Scripture. This hermeneutical circle must be consciously embraced."<sup>47</sup>

Royce Gruenler proposes two indispensable elements for Christian preunderstanding: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, enabling one to enter the story from the inside, and an acceptance of the authoritative witness of the Evangelists. This will enable the interpreter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to understand Scripture as God's "own interpretation of the deep grammar of nature, history, and of human existence."<sup>48</sup>

This may sound at first like reasoning in a circle, but it is not. The biblical message has essential meaning located in the extralinguistic referents; the biblical message is true in the sense that its statements correspond to reality. This enables it to make contact with life beyond the language. In addition, an interpreter's preunderstanding is brought more and more into conformity with the biblical data during the sanctification process, particularly when the interpreter stands beyond the hermeneutical circle and is impacted by it. Finally, the illumination of the Holy Spirit guides in the proper interpretation and application of the text, and through it all, authoritative Scripture impacts the interpreter's horizon and exercises functional control.

### *Hermeneutical Bridges*

For most evangelical interpreters, the hermeneutical bridge is already in place, held there by the nature of God and the nature of his dealings with his creatures. Walter Kaiser contends that the nature of God, the biblical concept of truth, and the fact that human beings are created in the image of God provide the objective grounding and reference points for the "possibility for adequate . . . transcultural communication."<sup>49</sup> If God in his nature is

46. Jennings, "Interpreting the Historical Books," 46-47.

47. Klooster, "Role of the Holy Spirit," 465; see also Erickson, "Presuppositions," 610; and Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions," 624.

48. Royce G. Gruenler, "A Response to the New Hermeneutic," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 588.

49. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Meanings from God's Message: Matters for Interpretation," *CT* 22 (1979): 1321; see also George W. Knight, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 252; Eugene A. Wilson, "Homiletical Application of Old Testament Narrative Passages," *Trinity Journal* 7 (1978): 86.

unchanging faithfulness and truth, then the interpreter may expect his message to be understandable from one historical time to another. The work of God the Holy Spirit in illuminating the modern believer's mind to understand the biblical message guarantees communication of meaning.

Evangelicals who view Scripture as given in culture-bound or time-bound language hold that the Holy Spirit serves as teacher and guide to bridge the gap.<sup>50</sup> Peter Richardson interprets the continuing activity of the Spirit to mean that no final and authoritative interpretation or principle of interpretation is possible. The interplay of the text and the Spirit provides a solid basis for individuals to hear God's Spirit speaking to them.<sup>51</sup>

James Dunn perceives this interplay as a union of strictly historical exegesis and prophetic openness to the Spirit speaking now. In this interaction each factor serves to stimulate and check the other. This dialogical approach, described by Dunn in personal communication (3 October 1986), seeks to hear again the Word of God in its original authority and to recognize the degree to which that authority was conditioned by culture or a specific situation, acknowledging that continuing authority may well be limited by such factors. The "directive authority," the guidance on what to do in a particular situation, is not found in the original message of Scripture recovered by historical exegesis. Rather, it is to be found in the Spirit's speaking through, but also oftentimes apart from, Scripture, as when the Spirit produces the mind of Christ in the context of the church. "It is in this interaction between the Spirit's inspiration then, and the mind of Christ now, that the authoritative Word of God is to be heard speaking to particular situations today."<sup>52</sup>

God's dealings with humankind in every age provide ample evidence that meaning can be conveyed transhistorically. J. I. Packer contends that Scripture as "inspired material stands for all time as the definitive expression of God's mind and will."<sup>53</sup> In applying this message to a given time, we can assume that God deals the same way with men and women in every age, which makes the transhistorical understanding and application of the message possible. Paul Wells also sees God's dealings with human beings, particularly in a covenant-communion relationship, as a key for grasping the transcultural nature of the Scripture message.<sup>54</sup>

The nature of humankind and our fallen condition provide further spans in the hermeneutical bridge. Walter Kaiser sees the human creature in the

50. Bloesch, "Crisis," 462; idem, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1:73-74; Kenneth Hamilton, *Words and the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 83; Dunn, "Authority of Scripture," 219.

51. Peter Richardson, "Spirit and Letter: Foundation for Hermeneutics," *Evangelical Quarterly* 45 (1973): 218.

52. Dunn, "Authority of Scripture," 220.

53. Packer, "Hermeneutics," 4.

54. Paul R. Wells, *James Barr and the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 354ff.

image of God and the doctrine of creation as sufficient grounds for transcultural communication.<sup>55</sup> Gordon Lewis suggests that the image of God in all people of all times includes the capacities for self-transcendence, moral discernment, and linguistic communication.<sup>56</sup> For Robin Nixon, the basis for transcultural communication rests on the principles of human nature, conduct, and relationships that do not change from age to age.<sup>57</sup> This continuity makes it possible to translate New Testament ethical principles into the contemporary situation.

According to W. Harold Mare, the sameness of the human sinful condition throughout history accounts for the continuing relevance of Scripture's message of salvation from that condition. "Since man is the same now in regard to his sin and need as he was in ancient times, those ethical and soteriological terms ring true for the twentieth-century man."<sup>58</sup> George Knight sums up the perpetual significance of the biblical message for humankind:

Since the message of the Scripture is addressed primarily to man as man, to man as sinner, to man as saved, to man as the one who must be obedient to the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and not to man primarily because of or in a culturally distinct or unique situation, we may appropriately expect that its message will apply to man in the cultures of this day and age and in the cultures of tomorrow.<sup>59</sup>

Paul Wells contends that the breakdown in communication between God and human beings, which the hermeneutical bridge seeks to remedy, is not a matter of God's being infinite and our being finite; it is a matter of the human race's falling away from covenant communion with God into covenant-breaking sin. The interpreter who begins with communion with God as the basic perspective and traces its revelation in history (from creation through fall, incarnation, and redemption) is in a position to understand how the Scriptures can and do speak across history. The Holy Spirit serves

55. Kaiser, "Meanings," 1321.

56. Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions," 618.

57. Robin E. Nixon, "The Authority of the New Testament," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 345; see also Dan R. Johnson, "Guidelines for the Application of Old Testament Narrative," *Trinity Journal* 7 (1978): 82. Winfried Corduan, using phenomenological analysis, argues that "entailed in my existence is a facet of communality with the rest of humanity, viz. that intersubjectivity is given within my subjectivity" ("Philosophical Presuppositions Affecting Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 504). This is a link to the community of origin of any proposition the interpreter wants to understand.

58. Mare, "Meaningful Language," 103. Gordon Lewis agrees: "Across the centuries-gap people are human, persons possess inherent human rights, demand justice, need forgiveness, desire loving acceptance and seek faithfulness to what is and to one another in deed and word" ("Response to Presuppositions," 618). Winfried Corduan also cites the ontology of all historical events as creating another link ("Philosophical Presuppositions," 508).

59. Knight, "Response to Problems," 252.



as the divine energizing link, as he was at the origin of communion between God and human beings. As Redeemer Spirit, he is the author of incarnation and inscripturation, and he energizes the renewal of human beings' communion with God, in which the restoration of the divine image takes place. Such a restoration depends on and is interpreted by the new relationship in which the Christian stands, savingly connected to the incarnation and the inscripturated Word. So faith in Christ and the Scriptures is the essence of this communion. The Spirit takes human words into his service to produce the Scriptures, and they become "divinely authorised to seal the covenant communion."<sup>60</sup>

Additional materials for the hermeneutical bridge were detected in the nature of language. Evangelicals identified two characteristics of language that allow it to communicate across time and culture. First, the successful practice of translation shows that truth can be communicated across such gaps. For a translation to succeed, rules of logic and thought-forms must transcend cultural bounds.<sup>61</sup> After comparing the thought of the biblical writers and that of modern scholars, I. H. Marshall concluded that their thought is not so different as to make translation impossible.<sup>62</sup>

Second, Carl Henry bases his argument for transhistorical communication on the creation accounts. "Language is possible because of man's God-given endowment of rationality, of a priori categories and of innate ideas, all of which precondition his ability to think and speak. . . . Human language is adequate for theological knowledge and communication because all men are divinely furnished with certain common ideas."<sup>63</sup> The meaning of language has the capacity to become significant for any perceptive reader outside the original audience. A text's significance is the relationship between its single meaning and the reader, situation, or idea brought to the text. Those applications of the text are in line with the original meaning.

Walter Kaiser is confident that both interpretation and application are possible in any historical period. He illustrates the process by pointing to Paul's use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10. He concludes that communication can continue and the Scriptures can be appropriated as the authoritative Word of God, as long as interpreters leave the final court of appeal for determining normative theological content "in the original writers' hands, in their single meaning and principle for each text, in their contextual settings, in the theology that informs their writings and in the faithful naming of new relationships between that original meaning and contemporary persons, conceptions and situations."<sup>64</sup>

60. Wells, *James Barr*, 370.

61. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:53, 59; Lewis, "Response to Presuppositions," 618.

62. Marshall, "How Do We Interpret?" 10.

63. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 3:389; see also Poythress, "Adequacy of Language," 352. Henry emphasizes, e.g., that the *imago Dei* universally underlies the idea of God.

64. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10," *JETS* 21 (1978): 18.

Anthony Thiselton, using a descriptive semiotic analysis of language informed by Wittgenstein, gives a number of reasons why biblical content need not be viewed as inescapably culture-relative. He begins with his functionalist understanding of language as a system of interrelated symbols. The rules governing the interrelationships and the meaning that flows from them are learned in one's culture, and the whole system may be called a language game. As Wittgenstein analyzed language games, he noted that there are certain statements (grammatical utterances) that are not culture-relative. He labels these second-class grammatical utterances. These are axiomatic statements so fundamental to one's thinking that one can say, "If I am wrong about *this*, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true." Examples of such assertions are statements in Paul such as, "Let God be true, and every man a liar. . . . God is not unjust if he bears wrath, is he?" (Rom. 3:4–5). In these statements the justice and truthfulness of God are assumed as unshakable axioms. These statements express these fundamental conceptions and thus articulate "the scaffolding of our thoughts." Thiselton contends that such class-two statements "regularly occur in the context of an appeal which presupposes a given religious or ethical 'common understanding.'"<sup>65</sup> That is, they derive from a theological tradition that can be differentiated from the culture in which they are spoken (an additional reason why class-two statements should not be considered culture-relative). Thiselton identifies New Testament witness to Old Testament authority as class-two statements.

Thiselton next considers why noncognitive accountings for biblical language and explanations that place everything within the framework of cultural relativism are not adequate. He argues that before biblical authority can be experienced within a language game, there must be a propositional aspect to revelation—that is, it must somehow communicate objective truth. "The dynamic and concrete authority of the Bible rests, in turn, on the truth of certain states of affairs in God's relation to the world. . . . For performative language to function effectively, 'certain statements have to be true.'" In its authoritative functioning, Scripture must also provide paradigms "in the light of which given concepts or experiences may be identified as genuinely 'Christian,' or otherwise." Basic Christian concepts derived from Scripture have transhistorical and transcultural authority, and to re-define them in such a way as to undermine the Bible would be to "saw off the branch on which I am sitting" as a Christian.<sup>66</sup>

Thiselton completes his argument by asserting that some biblical content functions as axiomatic class-two grammatical utterances, and these are derived from religious and theological, not cultural, tradition. One must assume objective propositional truth in order for Scripture to function authoritatively and provide paradigms for what it means to be a Christian.

65. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 392, 397.

66. *Ibid.*, 437–38.

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