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Bringing the Word to Life: Biblical Hermeneutics in Churches of Christ¹

Gary D. Collier

This paper evaluates the current debate on biblical hermeneutics² within Churches of Christ. I will argue that during the last forty years a hermeneutical spectrum has developed which includes at least three competing perspectives distinguishable by the amount of emphasis placed on propositional, historical, or theological concerns. For lack of better terminology, I will refer to the various points of view by way of descriptive phrases: (1) the rationalist/inductive perspective,³ (2) the historical/contextual perspective,⁴ and (3) the biblical theology perspective.⁵ I will also argue that there has been relatively little dialogue between these perspectives, that each has limitations, and that more attention should be given to relating text to life.⁶

The Rationalist/Inductive Perspective

When J.D. Thomas wrote in 1958 that the traditional threefold means of establishing biblical authority (by direct commands, necessary inference, and approved apostolic example) has "in general been accepted by all of us since the beginning of the Restoration period of church history,"⁷ he underscored just how entrenched that particular approach had become by the mid 20th century.⁸ Here, I point to two major literary sources still in use which more or less typify the approach: The Gospel Advocate Commentaries and two books by J. D. Thomas.

The Gospel Advocate Commentaries

The most important single literary production which represents this point of view is the Gospel Advocate Commentary series on the New Testament. These commentaries have been used (and continue to be used) with profit by many who seek to understand biblical texts. Still, they suffer from at least two major problems that relate directly to hermeneutical perspective.

(1) There is an inconsistency in the attitude of the commentators toward scholarship per se. Depending on the polemical need of the commentator, critical scholars are viewed either as authorities or as false teachers.⁹ The result is that interaction with critical scholarship is virtually nonexistent.

(2) There is an inconsistency at a fundamental level between the commentators' hermeneutical theory and their hermeneutical practice. This point requires elaboration. Although the commentaries contain no separate essay on hermeneutical procedure, the methodology is nonetheless stated now and then. Theoretically, the biblical context is to play a determinative role in explaining the meaning of a given text, for "the context of a Scripture is the only safe guide in determining what that Scripture means."¹⁰ As a result, attention is given in every commentary not only to a phrase-by-phrase explanation, but also to matters of authorship, date, place, occasion, etc.

But despite the theory, in many texts traditionally important in the Restoration Movement the controlling interest turns out to be, not context, but the question, "What does the Bible require of us?" The quest for biblical authority via the threefold command, example, and necessary inference becomes the dominant hermeneutical principle, often to the neglect of historical and even theological context.

To give three illustrations, H. Leo Boles and J. W. Shepherd explained the phrase "the first day of the week" in Acts 20:7 by referring to 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Hebrews 10:25 and Acts 2:42 to show that "this custom is now a command."¹¹ Neither author asked whether these texts were intending to give precept or example to establish a norm, and there was little effort to discuss the overall significance of the phrase in its context.

The same point can be made for the comments on Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; and Luke 16:18. The "canon within the canon" for these texts was Matthew 19:1-12; all other texts were interpreted in light of a particular understanding of it rather than their own contexts. C. E. W. Dorris, for example, did not deal at all with the form of the saying of Jesus as it appears in Mark 10:11, but added the "exception clause" from Matthew 19:9:

And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his

wife, — ‘Saving for the cause of fornication.’ (Matt.19:9) —
and marry another, committeth adultery against her.¹²

He then discussed guilty and innocent parties and who is free to remarry, as though these concerns were inherent in what Jesus had said, and as though such is apparent to all who look “objectively” at the text. Boles followed the same course in Luke 16:18,13 and Lipscomb’s comments were solely concerned with such issues.¹⁴ In the process, the individual texts were not viewed in their literary and historical contexts, but were simply compressed together (along with interpretations and traditions) to form one pointed doctrine, which is then used to interpret each of the texts individually.

A third illustration is J. W. Shepherd’s comment on the phrase “singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Instead of discussing what impact this phrase has on its context, or vice versa, Shepherd’s concern was more contemporary: How does the Lord require us to make melody? The cue for this question came from the phrase “with your heart” (as opposed to “with instrumental music”). But is the point of this text to establish the means of acceptable music? This question was not addressed.¹⁵ As a result, Shepherd’s conclusion was based on dogmatic rather than contextual concerns.

It can therefore be summarized that in the Gospel Advocate Commentaries (at least on some matters of long standing debate and concern), the criterion of understanding a text within its own context is not a doctrine to be taken seriously in hermeneutical practice. In fact, in certain matters of faith, history is to be thoroughly divorced from theology; the historical aspects of the text have little to do with determining the lasting theological significance of the text.

Restatement and Refinement: J. D. Thomas

One of the clearest and most comprehensive restatements of the rationalist / inductive viewpoint in the 20th century is found in two books by J.D. Thomas. In *We Be Brethren* (1958), he considered the question of when and how examples teach, refining and clarifying the method in two major ways: First, the “Standard Diagram of Authority” was developed which graphically shows the hierarchical relationship between “generic and specific patterns, excluded specifics, and optional expedients.”¹⁶ Secondly, the “Pattern Principle” was

developed which states that a binding example must contain “the logical implication of a command.”¹⁷ The upshot of the book is to argue that at least some biblical examples inherently establish pattern authority.¹⁸

In *Heaven's Window* (1974), the methodology was not so much refined any further as the position was restated in light of the first book. Here the underlying philosophical tenets of the method were set forth: (1) there is a philosophical need for an authoritative Word from God to man;¹⁹ (2) the Bible has blueprint pattern authority;²⁰ (3) the three-fold interpretive method—command, example, necessary inference—is necessary for establishing pattern authority;²¹ (4) the Bible consists of facts and propositional statements;²² (5) the inductive method as represented by Dungan is the best approach;²³ and (6) the grammatico-historical method is important and is the same as the inductive method.²⁴

The case is stated clearly and straightforwardly. Still, the position is open to serious criticism on at least two points. (1) In spite of the emphasis on the grammatico-historical method, the historical interest does not seem to bear significantly on the conclusions for the position(s) argued. *Heaven's Window*, for example, makes a strong claim that the “grammatico-historical exegete” will examine all of the important data: the language, the historical circumstances, the purpose, and the context.²⁵ But when the “New Testament Claims” are examined in chapter 10, it is not historical but dogmatic concerns that prevail.²⁶ (2) The position as stated also contains a serious inconsistency over the relationship of doctrine to people. In theory, the well-being of people is at the heart of the method, but in practice, the ability to determine pattern requirements takes center stage.²⁷

The Historical/Contextual Perspective

A recent series of articles in the *Restoration Quarterly*²⁸ has made it clear that a resurgence²⁹ of interest in worldwide biblical scholarship began to arise within the Churches of Christ in the decades following World War II. This interest was prompted by the beginning of the graduate programs in Bible at Pepperdine, Harding, and Abilene Christian, and by the number of graduates that went on to doctoral studies from those programs. By and large, the interest spawned a commitment to the “historical method” of interpretation,

and began to express itself in a number of major publications, including (among others) the *Restoration Quarterly*, the Living Word Commentaries, and a *festschrift* specifically devoted to biblical hermeneutics.³⁰

Restoration Quarterly

Founded in 1957, *Restoration Quarterly* became an important forum for explaining and advocating the historical method of interpretation.³¹ Its first issue included two articles on the subject of interpretation.³² Subsequently, numerous articles appeared on exegesis and exegetical method, biblical backgrounds, the early church, the Restoration Movement, and other related subjects.³³ When the whole of *Restoration Quarterly* is considered to the present day, entire issues have been devoted to explaining and demonstrating the method and task of biblical interpretation (1961), New Testament scholarship (1965), Old Testament scholarship (1966), and Scholarship in the Restoration Movement (1982). Other issues have also been devoted to a single topic, and although not concerned with exegetical method per se, are nevertheless living demonstrations of the historical approach to Scripture.³⁴

This does not mean, of course, that the writers saw themselves as a “new school of thought,” or that all were of one mind. Indeed, many authors wrote from within what I have called the rationalist/inductive perspective, and saw their work in *Restoration Quarterly* merely as a refinement or extension of the historical work that needed to be done.³⁵ The focus was not on anything “new” so much as there was a more rigid attention to working out the historical method of interpretation. This emphasis would, however, eventually raise important questions about the traditional approach to Scripture.

The Living Word Commentaries

How well have the hermeneutical concerns of those working from a historical/contextual perspective been relayed to the churches? The major hermeneutical effort to date is the Living Word Commentary project, an exegetical commentary series based on the historical method for, in the words of John Willis, “the average church member, and not for other biblical scholars.”³⁶ Certainly, this project was vitally needed and in many ways has been successful in achieving its goals.

It is instructive to notice how the commentators of this set³⁷ differ from the commentators of the *Gospel Advocate Commentaries* on the same passages referred to earlier.³⁸ On the positive side, the *Living Word Commentaries* avoid polemical attitudes, staying closely anchored to the historical and exegetical concerns of the text at hand. On the negative side, they do not address the topic in ways that will always register with readers from the Restoration Movement. When readers go to these commentaries on the selected texts, they will often find what seems to be a very strange silence on the very subject they are interested in reading about. It ends up looking like the commentators did not do a very good job “discussing the passage.” But more than that, the readers are often not moved one step from their old approach to the text, because they are not challenged to do so.

One of the fine features of the *Living Word Commentaries* is the inclusion of introductory volumes for both the Old Testament and New Testament. But even here, the articles on Bible study³⁹ in these volumes suffer, in my opinion, from two major problems.

Restoration Hermeneutical Context

(1) Neither article clearly addresses the major hermeneutical context of late 20th century readers who come from a Restoration background. It is perhaps one of the ironies of this approach, which rightly places so much emphasis on historical “context” when interpreting Scripture, that it has not spoken clearly to the hermeneutical tradition of its own audience! It is not that the articles are unintelligible. The article by Willis, in fact, is quite good. But they both fall short in what they do not address. There is no question that both articles have in mind, just out of view, a faulty methodology (viz., the rationalist/inductive approach) which they wish to adjust to a better, more productive perspective. But that faulty approach is never clearly addressed.

Contemporary Meaning

(2) Neither article clearly addresses how we get from “what the text meant” to “what it means.” Roy Bowen Ward discusses translations, the meaning of words, and literary types and forms, and then concludes with this statement:

It is beyond the scope of this volume to attempt to lay down rules for applying the New Testament to our own day or for

judging the present age by the norm of the New Testament. But it may be that the more we understand what it meant, the clearer will be them earning for today.

This statement is not very helpful and borders on telling the reader that what the text means for today is really not very important, or that it is self-evident.⁴⁰

John T. Willis (twelve years later) corrects this deficiency to some degree, giving a very readable and practical description of proper Bible study in its historical and linguistic context. He then comes close to addressing our concern. Under the heading "Customs and Abiding Truth,"⁴¹ he mentions that although "no certain solution" has been found for deciding whether a given biblical command is binding for all time, two observations should be kept in mind: (1) what is essential is the meaning and motives of acts, not just doing acts correctly; and (2) a belief, teaching, or practice does not have to originate in Israel or Christianity to be central to them. These are useful points as far as they go, but a more explicit description of how the "historical method" relates to current concerns is needed.

Festschrift on Biblical Hermeneutics

*Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice, Studies in Honor of Jack P. Lewis,*⁴² was published in 1986, and contains 25 articles (mostly on exegesis) and two bibliographies. According to the back cover, the book is intended for "those who preach, teach, and study the Bible"—a rather broad spectrum. Many excellent articles in the tradition of *Restoration Quarterly* are included from well prepared and capable writers, all of whom share a common Restoration heritage. Nevertheless, it is disappointing that the volume does very little to advance the understanding of interpretive methodology within the context of the Restoration Movement.⁴³

Ian Fair

To give three illustrations, Ian Fair's article on "Disciplines Related to Biblical Interpretation"⁴⁴ is a very thoughtful overview of three "ruling principles of interpretation": Have right attitudes toward Scripture (presuppositions), control subjectivity and find the meaning (exegesis), and apply the meaning to contemporary life (hermeneutics). Thus, after exegesis, "further ruling principles of interpretation must be developed" to separate the authoritative from

the non-authoritative. This sounds promising: (a) The theologian suggests a hypothesis as to its normative or incidental value; (b) the theologian evaluates the hypothesis against the overall theological context of Scripture; (c) the theologian makes a statement as to whether the text under review is normative or incidental; and (d) the preacher searches for contemporary analogies. The problem is, these principles are too general to be helpful, and they are somewhat vague. How is one to decide whether a text is normative or incidental? What is one to look for when comparing a hypothesis "against the overall theological context of Scripture"? Also, how are the tasks of the preacher and the systematic theologian related to each other, and what does this say about those who are neither?

Tim Hadley and Larry Chouinard

Two other articles survey the history of biblical scholarship, Timothy D. Hadley (OT)⁴⁵ and Larry Chouinard (NT).⁴⁶ These are fine articles, but they ignore Restoration scholarship completely. What better place than in survey articles could the strengths of Restoration scholarship and goals be represented and tested alongside other methods and movements? Such omissions leave the impression that nothing of any significance is to be found in Restoration scholarship, but this is not the case.

J. D. Thomas

Finally to be noted is "Vital Principles and Practices in Hermeneutics" by J. D. Thomas.⁴⁷ It is not at all surprising, nor out of place, that Thomas reiterates in summary his principles stated more fully in *We Be Brethren* and *Heaven's Window*; nor is his recommendation of D. R. Dungan's *Hermeneutics* as his preference; nor his support for the "Inductive Method"; nor his statement:

The need for logical reasoning sometimes leads the student deeper than mere technical or mechanical rules can take him. Here such matters as commands, inferences and approved precedents of the biblical characters must be considered.⁴⁸

None of this is disturbing. What is disturbing, however, is that one can leave this book believing that it all fits together. There is no dialogue between the competing points of view.

The Biblical Theology Perspective

A third hermeneutical emphasis began to appear about the same time as (and in connection with) the historical/contextual emphasis just reviewed. This approach points to the "theological centers" in Scripture as the umbrella under which other parts of Scripture are to be interpreted. This concern has seen the least amount of published material until recently, although it, too, claims a certain link with the theological interests of early restorationists.⁴⁹ But three articles in the *Restoration Quarterly* deserve special mention as offering direct critiques of the rationalist/inductive method early on.

In the first article, "The Restoration Principle: A Critical Analysis," Roy Bowen Ward offers a poignant analysis of the Restoration Principle in which he underscores the importance of recognizing that Christianity is a historical religion, and that the Bible, as we have it, is dependent on historical processes. This understanding of Christianity has major impact upon traditional Restoration exegesis (what the text meant), and especially upon Restoration hermeneutics (what the text means).⁵⁰ He suggests that

the results of 19th century exegesis have in some cases been superseded in the present time because 'principles of interpretation' have been more greatly refined and because new data has become available.⁵¹

Furthermore, according to Ward, the currently accepted hermeneutical rules as represented in J. D. Thomas's *We Be Brethren* (commands, examples, and necessary inferences), are categories that

are not set forth as a hermeneutic within the text of the NT, but rather they are derived from a certain logical system imposed from outside the text. The question should be raised whether or not this logical system is consonant with the nature of the NT itself. And the presuppositions of this hermeneutic should be discovered and clarified.⁵²

Ward suggests that a better approach is to understand New Testament theology and then to apply the theological insight to current situations. This would involve at least three steps: (1) understanding "the life, thought, and practices of the apostolic churches;" (2) "finding the central and motivating forces of those

churches and restoring these to the present church;" and (3) recognizing also "the importance of rites and institutions reflected in the canon of Scripture," such as believer's baptism, "not simply because some text commands it, but because only believer's baptism is consonant with the general theological understanding of the apostolic churches."⁵³

Thomas Olbricht also addressed this issue in two important articles.⁵⁴ His major contributions include (1) his seminal discussions on the philosophical background of Alexander Campbell and his peers; (2) his evaluations of the 19th century inductive method employed by Campbell and his followers, especially as it showed itself in Campbell's view of the Bible as primarily composed of a collection of historical facts; (3) his evaluation of Restoration views of revelation in light of the larger 19th-20th century theological debate of worldwide scholarship; and (4) his emphasis on biblical theology as the central point from which current-day hermeneutical relevance of Scripture is to be worked out.

In "The Bible as Revelation" (1965), Olbricht argues against the rationalist/inductive approach, in favor of reading the Bible through its great themes:

In my opinion Campbell got us headed in the wrong direction. I agree with him in looking at the Bible in a positivistic manner, but I think he was wrong in seeing it as a collection of facts, the unity of which emerges from the individual facts themselves. What he should have done is to raise the question of what are the great themes of the Scriptures of God's love shown in his deeds of sin and salvation and then interpreted the individual facts in that light. . . . In spite of expressed fears of those who wish to maintain our traditional hermeneutics I insist that if we took seriously what I have proposed we would be more biblical than ever before. We would not do away with examples and commands, but we would have a manner of looking at them provided for by the unity of the Bible itself.⁵⁵

All three articles by Ward and Olbricht deal head-on with the issues involved between the rationalist/inductive and historical/contextual approaches, and broach the question of biblical theology. However, these articles are the exception rather than the rule.⁵⁶

What is more, it is not clear to what extent others of a historical/contextual bent concur with such sentiments: the three articles stand as pioneering efforts in the Churches of Christ for exploring "what the text means" theologically in our modern context.⁵⁷

Moving Ahead

This study has argued that three hermeneutical perspectives are represented in what can be called the rationalist/inductive, the historical/contextual, and the biblical theology perspectives. These share many overlapping interests, but are different perspectives nonetheless, with different emphases. The second and third are very closely related. The third has been the least developed of the three, though it has been consistently pursued by a few through the years, and has come up recently for discussion.

Comparing and Evaluating the Perspectives

(1) The rationalist/inductive perspective, as it has come to exist, is untenable and needs to be reevaluated. It oversimplifies the quest for biblical authority in terms of the search for commands, examples, and inferences. What is objectionable is that such items found in or drawn from Scripture are filtered through a particular philosophical colander that ignores the nature of Scripture as received. In spite of its theory to the contrary, it mitigates against seeing Scripture in its historical, literary, and theological contexts, relegating large portions of Scripture to virtual insignificance, since those portions do not fit the grid of the interpretive concern. As a result, it does not bridge the gap between its practice of focusing on the objective pattern requirements of the absolute perfect will of God and its theoretical proclamation of Christianity as a faith written on the heart.

(2) The historical/contextual perspective is more viable, but has not gone far enough. If the one approach has gone overboard in neglecting world-wide scholarship and advances in hermeneutical theory, this one has remained aloof from its audience and neglected practical application. In its desire to tap into its intellectual roots, this perspective has not always attended well to the rest of the tree. Nor has it been brought into an open and clear comparison with the rationalist/inductive perspective. The result is that the historical approach has not fully conveyed the message it needs to convey (viz., that its focus is crucial for a proper reading and application of

Scripture), and it has sometimes conveyed a message that it should not want to convey (viz., that it is not concerned with its traditional Restoration hermeneutical heritage).

(3) The biblical theology perspective, as stated, is somewhat vague with respect to specific application and needs further clarification. It is still somewhat vague to assert a hermeneutical principle based on the "theological centers of Scripture, God's mighty deeds that give everything else its significance and shape."⁵⁸ Certainly, this is an important area to explore. But finding those theological centers is not always as easy as the theory sounds. Which center, if any, should be the center of the church today? Are all the great themes of Scripture of equal value? Are the great themes of the Old Testament⁵⁹ as important as those of the New Testament? Should the central Pauline themes be "more central" than those of Matthew or Luke or the Prophets?⁶⁰ Is the message of the cross truly the central biblical theme? And can we be consistent in speaking of the historical distance and diversity of the Bible on the one hand, and its plot ("Scripture's central story and central themes"⁶¹) on the other? There is much to do here.

Suggestions for Future Work

(1) We need to develop new models for teaching people how to view and read the Bible. Against some who argue that new models should be avoided, lest we put our trust in systems and formulas, a model simply provides an understandable example of how to go about proper Bible study. Can only scholars read the Bible? Sometimes this impression is left. If we are serious that Scripture is complex in its diversity and distance from us, culturally and otherwise, then finding ways of helping people who are non-specialists to read it properly should be considered both a legitimate and important concern. Intrinsic to this is the question of the nature of biblical authority in light of the related but as yet untapped question of canonical function.⁶² This subject is often taken for granted but begs for attention. New models should be doubly sensitive to "exegeting" the life-situation of the people being addressed, as well as the historical and theological situation of the text of Scripture itself.

(2) We need to deal with the hermeneutical question specifically as it relates to our Restoration tradition. It is unwarranted to

dismiss either our traditional concerns, or concerns about our tradition. We must tend to both. The questions about commands and examples in Scripture, and what implications we draw from them, are important if for no other reason than they are part of our identity. But so is our feeling of responsibility that each generation must grapple with the issues anew. To ignore the traditional hermeneutic, or to disallow challenges to it, are really two sides of the same coin.

Also, we must eventually deal with specific issues that have been traditionally important to us; it is not enough simply to paint the big picture (though surely, that is important). To stop short of exploring the specific implications of our hermeneutical theories is nothing less than a repeat of our failure to relate exegesis to life. A good place to begin this discussion is with the three articles by Ward and Olbricht. Although they are cited at times by individuals doing historical studies, we have still not followed-up on their specific and valuable suggestions.

(3) We need to address the relationship between history and theology. Despite a few comments about this relationship, we have written very little on it. In 1961, Abraham Malherbe commented on the relationship that,

Exegesis is the basic discipline, not only of N. T. studies, but of theology. As to form, theology must always be the exegesis of Scripture. Exegesis must govern theology. Theology must not be allowed to rule exegesis, for then this discipline loses its character and becomes eisegesis.⁶³

The article goes on to clarify methods for exegesis. However, since no article does the same for theology,⁶⁴ one may wonder if the theological quest is worth the bother. And in fact, until recently, exegetical interest has completely overshadowed theological interest. If a distinction is to be maintained between the two, their relationship must be explored more fully.⁶⁵

(4) We need to participate more energetically in the broader hermeneutical debate in biblical scholarship. The renewed interest in critical scholarship notwithstanding, on the whole, we have not been in dialogue with world-wide scholarship on the question of the interpretation of Scripture. Concepts such as canonical criticism, comparative midrash, reactualization, contextualization, supracul-

turalism, the hermeneutical circle, horizon, deconstruction, postmodernism, and others are still “Greek” to us. It is not that we should fall in line with everyone or anyone else, necessarily, but we should at least be conversant with current trends. One important question to ask here, for example, is the viability of a “Biblical Theology” movement. Such an emphasis has waned in broader circles and we should ask whether this theological perspective has already been tested and found wanting. Another important question is whether our assumption that exegesis should be the foundation for theology is acceptable — post-modern views of the Bible are challenging this.

(5) Finally, we need to address the issue of bringing the Word to life. None of the perspectives has dealt adequately with the question of applying Scripture to people in real-life situations.⁶⁶ To take one example, the book, *The Worldly Church*, in its marvelous passion against the two extremes of legalism and need-centered secularism, devalues the daily, temporal needs of people. It comes close, in fact, to advocating a renewed “text-centeredness.”⁶⁷ Now certainly, this is not the point of the authors who correctly warn against a devastating secularism. But even at that, the concluding statement on “authentic Christian ministry” is pale at best:

If we want to do a Christian work, we must learn to hear the ultimate need behind every temporal need, . . . And having heard, we must proclaim the Ultimate Answer which all men and women, in whatever straits or circumstances, need to hear.⁶⁸

In itself, the statement is fine. But any motivation to deal with temporal needs is blunted when this sentiment of the ultimate need is set in the context of so many blistering attacks against “endless sermons on how to have happy marriages, on how to cope with drugs, and even on how to achieve success in the world,”⁶⁹ and against the efforts of some “to address the endless ‘needs’ of the secular society’s casualty list . . . [including] failed marriages, soaring abortion rates, crime, delinquency, suicide, drug addiction, nervous stress, mental breakdowns, and the disorientation of our youth.”⁷⁰ It almost sounds as if the only legitimate need people have is their ultimate need, and that is all we really should be concerned with, except perhaps with some good Christian ministries “to families, to the infirm, to the aged, and to the suffering who need our aid.”⁷¹ Even when set against other

more positive statements,⁷² one does not feel too compelled to deal with people in the here and now. The problem is one of overstatement. People and their life-predicaments stand very close to Jesus' view of God. But they never have in our theology, except in a theoretical or ancillary way.

We can expect that our hermeneutical journey will experience times of discomfort, because some cherished theological positions are certain to be challenged. But who knows, as a people we may yet get a chance to identify with our early brothers and sisters at Berea, in both the pain and exhilaration of their discoveries!

NOTES

¹ This is an abbreviated version of a paper presented to the Christian Scholars Conference at Pepperdine University, July 1987. Since the writing of the original paper, several excellent discussions have appeared to which I am indebted for some correctives, including C. Leonard Allen, Richard Hughes, and Michael Weed, *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal* (Abilene: ACU, 1988), C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross Shaped People in a Secular World* (Abilene: ACU, 1990), and most importantly the Christian Scholars Conferences of 1988 and 1989 (Pepperdine University), and 1990 (Abilene Christian University); (papers are available from those institutions). My thanks to *Christian Studies* for an opportunity to provide an updated version of this paper.

² In this paper, I use "hermeneutics" in its broad, classical sense to refer to the whole interpretive process. It is fashionable, however, to use the term for theological appropriation, or "what the text means." See, for example, Abraham Malherbe, "An Introduction: The Task and Method of Exegesis," and Don McGaughey, "The Problem of Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Restoration Quarterly* 5 no 4 (1961):170, 252; and Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

³ The "rationalist/inductive perspective" refers to that philosophy of interpretation which hails especially from the mid-19th century; which attempts to reconstruct the original pattern of the nature and organization of the "ideal" New Testament church, through what can best be called "thoroughgoing inductivism" (i.e., through detailed attention to inductive reasoning and stated in propositional statements); whose specific method of establishing biblical authority is through specific commands or precepts, approved apostolic examples, and necessary inferences; and which respects the silence of the Scriptures in the various "articles of faith, acts of worship, and principles of morality" (Alexander Campbell, *Christian System* [Bethany, VA., 1839], 72-73). The emphasis upon the inductive method as the proper

method of biblical interpretation is to be seen especially in works like Thomas Campbell's, "Declaration and Address" (1809); Alexander Campbell's "Sermon on the Law" (1816), *Christian System* (1835, 1839), and *Christianity Restored* (1835); J. S. Lamar's *The Organon of Scripture: Or the Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA., 1859); Robert Milligan's *Reason and Revelation* (Cincinnati, OH., 1867); D. R. Dungan's *Hermeneutics* (Cincinnati, OH., 1888); and J. D. Thomas's two books, *We Be Brethren* (Abilene: BRP, 1958) and *Heaven's Window* (Abilene: BRP, 1974). Other works could also be listed, and not all works cited agree on every detail. Whereas previous drafts of this paper have referred to the "Rationalist/Inductive School," the designation was misunderstood by some readers as a pejorative reference. Such was certainly not intended. The present designation "rationalist/inductive perspective" is intended as descriptive of major concerns.

4. The "historical/contextual perspective" refers to that approach within the Churches of Christ, beginning around 1950, which is expressly interested in interacting more seriously with world-wide scholarship and in advocating an historical approach that is guided by contextual restraints. Interestingly enough, this emphasis on scholarship and the Bible as history also hailed from Alexander Campbell, but had by-and-large receded in Restoration circles around the middle part of the 19th century as attention turned more toward the inductive approach and the inclusion of necessary inference. (On this last point, see Michael W. Casey, "The Development of Necessary Inference in the Hermeneutics of the Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1986].) Campbell's emphasis on the Bible as being primarily "history" (rather than primarily "propositional") was underscored by Abraham Malherbe at the 1986 Pepperdine Lectureship (on tape — "How to Study the Bible"): "I think that where [some brethren] slip a cog, is that they conceive of the Bible as a collection of propositions. And they are still concerned with all kinds of stuff from Aristotle, but they have never quite understood Campbell when he speaks of the historical element. . . . He stressed history. And in that respect, he shared more with modern biblical study than he did with John Locke." The designation "historical/contextual perspective" is intended, like the previous designation, as descriptive of major concerns of the approach. It also replaces the phrase, "Scholarship Movement" in my first draft, in retrospect, an unfortunate designation.

5. The "biblical theology perspective" refers to an approach to Scripture which looks primarily for the theological centers of Scripture from which Scripture sets out its own parameters for interpretation. See especially Thomas Olbricht, "The Rationalism of the Restoration," *Restoration Quarterly* 11 no 2(1968):77-81; more recently see Allen, Hughes, and Weed, *The Worldly Church*; and Allen, *The Cruciform Church*.

⁶ Two points must be emphasized. First, although the perspectives to be examined are different, they are not totally mutually-exclusive. All three are concerned in one way or another with biblical content, context, history, scholarship, theology, and the like, and all use inductive and deductive reasoning to one degree or another. But there are unmistakable differences in the ways these common concerns are approached and applied, and it is those differences that I wish to bring into focus. Secondly, hermeneutical methodology is only a part of a much larger problem in our fellowship and cannot be said to be "the cause" of the current malaise. That Churches of Christ are undergoing a "paradigm shift" on several levels and for varieties of reasons has been ably argued in a number of papers at the Christian Scholars Conferences at Pepperdine (1989) and Abilene Christian (1990). Nevertheless, biblical hermeneutics is a legitimate and important topic in its own right and deserves discussion and clarification.

⁷ Thomas, *We Be Brethren*, 6.

⁸ Ibid. While there is little question that the hermeneutical approach as outlined indeed became the system of choice within Churches of Christ fairly early-on in the movement, it is not quite accurate to say that it has been so accepted from the beginning of the movement. Several recent studies have made it clear that the approach came into favor amid heated controversy in the mid-to-late 19th century and crystallized in its present form in the early 20th century. Among others, see Casey, "The Development of Necessary Inference," (also see his two summary articles, "The Origins of the Hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 31 nos. 3-4, 1989 and 1990); C. Leonard Allen, "Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and the Organon of Scripture," *Church History* 55(1986):65-80; Charles W. Zenor, "A History of Interpretation in the Church of Christ: 1901-1976" (Th.D. dissertation, Iliff School of Theology, 1976); Robert Woodrow, "The Nature of Biblical Authority and the Restoration Movement" (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1983).

⁹ J. W. Shepherd, for example, explained that the commentaries were based on the American Standard Version because "It is recognized as the best by men who are entitled to speak with authority—by leaders of the foremost universities, colleges, theological seminaries, and Bible training schools" (J. W. Shepherd, *Romans* [1933], iv); but Guy N. Woods remarked that his commentary on James had been prepared for average Bible students who, "are not acquainted with, or interested in, the denominational theologians of the age; and who would not be edified, but merely bewildered, by an array of their various and often false opinions" (Guy N. Woods, *James* [1964], 7 [his emphasis]). See also a similar comment of his in *John* [1981], 4.)

¹⁰ David Lipscomb in H. Leo Boles, *Matthew* (1936), 82.

¹¹ H. Leo Boles, *Acts* (1941), 318; J. W. Shepherd and David Lipscomb, *1 Corinthians* (1935), 249.

12. C. E. W. Dorris, *Mark* (1938), 229 (his emphasis).
13. H. Leo Boles, *Luke* (1940), 317.
14. David Lipscomb in H. Leo Boles, *Matthew* (1936), 143, 388-389.
15. J. W. Shepherd, *Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians* (1939), 108-09.
16. *We Be Brethren*, 19ff.
17. *We Be Brethren*, 57, 90. Milo Hadwin's *The Role of NT Examples as Related to Biblical Authority* (1974) specifically challenged the conclusions of Thomas's *We Be Brethren*, maintaining that only commands establish pattern authority. Thomas responded at length in *Heaven's Window*, 107-125.
18. *We Be Brethren*, 1.
19. *Heaven's Window*, 3-4.
20. *Heaven's Window*, 4.
21. The Bible not only contains patterns (*Heaven's Window*, 1, 32-34, 68-69, 73, *et al.*), but is itself a pattern from God (4-6, 40 *et al.*). For that reason, the means of discovering "pattern authority" is vitally important for all Christians at all times, and is to be discovered inductively. "The sum total of all this is that 'commands establish patterns without question'; but so do necessary inferences, when the conclusion is absolute and is necessary; yet when examples are known to have underlying commands (by necessary inference) they also will establish patterns, but only then! . . . In the final analysis, therefore, commands, necessary inferences, and 'binding examples' are all one and the same thing—as far as the force of logic is concerned" (*ibid.*, 104, quotation marks and italics are his).
22. The Bible primarily consists of facts, and through the "Inductive-Deductive Method" (*We Be Brethren*, 16) those facts can be synthesized to arrive at general teachings from Scripture (*Heaven's Window*, 89).
23. *Heaven's Window*, 53, 86.
24. *Heaven's Window*, 85, 87.
25. *Heaven's Window*, 85.
26. See, for example, *Heaven's Window*, 73.
27. It is clear that both books under review attempt to put forward a hermeneutical clarification that would "alleviate the tensions between BRETHREN and would thus permit us to get on with our main business of saving the world" (*We Be Brethren*, 7, his capitalization). See also other very strong and positive remarks in *Heaven's Window*, 24 and 76, that the issue is Christ and not some form of legalism. Yet these statements are difficult to square with the pattern principle and with the concept of obedience to the pattern requirements of God as these are worked out in the two volumes. A

comparison of *Heaven's Window*, 76 and 104-105, reveals a gigantic struggle between objective and subjective elements in the Christian faith in which the subjective has no independent merit. In the final analysis, grace and forgiveness are subject to proper pattern requirements: "the person will remain a sinner unless grace and forgiveness are invoked through the proper pattern requirements that bring forgiveness" (105). So the primary objective, which starts out as "faith in Christ," turns out to mean getting in a "right relation to propositional statements," and being able to tap into "the proper pattern requirements." It appears that one's faith and life in Christ turns on his or her ability to distinguish between "optional expedients" and "excluded specifics."

²⁸. See the special issue on Restoration scholarship in *Restoration Quarterly* 25 no 4(1982), especially the studies by Everett Ferguson, Tony Ash, and James Thompson. See also Ash's earlier thorough studies on Old Testament scholarship in *Restoration Quarterly* 9-10(1966-67).

²⁹. In other words, those who espoused the "historical method" saw themselves as standing firmly in the tradition of Campbell a century or more earlier who also emphasized historical context. Note W. E. Garrison's remarks in *Religion Follows the Frontier* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), 258: "The first generation leaders had included a few men who had wide intellectual contacts. The second generation had fewer. And as the Disciples multiplied colleges, manned chiefly by their ministry so far as they were trained at all, a process of intellectual inbreeding ensued which resulted in an unfortunate isolation from the main currents of religious thought and scholarship." Quoted in Tony Ash, "Old Testament Studies in the Restoration Movement—No. IV," *Restoration Quarterly* 10 no 3(1967):158.

³⁰. See also *Mission Journal* and the *Faculty Bulletin* of the Institute for Christian Studies for similar concerns. As in the previous section, I have selected literary works that typify the approach.

³¹. James Thompson has observed that the journal functioned "to provide a forum for scholars who were active in research, many of whom were completing doctoral dissertations at the time," "New Testament Studies and the Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 25 no. 4(1982):230.

³². Paul Southern's "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Restoration Movement" was more a celebration of Restorationism than an assessment of Restoration methods; and J. W. Roberts "Exegetical Helps" was the first of many installments under that title providing insightful philological contributions to the scholar and preacher alike.

³³. Particularly important for interpretive method were the numerous contributions of J. W. Roberts; the challenging contributions by Abraham Malherbe, including (among others) "The Task and Method of Exegesis," two articles under the rubric "Through the Eye of the Needle" (reflecting his conviction that "philology is the eye of the needle through which every

theological camel must enter the heaven of theology”), and “Surveying New Testament Research.” Also important were the detailed articles by Frank Pack on textual criticism, and the many articles by Everett Ferguson and Jack Lewis on church history, biblical backgrounds, and other studies. These are but a few of those who wrote in the early issues.

³⁴. These volumes are wholly given over either to biblical books: *Acts* (1960), *John* (1963), *Genesis* (1980); or to other topics of interest in the Restoration Movement which directly or indirectly relate to biblical hermeneutics: baptism (1957), the Church (1958), apologetics (1962), 2nd century Christianity (1968), English translations (1974), and personalities of the Restoration Movement (1977).

³⁵. For example, see the numerous articles by J. D. Thomas and others. Also, it is noteworthy that from 1957 to 1977 no articles appeared on any of the texts mentioned above (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Acts 20:7; Eph. 5:19), except three reprint articles by J. W. Roberts originally written for the *Christian Worker* and the *Firm Foundation* (*Restoration Quarterly* 17 no. 1 [1974, memorial volume for professor Roberts]: “Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage,” 29-32; “Instrumental Music,” 44-47; “The New English Bible and Acts 20:7,” 61-64). These articles clearly reflect the agenda of the traditional hermeneutic and do not look at the texts contextually.

³⁶. John T. Willis, “Rewarding Bible Study,” *The World and Literature of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, I (OT) (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 9.

³⁷. Richard Oster, *Acts* (1979); Carl Holladay, *1 Corinthians* (1979); Jack P. Lewis, *Matthew Part 2* (1976); Michael Weed, *Ephesians* (1971), all volumes (Austin: Sweet).

³⁸. Acts 20:7; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-12; and Ephesians 5:19.

³⁹. “How to Study the New Testament” by Roy Bowen Ward, 1967; and “Rewarding Bible Study” by John T. Willis, 1979.

⁴⁰. See the very negative review of Ward’s article by George Howard in *Restoration Quarterly* 11 no 2(1968):116-117.

⁴¹. Willis, “Rewarding Bible Study,” 35. But see p. 9 which clearly states the intent to deal with exegetical and not theological issues.

⁴². (Grand Rapids: *Baker*, 1986) ed. by F. Furman Kearley, Edward Myers, and Timothy D. Hadley.

⁴³. Since there is no foreword to give the editors’ goals, one must be careful not to second-guess them. But it is odd that such a book on hermeneutics would leave out issues so directly relevant to its own heritage and commitment, even if the book was intended for a so-called “wider audience.” Since such home-grown concerns do show up at places (e.g., Carroll D. Osburn, “Interpreting Greek Syntax,” esp. 237), one wonders why they could not have been more consistently represented by editorial design.

44. *Biblical Interpretation*, 31-49.
45. *Biblical Interpretation*, 103-116.
46. *Biblical Interpretation*, 195-213.
47. *Biblical Interpretation*, 307-317.
48. *Biblical Interpretation*, 316.
49. As seen, for example, in Alexander Campbell's *Christian System* (1835, 1839).
50. Ward uses the term "hermeneutics" in its narrow sense to refer to "what the text means" rather than to the exegetical process itself.
51. Ward, "The Restoration Principle: A Critical Analysis," *Restoration Quarterly* 8 no. 4(1965):208-209 (his emphasis).
52. Ward, 209.
53. Ward.
54. Thomas Olbricht, "The Bible as Revelation," *Restoration Quarterly* 8 no. 4(1965):211-230; "The Rationalism of the Restoration," *Restoration Quarterly* 11 no. 2(1968):77-88.
55. Olbricht, "The Bible as Revelation," 229. Three years later (1968), in his article, "The Rationalism of the Restoration," 87, Olbricht raised two objections to Campbell's approach to Scripture: (1) the Lockean approach to Scripture was the wrong approach to adopt, because viewing the Bible as a collection of facts leads to atomistic interpretation; and (2) "the effort to separate reason and facts from emotion" when coming to faith in Christ is wrong.
56. See also, Russ Dudrey, "Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?" *Restoration Quarterly* 30 no 1(1988):17-42. Dudrey argues that we must "read the Bible first as historians, then as missionaries, then as theologians" (p. 40). The New Testament writings are "missionary correspondence[s]" written "from on the field and in the trenches of the spiritual battle to fellow-soldiers also on the field and in the trenches" (p. 41). To read them properly, we must think more like missionaries than scholastics.
57. In the mean time, Olbricht has persistently pursued this topic. See, for example, "Theology of the Old Testament," *The World and Literature of the Old Testament* (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 296-345; "Biblical Theology and the Restoration Movement," *Mission Journal* April, 1980; "The Theology of Genesis," *Restoration Quarterly* 23 no. 4 (1980): 201-17; *He Loves Forever* (Abilene: 1985); and various popular forums. For other recent discussions of the topic see Monroe Hawley, *The Focus of Our Faith: A New Look at the Restoration Principle* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1985); Allen, Hughes, and Weed, *The Worldly Church*, especially chapter five; and

especially Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (1990). Allen's book is a recent major addition to this line of thinking and is aptly dedicated to Thomas Olbricht. The book merges historical assessment with systematic theology, arguing for, among other things, the rediscovery of mystery and metaphor, and a commitment to historical interpretation. After sketching a broad picture of how the Bible should be viewed, attention is turned to a systematic treatment of three topics: God, the cross, and the church in the world. The final chapter in effect sums up the approach to and application of Scripture in the concept of Compassion: "This compassionate incarnation of God in Christ . . . provides the dominant model for all Christian behavior" (p. 182).

^{58.} *The Worldly Church*, 72. Allen, *The Cruciform Church*, has reemphasized this, but focuses more on the broad strokes than on how this may work out in specific instances.

^{59.} See Thomas Olbricht's interesting paragraph ("Theology of the Old Testament," 296) on four different groups of scholars who have attempted to define the center of the Old Testament.

^{60.} One could get that impression, for example, from the very powerful fifth chapter of *The Worldly Church*.

^{61.} Allen, *The Cruciform Church*, 71.

^{62.} See the programmatic essay by Michael Weed, "The Authority of Jesus, or the Jesus of Authority?" *Faculty Bulletin of the Institute for Christian Studies* 2 (October, 1981):55f, "I think we would understand much more about the authority of the Bible if we paid more attention to its function in ordering the moral life . . . rather than attempting to derive abstract and intellectual theological systems from it." For a somewhat different perspective with similar results, see also the engaging work of James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), and *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); and Gary D. Collier, "Closing the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew: The Hermeneutical Contributions of James A. Sanders," unpublished paper presented at the Christian Scholars Conference (Pepperdine, 1989).

^{63.} Malherbe, "An Introduction: The Task and Method of Exegesis," *Restoration Quarterly* 5 no. 4(1961):169.

^{64.} McGaughey's article in the same issue, "The Problem of Biblical Hermeneutics," defines hermeneutics as "the principles upon which the appropriation is accomplished" (p. 252). Yet the article (by design) merely summarizes various perspectives on the topic (Liberal, Neo-Orthodox, Existentialist, Conservative) and does not "present a particular set of hermeneutical rubrics" (p. 251). For more recent discussions on this topic refer to papers delivered at the Christian Scholars Conference, 1984, 1989, and 1990. See also Gary D. Collier, *Christian Scholars Conference Papers Index*

(vols 1-7, 1981-1987) available through Pepperdine University.

^{65.} This is a question that goes beyond our own borders. See, for example, the intriguing assessment by Heikki Risnen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM, 1990).

^{66.} Though certainly Leonard Allen has broached the subject in a major way (*The Cruciform Church*, esp. 173-83). See above for my critique of the rationalist/inductive approach on this score.

^{67.} Compare two statements: "The identity crisis among Churches of Christ today can be resolved only as we place Scripture at the center of our life together and grapple anew with its message" (Allen, Hughes, and Weed, *The Worldly Church*, 91); and: "Today among Churches of Christ . . . we face the challenge of letting the cross stand at the center of all our preaching and teaching" (p. 73). Are the two statements to be taken synonymously?

^{68.} *The Worldly Church*, 92.

^{69.} *The Worldly Church*, 8.

^{70.} *The Worldly Church*, 13.

^{71.} *The Worldly Church*, 9.

^{72.} See for example, *The Worldly Church*, 78: "True Christian worship . . . entails a 'return' to the world of the ordinary . . . to reflect God's righteousness, compassion, and justice—both in the church and in the world."



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