

THE IMPACT OF POSTMODERN THINKING ON EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS

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Historically, evangelicals held that God communicated truth through men in such a way that it could be understood and serve as a divine guide for thought and life. This objective truth was expressed in statements that were to be believed and obeyed by all people. The Bible was given in historic contexts, so some of it, though true and to be believed, was limited in its intended audience for expected obedience, in which case the Bible itself would indicate its intended audience. If people followed reasonable guidelines for getting at the meaning intended by God and expressed in the text, they could understand objective, unchanging truth. Their understanding would bear an adequate and reliable correspondence with ultimate reality. Although Scripture is infallible, one's interpretation of it is not infallible in every detail because understanding is limited by one's preunderstanding, spiritual receptivity, level of intellectual acumen, mastery of and faithful adherence to the disciplines of hermeneutics (classically defined) and the amount of hard work invested in the effort.

Recently some evangelicals have said that the older optimism is naive and unwarranted, that we mortals could never be expected to get at the mind of God with accuracy through a written revelation. The best we can hope for is that the most learned and talented among us, at least, with great effort may be able to join successfully the two horizons of their own consciousness and the Biblical text and spiral upward toward closer approximations of truth, which, gratefully, we still believe exists. We are constantly reminded that the intent of the Bible authors, not to mention the intent of God, is forever out of reach because of the limitations of human language, the blinding effect of preunderstanding, and the cultural encapsulation of the text.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK

1. *Postmodern thinking.* Some trace this increasing uncertainty to the influence of postmodernism. But what is postmodernism? It is said by some to be the logical development of modernism toward ever greater relativity, not only in our perception of truth but also of reality itself. On this view

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postmodernism would be the logical outcome of Enlightenment thinking, the final step of recognizing that meaning is created in part, at least, by my personal perceptions. By others postmodernism is held to be a countermovement to modernism, which is viewed as the final bastion of rational enlightenment. In this understanding of postmodernism there is a radical discontinuity with modernism, since postmodernism rejects the notion of objective truth altogether. Either way, however, the result is radical relativism. The role of the interpreter, the knowing subject, is being redefined not merely for how meaning is to be understood and communicated but actually for how the interpreter participates in the creation of meaning and even, for some, the creation of whatever reality there is.

Postmodernism is difficult to define, not only because it means different things to different people but also because it is a label used to identify an emerging mood. Is there any unifying set of criteria to which all the participants in the current flow of thought subscribe? If there are identifiable common ideas or a common methodology, can we be sure at this point in time that historians of the future will identify our era as postmodern in those specific terms? Perhaps we are now merely experiencing a transition from modernism to some other yet-to-be-determined paradigm. Added to these complications is the fact that postmodernism, as most describe it, is an antiphilosophy, radically relativistic, holding no creed and espousing no particular methodology. Advocates of postmodernism agree that modernism is spent. Having abandoned the naive hope of discovering universal truth and morality through the application of the human mind to the cosmos, we now live in an era careening toward greater fragmentation and diminished expectations. Today the postmodern impulse is emerging among all disciplines and in various cultural forms.¹

Exactly what constitutes postmodernism and how it differs from and has been influenced by its precursors and other contemporary philosophical moods is difficult to specify. Since postmodernism is not yet clearly defined, at least not to everyone's satisfaction, we here use the broader expression "postmodern thinking." In any event the emerging contemporary approach to reality, understanding and communicating may derive from a variety of sources. Some of these may be conscious derivations from a specific hermeneutic, but many may be unconscious. For example, ours is the age of subjectivism, of freedom and personal autonomy, of undogmatism and tolerance, and of other reinforcing or conflicting currents. In Protestantism, existential approaches have dominated the theology of the last half of this century. Did postmodern

¹ M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1993), identifies three types of postmodernism: deconstruction in literary criticism, the new historicism, and neopragmatism (p. 102). Some helpful sources for a definition and profile of postmodernism from among the burgeoning literature include T. Finger, "Modernity, Postmodernity—What in the World Are They?", *Transformation* 10 (October-December 1993) 353–368; T. Gitlin, "The Postmodern Predicament," *Wilson Quarterly* 13 (Summer 1989) 67–76; G. J. Percesepe, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being Postmodern," *Christian Scholar's Review* 20 (1990) 118–135; C. Van Gelder, "Postmodernism as an Emerging World View," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991) 412–417.

thinking create these, or is it merely part of a larger flow? Whatever the sources, we seem to be in the process of losing any assurance of certainty about knowing and communicating objective reality. And many evangelicals are becoming at least moderate relativists.

Postmodern thinking, with new directions in literary criticism, linguistic theory, communications theory and anthropology/sociology, has challenged traditional approaches to Scripture at three points, among others: (1) Unchanging, ultimate truth does not exist. (2) Language cannot accurately communicate thought to another person's mind, and with time and culture distance the attempt becomes ever more futile. (3) The inadequacy of language is not necessarily bad because meaning is constituted of a combination of what is out there (objects and events, including the words of others) and what is in here (my own subjective sense). Though the words of others play a formative role, the controlling element is what I bring to the text. And the outcome of that mix is all the reality there is. Thus meaning is relative, particularly relative to my present subjective perceptions.

2. *Evangelical response.* Evangelicals for the most part reject these concepts. We affirm the existence of God and other unchanging, ultimate truths about him and his world. We believe that God, at least, can communicate what is in his mind with understandable words. Few of us believe that our own subjective perception controls meaning. At least we believe it should not and does not need to. And even if it is allowed to control our perception of reality, we do not identify that "meaning" with reality, which we believe exists independently of our perceptions.

Apart from these basic disagreements with postmodern thinking, however, we recognize some legitimate contributions to evangelical thinking, primarily in alerting us to issues that we have not sufficiently addressed. Postmodern perspectives have sensitized us to the difficulty of verbal communication, alerted us to the nearly imperceptible influence of preunderstanding, and caused us to reevaluate the historical and cultural distance between Scripture and us. As a result we examine more carefully our own cultural and theological preunderstanding and are more modest in our claims to infallible interpretations.

Thus contemporary evangelicals respond to postmodern thinking: Is there objective truth? Yes. Can that objective truth be known? Yes. Can it be known through words? Yes—but can it be known accurately through words? That is, how closely can the truth and human perception of it correlate? And what part of what we do understand applies to us? Here there is a division in the evangelical household.

3. *A divided evangelical household.* Some among us have become relative relativists, yielding more and more ground to the realm of uncertainty. In our endeavor to be honest about our own preunderstanding and fallibility, and increasingly uncertain about human ability to say words that correspond with reality, we retreat from defending historic understandings of

difficult texts to defending important teaching that has clear (unambiguous, repeated) Biblical authority. Then we retreat again from defending those to defending with conviction only the major tenets of the Christian faith.

When we gave up holy kisses and head coverings, no one worried. When we gave up washing feet and silent women, some folks winced a little. Now we are challenged by fellow evangelicals to give up Adam and Eve, role distinctions in marriage, limitations on divorce, exclusively heterosexual unions, hell, faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to acceptance with God and—most pivotal—an inerrant Bible. On this last point some declare themselves to be “limited inerrantists,” which means, I take it, that passages without error are limited to those sanctioned by the interpreter. This undermining of Biblical authority does not all stem from postmodern thinking, of course, but postmodern ways of thinking have softened us up to accept what otherwise might not even be entertained.

Among those who describe themselves as evangelical, then, there are differing views on the implications of inspiration: (1) Some hold to limited inerrancy, saying that only the true parts of Scripture, usually construed as the “theological” teaching, demand faith and obedience.² (2) Others hold that the (original) text is without error, but only the substance is authoritative, not the cultural, historical, or verbal form in which it is communicated. (3) Still others believe that God inspired the form as well as the substance, intending us to believe and obey both unless Scripture itself distinguishes a transient form from the enduring substance of a teaching.

In holding to the third position, we agree that the substance is the point of Biblical teaching. But substance, especially an abstract idea, is unknow-

² G. Fackre, “Evangelical Hermeneutics: Commonality and Diversity,” *Int* 43 (1989) 117–119, gives a taxonomy of differing approaches among evangelicals based on their views of authority. He labels those in our first category as “infallibilist” and cites the writings of J. Rogers and D. K. McKim as well as of G. C. Berkouwer. These, he says, subscribe to an “infallible” Scripture that has errors in nontheological areas. He puts others to the left of these, including D. Bloesch, B. Ramm, P. K. Jewett and C. Kraft. Fackre also notes two categories of inerrantists who are to the right of the infallibilists, “moderate” and “liberal,” and cites C. Pinnock and J. R. Michaels. Primarily he cites the critiques of these positions by C. F. H. Henry, R. Nicole and G. Lewis. Our second category—“substance but not form”—is advocated by some in each of Fackre’s categories noted above, though with those to the left it is mixed with acceptance of error in Scripture. It goes without saying that his category to the left of these, “Catholicity,” would be among those who accept only the kernel of substance found within the cultural, historic and linguistic form. If Fackre had written this article in 1994 he would surely have included S. J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), who writes with passion in advocating the Catholicity position. His attack on Henry’s “propositionalism” is unremitting, and he even rejects Erickson’s brand of “contextualizing” (our category 2) as not sufficiently freed from propositionalism (pp. 68–72). He prefers, rather, Pinnock’s approach: “Other evangelicals, however, have not been satisfied that either contextualization or a mere adjustment in terminology is sufficient. They are convinced that more radical measures are needed if the evangelical theological experiment is to be salvaged. Clark Pinnock, for example, rejects as inflexible and undynamic the ‘propositional theology that sees its function as imposing systematic rationality on everything it encounters.’ Taking his cue from the contemporary narrative outlook, he chides academic theology for looking for truth in doctrine rather than in the biblical story. Viewing revelation as primarily narrative, Pinnock sees the task of theology as expounding the story and explicating its meanings. ‘Theology, then, is a secondary language whose propositions live off the power of the primary story.’ The call to move beyond mere contextualization . . . is surely correct” (p. 71).

able apart from the form. Just because “form” may refer to narrative, poetry, or figurative language in which the form is not always essential to the intended substance of the teaching, this does not make propositional statements suspect or invalid. They also are a form, and one that is difficult to disentangle from the substance. God chose to inspire the very words (the form) as well as the substance. Only Scripture can authorize me to discard the form after I have used it to get at the substance. We will return to this important matter in the second half of the paper.

Evangelicals also differ on the goal of Bible interpretation: (1) Some seek the author’s intended response from his immediate audience.³ This approach has been called “dynamic equivalent theologizing” and uses the words of the text to get at the author’s intended meaning and then uses the tools of anthropology to get behind the meaning to the effect the author was trying to produce. Then, by means of contemporary “revelation,” the interpreter identifies what would produce the same effect in a current cultural context. That is the Word of God, the truth. (2) Others aim at the meaning of the text itself, since the author’s intentions cannot be verified, and then decontextualize the text and state the timeless truth for a new context.⁴ (3) Still others consider the author’s intended single meaning the goal of interpretation.⁵ There are, of course, many gradations between each of these goals espoused by leading evangelical scholars.

Finally, views differ on the level of certainty one can achieve in interpretation, all the way from process theology to the pope. In evangelical circles the range is more narrow on the potential of certainty: (1) Some believe we can know very little with certainty, and that is good, not bad. (2) Others think we can achieve a fair degree of certainty but be modest about it all. (3) Still others believe we can be certain of everything important in God’s intent to communicate. On this third view, there is congruence between ultimate reality, the portion of that reality God has chosen to communicate, the understanding of it by the Biblical authors, their formulation of that in words, and the modern reader’s understanding. Every congruence up to the final step is infallible, we hold, but not every conclusion of the interpreter’s.

It is not merely limited inerrantists who question our ability to know much of anything with certainty. Grant Osborne may actually agree with the third position given above, but when he says, “Since neutral exegesis is impossible, no necessarily ‘true’ or final interpretation is possible,”⁶ he appears to advocate the first or, at best, the second position. Perhaps he intends to speak

³ C. Kraft, *Christianity and Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 118–119, 231, 250, 254–256.

⁴ M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical* 19 ff., 69. See also W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Waco: Word, 1993) 117, 145.

⁵ W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Single Intent of Scripture,” *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith* (ed. K. S. Kantzer; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978) 138; “Legitimate Hermeneutics,” *Inerrancy* (ed. N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 119; “A Response to Authorial Intention and Biblical Interpretation,” *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 441.

⁶ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 412.

of passages or teachings with disputed meanings, for surely our understanding of the basic truths concerning God, man, sin and salvation, not to mention God's will for our behavior, are true and final. In any event, evangelicals generally are less and less sure of any certain outcome through the efforts of interpretive study.

When evangelicals dismiss this third position as extreme conservatism, they consistently choose examples of holy kisses and head coverings when our concern is the integrity and authority of Scripture, many important ethical issues, and especially the way of salvation as the hope of eternal life (the critical issue for the mission of the Church).⁷ Of course the existence of a knowable, personal God is a primary target of the postmoderns who helped push us into our present position, but no evangelical could question that. Or could we?

4. *In defense of historic evangelicalism.* In borrowing insights from postmodern thinking and employing those methodologies for analyzing written communication we have jeopardized basic theological tenets. Historically we have believed that a personal God exists who by nature communicates to others. We have said that he does so infallibly and that the Bible claims to be that communication. To deny the possibility of words corresponding to reality is ultimately an attack on the nature and activity of God. Elliott Johnson agrees, arguing that the correspondence between words (language meaning) and reality is essential to the nature of God and of human beings made in his image.⁸ This connection between revelation in understandable words and the nature of God and of humankind is a major theme of Carl F. H. Henry in *God, Revelation, and Authority*.⁹ Evangelical faith is that God can communicate and indeed has communicated in words all the truth about ultimate reality he thinks it necessary for us to know. Jesus alluded to this correspondence between words and truth when he prayed: "They are no more the sons of the world than I am—make them holy by the truth; for your word is the truth" (John 17:17, Phillips). The basic conflict between postmodern evangelicals and traditional evangelicals is over the relationship between words and reality. We are guilty of the referential fallacy, they say, holding that a given word points to only one thing. The traditional approach is denigrated as Scottish common-sense realism, and any correspondence theory of truth is disallowed. There is no way objective reality and my perception of it could bear an exact correspondence to one another, let alone my formulation of it in words. In fact "propositional truth" is an oxymoron. If there is truth, objective and ultimate, it cannot be reduced to verbal formulations, to propositions. To think otherwise is naive, archaic rationalism.

⁷ Kraft, *Christianity*, is an early advocate among an increasing number who advocate salvation apart from the knowledge of Christ.

⁸ E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 270.

⁹ Cf. e.g. C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976–83) 1.394; "The Fortunes of Theology, Part 3," *Christianity Today* (June 9, 1972) 30 [874].

We cannot deal with this fundamental conflict in the scope of this paper, but it is necessary to point out the error of the critics' judgment of our position and to indicate the implications of the debate for hermeneutics, especially for determining the normativeness of a given teaching.

Evangelicals have held that words can communicate truth, corresponding with reality, and that God's words do. We seek to follow in the train of Paul, who said, "I also believe in everything written in the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets" (Acts 24:14). It is true that the traditional evangelical view could be called "referential" or a "correspondence theory of truth." We do not claim, however, that we can always perceive and articulate exactly and exhaustively every detail of correlation between a word and its referent.

Any bilingual person knows how words lack precision, especially when referring to incorporeal or abstract concepts. But evangelicals have traditionally held that words can convey truth without error, can express accurately what is in the mind of the speaker. Merely because one can demonstrate that we are incapable of comprehending all truth, even about any given subject, does not prove that we cannot apprehend a portion of the truth with accuracy. Our contention is that God's nature as the determined Communicator, and his deliberate plan to create us on his pattern so that we can receive that communication with saving efficacy, demands some correspondence theory of truth.

But it is not merely that our theology demands this. The Bible views itself in this light. It presents itself throughout as a revelation of truth, not as an imprecise pointer toward an obscure reality. If we do not do interpretation on the premise that God has spoken and that he can be understood, that truth about him can be communicated accurately in words, we run the danger of ending up where postmodern thinking has taken some proponents: speaking nonsense. That is, they use words in an attempt to communicate their own thought about how impossible communication with words is.

Not only does Scripture consistently present itself as a trustworthy and authoritative revelation of truths about God and his will, but also the Biblical usage of the term itself ("truth") indicates a correspondence concept of truth, that whatever is said to be true is there because it corresponds to reality. William Larkin has demonstrated this Biblical usage.¹⁰

To say that I can know and communicate truth does not mean that I know it exhaustively. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." Is this true? Does it correspond to ultimate reality? Yes. Is it exhaustive? No. God is much more than this. He is love, for example. "Jesus rose from the dead in the same body in which he was crucified." That is a propositional statement that corresponds precisely with reality. But do not ask me to explain the altered cellular structure of Jesus' resurrected body. "Do not lie, murder, or steal. Do pray." Those are absolute

¹⁰ W. J. Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 233–237.

and understandable commands, a true representation of God's will for us. But is all killing murder? Is all taking without the approval of the owner stealing? Is all deception sinful? Are all prayers answered? These questions are the legitimate concern of investigation into all the Bible teaches on those subjects. But merely because I do not know all the truth there is about God's will in these matters does not mean that I know nothing at all for sure.

We claim not only that there is not a precise and exhaustive correspondence between every word and its referent but also that there is not always an exact correspondence between our personal interpretation of Biblical words and ultimate reality. Far from it. When I returned to faith from a sojourn in agnosticism I left behind most of my certainties. In an article I wrote forty years ago pleading for evangelical unity, I proposed that the limited nature of revelation, coupled with our own finitude and sinfulness, precluded the luxury of dogmatism about many traditional certainties.¹¹ At the time not many evangelicals, let alone fundamentalists, felt the necessity of such modesty. But my uncertainties concerned theological niceties about which we battle, not about the major theological themes of Scripture. Furthermore I did not address Scripture's ethical teaching, including more than six hundred commands in the NT alone. But when it comes to minor themes of Biblical teaching, my lack of dogmatism was based on my fallenness and fallibility, not Scripture's. Whatever Scripture said was true, to be believed and obeyed. The only question was how well I could understand it.

Since not every teaching of Scripture is easily understood by the uninformed reader, hermeneutics as a method of ascertaining the meaning of language is necessary. And since God did not see fit to make every teaching equally plain, we assume it was not his intention to do so. We respond with hard work to discern the meaning of less clear passages as best we can, with modesty about our conclusions. But the major teachings of Scripture are so plain that Bible believers have uniformly recognized and affirmed them, as seen in the great catholic creeds of the Church. For the detail of Scripture we labor in a spiraling upward between the two horizons, if you please, reexamining the validity of our interpretation with each fresh encounter between the text and our own previous understanding. Our object in the difficult and disputed passages is to discern the meaning with closer and closer approximation to the truth as God sees it.

Thus all Scripture is equally true but not equally understandable. This is not to define our own private canon within the canon but to treat Scripture as it treats itself. Peter tells us that some of Paul's writing is difficult to understand (2 Pet 3:16). It behooves us to be modest about interpretations in which equally learned and godly scholars have differed through the ages.

II. APPLYING THE BOOK

Postmodern thinking influences not only our hermeneutics of understanding Scripture but also our hermeneutics of applying Biblical teaching to the

¹¹ J. R. McQuilkin, "This I Know," *Action* (November 1, 1956).

contemporary context. Even if we agree on the meaning of a text, can we be sure it applies to us? All would agree that not all Scripture is equally applicable to us, but there are two views on deciding the applicability of a teaching for contemporary obedience: (1) Nothing is normative unless the Bible expressly says so or unless it meets certain criteria. (2) Everything the Bible teaches is normative except that which the Bible itself gives us the right to limit in applicability.

The first approach is taken by many in the evangelical movement who accept the Bible as the final authority and who interpret it responsibly but who restrict the audience intended by God, in parts of Scripture, in ways the Bible itself does not authorize. This can be done consciously or unconsciously. Regardless of our approach to discerning universal norms in Scripture, most of us are guilty. For example, we set aside teachings of Scripture that do not conform to our theological system or ecclesial tradition or that run counter to the verities of our contemporary culture. But there are those who do this as part of a deliberate hermeneutical approach, deriving in part at least from our new uncertainties about meanings and our new awareness of the cultural and historic conditioning of Scripture. It is this approach that is in conflict with the traditional approach and is in process of redefining the authority of Scripture in the evangelical community.

The second position means that we set aside as normative for contemporary obedience only what the Bible authorizes us to set aside. This has been the traditional evangelical position—not that the approach was formulated in so many words. There was no need to so formulate it since all Scripture was viewed as authoritative. This can be seen, for example, in the Reformation rejection of the early and medieval hermeneutic of finding four distinct meanings for each text, and in the Reformers' espousal of the principles of *Sola Scriptura*, the perspicuity of Scripture, and the analogy of faith by which Scripture interprets Scripture, the less clear understood in the light of the more clear teaching.

The evangelical Church has always taken its stand against the inroads of doubt concerning the trustworthiness of the text or its authority for contemporary thought and behavior. In the middle of the last century when the critics said the Book was purely human, evangelical faith responded: "No, it is inspired by God." Some agreed that it was inspired but not all of it. So evangelical faith added an adjective: "plenary." Doubters agreed that it was fully inspired but only in the ideas, not the words. So evangelical faith replied at the turn of the century: "No, we mean 'verbal' inspiration. The activity of God in giving the Word extends to the very words." Later in this century erstwhile evangelicals said, "Yes, it is verbally inspired, but that applies only to what it intends to teach, to theology, not to matters of science and history." So evangelical faith was then pressed to add an additional qualification: Scripture is without error ("inerrant"). Now we are pressed to add an additional qualification as many among us have begun to say, "Yes, the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative, but it cannot be applied directly to us unless it passes certain tests that we shall formulate." To this new attack we must formulate a new defense: Scripture itself must set its own limitations on the audience God intends. We may not use external criteria to

pick and choose what applies or we shall, like our forebears, gradually lose an authoritative Scripture. Perhaps we need to add a new qualifier: “normative.”

1. *Reasons for the traditional view.* We hold to this position for two reasons: the nature of Scripture and the way Scripture treats itself.

Since the Bible is the only divinely authorized word we have from God, it must be treated as the final authority. If I accept only what I discern as the principle behind a teaching, or affirm the substance of a teaching while rejecting the form, or if I set aside as normative for contemporary obedience all teaching except what can be demonstrated to be based on the nature of God, the order of creation, a universally recognized cultural phenomenon, or my theological system, my judgment supersedes the authority of the written Word. Of course many of these ways of looking at Scripture are valuable. They are valuable positively but not negatively. They are valid to help determine the meaning the Author intended, valid to reinforce the truth expressed in the text, but not valid for setting it aside. If I evaluate by criteria not authorized in Scripture what to accept and what to reject, I become the authority superior to the text itself.

One reason many neglect the traditional evangelical approach to Scripture—allowing it to be its own judge—is a lack of confidence that Scripture itself has adequately limited the audience God intended. The truth is that Scripture, either in the immediate context or in subsequent revelation, consistently limits some of its teaching to particular audiences. Since I have treated this extensively elsewhere¹² I will simply call attention to the fact that most of the so-called problem passages can be solved with this approach. I know this to be true because in a text on ethics in which I considered virtually all ethical issues addressed in Scripture and most major contemporary issues¹³ I used this approach. A major evangelical publisher turned down the manuscript because it was too liberal, while a major pulpiteer, who told me the text is his chief source when addressing ethical issues, remonstrated that I was too conservative in places. I am therefore content with the viability of the approach!

On the serious side, I urge my fellow evangelicals to work hard at discerning how the NT limits the OT, how narrative can rarely be made prescriptive, how the context constantly refers to a specific person or people, how conflicts between passages may be resolved, how genre affects interpretation, how the author uses arguments to validate his point, and many others. For example, Alan Johnson lists fifteen teachings, most of minor significance, which he says my approach would make normative.¹⁴ By letting Scripture itself limit the audience intended, however, fourteen of his fifteen best-case examples could be considered limited in the audience God intended, without resorting to external criteria to sit in judgment on Scripture. Allowing Scrip-

¹² J. R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 279–315; *Hermeneutics* (ed. Radmacher and Preus) 230–240.

¹³ J. R. McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995).

¹⁴ A. Johnson, *Hermeneutics* (ed. Radmacher and Preus) 277–278.

ture itself to render the verdict on what is universal and what is particular keeps the authority of Scripture intact. To impose external criteria in making the judgment puts those criteria and the interpreter's judgment above the authority of Scripture. Rather, if all the teaching of Scripture is accepted as normative unless the Bible itself limits the audience, the Bible itself remains the final authority. But there is another reason to hold to this approach: the way Scripture treats itself.

A guide to understanding Scripture is to note how it interprets itself. Nowhere does Scripture lend credence to the notion that nothing is to be taken universally unless the text so affirms. Scripture consistently treats itself as authoritative and nowhere authorizes external principles for selecting what is to be believed and obeyed. It is true that Jesus and the apostles set aside much of the OT as no longer prescriptive, but only the inspired author of Scripture or the incarnate Son of God has the authority to set aside or add to what is written. If anyone else does so, he usurps the authority of God the Holy Spirit and embarks on a dangerous course. Revelation 21:18–19 may have primary reference to John's book, but at least by inference the warning is for those who would add to or take from any part of the inspired Book. Jeremiah did not have postmodern thinking in mind, but his words apply: "I am against those prophets who take each other's words and proclaim them as my message. I am also against those prophets who speak their own words and claim they came from me" (Jer 23:30–31, TEV).

Better to treat Scripture as it treats itself—absolute in authority for faith and obedience—unless the Son of God or an inspired prophet or apostle indicates a limited audience.

In spite of the objection that imposing external criteria usurps the independent authority of Scripture, and in spite of the consistent way the Bible treats itself, increasing numbers of evangelicals, wondering if communication can be all that exact anyway, have proposed criteria that any given passage of Scripture must meet if it is to be accepted as normative. Is the teaching a cultural universal? Is it based on the order of creation or the nature of God? Alan Johnson lists eleven such criteria.¹⁵ I think many of these and other questions advocated by various scholars are valid and important to pursue. I have utilized and taught many of them myself, even before postmodern thinking made inroads into evangelical hermeneutics. My objection is not to their validity as tools of hermeneutical inquiry to determine the meaning of the text or to reinforce that meaning but to their use as tests of validity in applying a teaching for contemporary obedience.

2. *Normative teaching: examples of invalid criteria.* The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics was hammered out and signed by more than a hundred evangelical scholars. Article VIII reads as follows:

¹⁵ *Hermeneutics* (ed. Radmacher and Preus) 279–280. An excellent exposition of nine such principles may be found in Klein *et al.*, *Introduction* 411–421. See also T. Tiessen, "Toward a Hermeneutic for Discerning Universal Moral Absolutes," *JETS* 36 (June 1993) 189–207.

WE AFFIRM that the Bible contains teachings and mandates which apply to all cultural and situational contexts and other mandates *which the Bible itself* shows apply only to particular situations.

WE DENY that the distinction between the universal and particular mandates of Scripture can be determined by cultural and situational factors. We further deny that universal mandates may ever be treated as culturally or situationally relative.¹⁶

This statement of the traditional evangelical approach to cultural context was a response to the debate generated by my paper on the subject in which I said that “a fully authoritative Bible means that every teaching in Scripture is universal unless Scripture itself treats it as limited.”¹⁷

Do not misunderstand my position. For twelve years I pioneered the contextualization of the gospel in Japan, researching and writing on the values of Japanese culture *vis-à-vis* an appropriate evangelistic approach, something evangelicals at that time had not done and most were unwilling to do. I know how complicated cross-cultural communication is through immersion experience at the contemporary horizon. And though, unlike Japanese culture, we westerners share many understandings with the Biblical authors, there remains a cultural and historical distance. Thus to search out the historical and cultural context of a passage is legitimate for understanding the meaning God intended to communicate. But it is not legitimate to use that extra-Biblical contextual information to alter the meaning or disallow the authority of that teaching for contemporary thought and behavior.

For example, it is legitimate to study the role of women in the patriarchal environment of Bible times in order to clarify God’s design for sex roles and to fight contemporary male chauvinism, but it is not legitimate to set aside Paul’s teaching as no longer applicable because he was bound by rabbinical error about the role of women.¹⁸ Consider another example. Not one of the ten commandments is a cultural universal, recognized in all societies. That is the whole point of them: God is setting up a new culture. Yet many evangelicals insist on the so-called cultural-universal criterion to admit absolute mandates for today. Osborne argues against this: “We must remember that a culturally based command is still applicable today in any culture that parallels the first-century setting.”¹⁹

Moreover, it is legitimate to seek for the general principle within a particular teaching. Erickson gives excellent guidelines for searching out the principle.²⁰ In fact, identifying the principle behind a command or prescriptive teaching is often essential for full obedience. But it is not legitimate to squeeze the principle out of a text and toss away the teaching itself, as Erickson seems to do: “It is not, however, a matter of deciding which rules

¹⁶ *Hermeneutics* (ed. Radmacher and Preus) 883 (italics mine).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 230.

¹⁸ P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 112 ff., 138.

¹⁹ Osborne, *Spiral* 332. Osborne gives excellent guidelines for distinguishing transient cultural factors from permanent and normative teaching (*ibid.* 328 ff.).

²⁰ Erickson, *Evangelical* 65 ff.

are universal and which are not. It is a matter of recognizing the locus of normativity as being the principle that underlies the command.²¹ To be sure, the essence, the content is the aim of the form (the words, the historic and cultural context). But the words were chosen on purpose, and the form also is the revealed will of God.

Christ gave us an example in his teaching on the mountainside. He pointed out the deeper and broader implications of the commandments. But Christ did not intend to set aside the form. Murder and adultery are still prohibited.

“Be kind to your animals” does not mean I must own one. But if I have an animal, I must be kind to it. “Pray for the king” does not mean we must set up a monarchy. Since I do not have a king, the principle applies to my president. But if I have a king, I must obey the form. I must pray for him, not shoot him. “Before you recline at dinner with dirty feet, take the servant’s role and wash the guests’ feet” does not mean we have to recline, wear sandals or wash our feet before dining.

In Japan people do not recline to eat and do not have dirty feet. But they do leave their footgear at the door, and the servant arranges them carefully for departure. The principle Jesus taught (John 13) would point toward arranging the *geta* while the guests were dining. But if I am with those who have dirty feet and need help, I am not relieved of obeying the form of the teaching as well as the principle.

The principle behind one-wife teaching may be fidelity, but that does not mean we can use that principle for homosexual relationships, requiring only that people remain true to their chosen partner. The form of Biblical teaching concerning heterosexual marriage is authoritative, as well as the principle. Only by tortuous hermeneutics can one squeeze an egalitarian marriage out of Ephesians 5, and yet that is precisely what many evangelicals now do. The cultural forms of husband/wife, parent/child, master/servant relationships are part of the mandate in that passage and indeed define the principle of “being subject to one another” enunciated as a preamble.

If the cultural form itself is not mandated by the text, we may demand obedience only to the principle. But if the cultural form is part of the mandate, we are not free to set it aside.

Finally, it is helpful to identify the way a teaching flows from the nature of God or the order of creation to reinforce that teaching. It is not legitimate to turn that deduction back on the teaching itself to eliminate it for contemporary obedience. Part of Paul’s condemnation of homosexual conduct is that it is against nature. Some contemporaries reason that he meant to condemn it only to the extent it is against nature, that those who are born with this orientation are free to follow their “nature.” If we can prove that homosexual orientation is a learned response, we may feel more comfortable in our opposition to homosexual behavior, but the Bible’s condemnation of it does not depend on that proof.

²¹ Ibid. 64. See also E. E. Johnson, *Hermeneutics* 229; Klein *et al.*, *Introduction* 406 ff.

Baptism was not in the order of creation, nor does it flow from the nature of God. But it is a mandate required of us. Is monogamy based on the nature of God or the order of creation? It would be hard to prove either. As in the earlier criteria, so with this principle: It can prove helpful in reinforcing Biblical teaching but must not be allowed to set aside a teaching for contemporary obedience.

III. CONCLUSION

Though one can expect no more than an outline of the issues in so brief a scope, it should be apparent even from an outline that the impact of postmodern thinking on evangelical Bible interpretation is profound, both for understanding eternal, unchanging truth and for applying that truth to our lives today. While learning from postmodern thinking to recognize the hazards of verbal communication and the need for modesty about some of our own understandings, and while reaffirming our commitment to a real God who communicates infallibly, let us return to honoring the implications of that commitment. Let us allow the authority of the written Word to prevail in our lives by faithfully searching out the meaning God conveyed through inspired words and faithfully obeying its every teaching.

Postmodern thinking presents us evangelicals not only with the serious challenges of which we have spoken but also with unprecedented opportunities for the gospel. Never before has the authoritative gospel been directed against such an antiauthoritarian spirit. Let us so hold fast to the authority of the Word that we shine as lights in a world dimmed by the darkness that is postmodern relativism (Phil 2:15–16).