

THE MINISTERIAL FORUM



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Our discussion of the proposed revision of our EFCA Statement of Faith during this past year has raised the important question of hermeneutics, a question that could be phrased like this: *Would the elimination of premillennialism as a required theological position in the EFCA significantly (and detrimentally) alter the accepted hermeneutical principles now operating within our movement?*

We will be examining this question more fully at our Midwinter Ministerial Conference in January, but at a seminar at our National Conference last June, Bill Kynes, a member of the Spiritual Heritage Committee, presented an introduction to this topic to stimulate our thinking. This issue of the *Forum* contains a shortened version of that presentation.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF A STATEMENT OF FAITH

By Bill Kynes

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More than once we on the Spiritual Heritage Committee have been asked, Why don't we have an article in our Statement of Faith (SOF) addressing hermeneutics? Our response has been threefold. First, historically, it is just not done—it is simply not the normal practice to include that subject in a statement of theological essentials.

That's not really a very good reason, so we quickly go to a second reason: practically, it is very difficult to do. How can one do justice to the topic in a very few words?

But I prefer a third reason: In fact, our SOF has implicit within it a whole host of hermeneutical principles, and it, in itself, provides a hermeneutical guide for our understanding of the Bible. This is part of the function of a statement of faith.

A Hermeneutical "Key"

The early Church summarized the message of Scripture in what was called the Rule of Faith, and in the second century Bishop Irenaeus

talked about the role of this Rule of Faith in hermeneutics using an analogy from the world of art.

In those days mosaics were shipped unassembled, but they included with them a plan or key which showed the recipient how the tiles were to be put together. The Church's Rule of Faith, Irenaeus said, is like that key. Whereas the heretics arranged the Scriptures wrongly to form the picture of a dog, the Church's Rule of Faith explains how the Scriptures are to be arranged to render the portrait of the King.¹

I see our own Statement of Faith functioning this way, also, for *any hermeneutical process that does not reach the theological conclusions found in the Statement (our portrait of the gospel) is disallowed.*

The point here is that hermeneutics cannot be separated from theology—there is a two-way relationship between them. We come to our reading of Scripture with certain supposi-

tions and expectations, which are then either confirmed or challenged by our reading of Scripture. This, in turn, forms a new understanding which is then brought to the process of reading more Scripture. This constant back-and-forth relationship between the reader and the text is known as the *hermeneutical spiral*.²

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If we believe that our Statement of Faith is a faithful expression of biblical teaching, then what are the theologically grounded hermeneutical principles to

which it points? What are the ways in which the Statement of Faith helps us to know how to read the Bible? Let me suggest nine aspects of this hermeneutical "key."

¹*Adv. Haer.* 1.8.1; 1.9.4.

²Hence, the title of the well-known hermeneutical textbook authored by TEDS professor, Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd revised and expanded edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

1) Our Confidence as Hermeneutical Realists

If we are to understand the Bible as the Word of God, we must first believe there is a God who can speak there. Thus, our proposed revision in its second draft begins with God:

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The simple affirmation that “God is” makes us “hermeneutical realists,”³ that is, we believe that there is a real meaning in the Bible outside of us, independent of our interpretation and waiting to be discovered.

Hermeneutical realism is grounded theologically in the Creator-creature distinction which affirms the fundamental independence of God from his world, as well as from all human thought and experience. God exists *outside of* us as the ultimate Author of Scripture, and he speaks *to* us. We *receive* God’s revelation, we do not *create* it.

This may sound obvious, but it is denied by many today. Postmodern hermeneutics assert that meaning comes not from the author but from the reader. A text *means* what it means *to me*. The postmodern “death of the author” requires that we create our own meaning.⁴

Such hermeneutical “will to power” is nothing but idolatry—creating our own god. In contrast, we affirm that there is a God who stands outside of us and over us who has spoken to us, and we had better listen.⁵ The authority of the Scriptures follows from God’s authorship. Our theology gives us hope that God *can* speak to us, for we believe that God is *personal*, and he has created us in *his* image. This provides a theological rationale for our faith in divine-human communication.

More than that, we believe that the gospel is God’s good news, and to be good news it must be intelligible. Thus, the very notion of “gospel” requires divine communication. The intelligibility of the gospel undergirds

the Reformers’ insistence on the doctrine of the **perspicuity** or **clarity** of Scripture. God has a gospel to communicate with his people, and the Bible’s basic saving message can be understood by ordinary readers.

So our doctrine of God—God as Creator, God as the personal triune God who has a gospel to communicate, and ourselves as created in God’s image—all this gives us theological grounds for believing that when we come to the Bible, we can and must hear his voice to us there.

2) Hermeneutical Humility and Critical Realism

Our theology, however, also suggests that not everything in the Bible may be immediately obvious or clear to us. We are “critical realists” in our hermeneutics, for though we believe

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that God can communicate with us, our theological anthropology also forces us to recognize the limitations in our understanding.

For one thing, as **finite** creatures we are culturally located, occupying only one particular place in space and time. Only God is infinite. We are limited in our knowledge, for we cannot know all the aspects of language, culture and history that make for complete communication. Only God is all-knowing.

In addition, and more significantly, though we were created in God’s image, our theology asserts that we are now **sinful** and that divine image is now corrupt and in need of repair. In our sinful state, we are spiritually resistant to God’s truth, and we are liable to demonic deception. There is something about us that now hinders our understanding of God’s Word to us.

We are not so naïve as to think that we come to the Bible as neutral observers, with a blank slate, with no pre-understanding, and that we can view the Bible exactly as God views it. We now see “as in a glass darkly.” We acknowledge something of the postmodern critique. As a result, we are “critical” realists. We confess we cannot know God’s truth exhaustively, but we affirm that we can know it

adequately and truly.

What is the ground of such hermeneutical confidence? It can only come through the work of the **Holy Spirit**. As God is the *Author* seeking to communicate with us, and his text is the *Word*, supremely the Word of his Son Jesus Christ, so the Spirit is the one who comes alongside us as *readers* enabling us to understand what he has intended.⁶ I appreciate what TEDS professor Kevin Vanhoozer says about this:

The Spirit sanctifies the reader, removing pride and prejudice and creating the humility of heart and mind ready to receive something not of its own making. In short, the Spirit transforms us from being non-realists who prefer our own lies, to realists who desire to hear the Word of God. Reading in the Spirit, therefore, means letting the letter accomplish the purpose for which it was sent (Is. 55:11). . . . the Spirit is the Word’s empowering presence.⁷

So our theology of God and humanity leads us to be hermeneutical realists—God is the author who speaks to us, and we can understand him. We believe in the perspicuity of Scripture. But our theology also makes us critical realists in our hermeneutics. Because of our finitude and our sin, God’s communication with us is not always clear and plain, and we need the work of the Holy Spirit to be good readers of God’s Word.

3) Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority

We turn now to our Statement on the Bible itself:

³On this, see Kevin Vanhoozer, “‘But That’s Your Interpretation’: Realism, Reading, and Reformation,” (*Modern Reformation*, July / August, 1999), pp. 21-24. This theme is expanded in his very insightful book, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁴This is one reason that the proposed SOF begins with a statement about God.

⁵Cf. the words of the Father to the disciples referring to the transfigured Jesus (Lk. 9:35).

⁶On the role of the Spirit, see Vern Poythress, “Why Must Our Hermeneutics Be Trinitarian,” (SBJT 10.1, Spring, 2006), pp. 96-98. Also, Vanhoozer, *Meaning in This Text*.

⁷“But That’s Your Interpretation,” p. 28.

We believe that God has spoken through the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments. They are the verbally inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority that stands over every realm of human knowledge and endeavor.

The first thing we observe is simple but often overlooked—this statement affirms a biblical truth reaffirmed during the Reformation: the principle of *sola Scriptura*—the Bible alone is our authority. This means that the Bible itself must stand over all knowledge, including our knowledge of hermeneutics.

If the Bible, and the Bible alone, is our ultimate authority, we cannot devise a hermeneutical system and then impose it on the Bible. That would deny the Bible's authority over "every realm of human knowledge."

This is, in some sense, the principle that we've been operating with already—if we believe our SOF is an accurate summary of the Bible's teaching on the clear essentials of our faith, then our hermeneutics ought to flow from that teaching. Our hermeneutics can't be derived from someplace outside the Bible itself.

Dr. A. T. Olson in *This We Believe* affirmed this principle when discussing the drafting of our current SOF—"For our leaders to place any interpretation [i.e., hermeneutical system] above the Scriptures would be contrary to the entire spirit of the movement."⁸ This principle also has important implications on the way we view the Old Testament, for we must carefully observe the way the Bible interprets itself. We'll return to that in a moment, but first we will consider the hermeneutical significance of the dual nature of the Bible's authorship.

4) Human Authorship and Grammatical-Historical Method

Our doctrine of inspiration affirms that God makes use of the words of human authors to produce his Word. This means that as a "human" book, the Bible must be interpreted through grammatical-historical means to seek the intention of the human author as expressed through what he has written.

The term "grammatical-historical" is really just a fancy term for the common-sensical way that we think about interpreting any document: What did this person mean by writing these words? Interpretation involves decoding the signs that an author uses to communicate a message.

How do we do that? We begin with words, but words can mean all sorts of things. Take, for example, the word "attack." What does it mean? Is it a noun or a verb? It could refer to a military exercise or a medical condition or a position on a soccer team. We don't know. Words only have a definitive meaning in the context of a sentence—such as "The wolf went on the attack and ate the little girl." The sentence provides a context and has a grammatical structure that helps us sort out what is being said.

But sentences have meaning only within a particular setting within the context of a paragraph and of a chapter and of a book. And this raises the question of **genre**, or the kind of book it is.

Take that sentence, "The wolf went on the attack and ate the little girl." How do we take that sentence?

If I read it in our local newspaper, I would probably hesitate to go walking in the woods. But consider the difference in my reaction if that sentence was part of a story that began, "Once upon a time . . ." That expression is a literary clue that tells me that this is a fairy tale, and, knowing that genre, I now know how to understand that sentence correctly.

There are all sorts of genres—historical reports, love poems, parables, proverbs, and so on, and we interpret them differently. By using certain generic forms, authors evoke reading strategies in their audience. They send signals to their readers as to "how to take" their statements. Judgment about genre is part of the art of hermeneutics. After all, Jesus doesn't announce, "I'm telling a parable here," when he says, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jeri-

cho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. . . ." (Lk 10:30).

In addition, in reading ancient material especially, we need help with the **historical context** in which something was written. This includes the cultural assumptions and conventions that give us some clues as to how to decode the message.

All this is involved in what is called the grammatical-historical principle of interpretation. This principle is critical, for it is here that we have the central objective control over the interpretative process. The meaning of the Bible for today must begin with *and be controlled by* what the Bible meant by those who wrote it. This is where the objectivity of biblical interpretation must be found.

Grammatical-historical interpretation, in seeking the original intent of the human author, must take into account the entire range of the historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, and literary factors that help us arrive at that intention. This means that the term "**literal**" becomes a very ambiguous term. Rightly understood—and this is the way it has been understood, especially since the

Reformation—literal interpretation, or *sensus literalis* as it is called, is the same as grammatical-historical interpretation. That is, it involves a determination of the meaning of the text as the author intended it, taking into account the original historical and cultural context and literary form in which that message was given.

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The Reformers insisted upon this literal meaning, as opposed to an allegorical meaning which had often been used in the Church, because an allegorical interpretation imported ideas

⁸P. 315. But Dr. Olson continued, "However, [the SOF] did give articulation to many views already accepted and, no doubt, influenced greatly the specific terminology adopted in speaking on and writing of the last things." This apparent privileging of a particular hermeneutical tradition in the SOF does suggest a tension which we are seeking to address in the revision.

into the text from outside the Bible, distorting its meaning and denying the principle of Scripture alone as our authority.

But in using the term “literal” we must be careful not to insist upon using terms like “plain meaning” or “obvious meaning,” for the obvious question is, Plain or obvious to whom? Is it the original reader or someone reading today in his or her 21st century American context?

5) Divine Authorship and Biblical Unity

There is, however, another danger in the misuse of so-called “literal” interpretation. Individual statements in Scripture, taken literally, must be understood in their broader context as a part of the entire biblical canon.

Didn’t Satan tempt Jesus in the desert with a literal interpretation of Scripture, urging him to throw him-

self down from the pinnacle of the temple with the divine promise of protection found in Ps. 91:11,12? But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. He interpreted what is literally said in Psalm 91 by using the broader message of the Bible, and in response he quotes from Dt. 6:16 (cf. Mt. 4:6,7).

Another notable example of the misuse of biblical literalism appeared in the fourth century. A heretical priest named Arius insisted upon a literal interpretation of the Bible. Though Arius believed that Christ was highly exalted, he denied that he was eternal.

He was still a creature who had a beginning, Arius insisted, for hadn’t Paul affirmed in Col. 1:15 that Christ was “the *first born* over all creation.”

The Church’s response to Arius leads to another principle that flows from our doctrine of biblical inspiration. Not only is the Bible a human book, requiring grammatical-historical interpretation, it is also a “divine” book, requiring that we recognize its *unity*. As a book fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Bible reflects one divine mind. Therefore, we must assume that it is consistent with itself. As a consequence, *Scripture is its own best interpreter*. This principle is known as **the analogy of Scripture**.

How does this principle work? Generally, that which is clear and emphatic in Scripture is to be used to interpret what is obscure and sporadic. That is, passages which treat a doctrine in a more systematic and coherent fashion help us to understand a passage in which a doctrine may be referred to in passing.

So, for example, the eternal nature of God the Son, the Word as John calls him, is clearly taught in John 1 and Philippians 2, and these passages provide the basis for understanding what Paul says in Colossians 1 about Jesus being “the first born of creation.”⁹ Or what Paul says about justification by faith in Romans 3,4 and Galatians 2,3 helps us to understand what is said in James 2. Or his reference to “baptism for the dead” in 1 Cor. 15:29 must be understood in the light of what is taught in Romans 6.¹⁰

The principle of the unity of Scripture has been applied in another way known as the **analogy of faith**. Since Scripture has a unified message, and that central message is captured in what we call “the faith”—that is, the central creedal doctrines of our faith, then individual passages should be interpreted in a way that is harmonious with that faith.

Certainly, we must be careful that our human description of “the faith”—that is, our theological synthesis of the Bible’s message—not stand over the Bible itself. It must be tested

Individual statements in Scripture, taken literally, must be understood in their broader context as a part of the entire biblical canon.

by the Bible. As we said, there must be a dynamic relationship between the two such that our exegetical work interacts with our theological formulations,

forcing us at times to make adjustments to those formulations if the exegetical results are strong enough. But the analogy of faith is still a helpful approach as a general principle of hermeneutics. Using our proposed SOF, this principle requires, for example, that Jesus be understood as a real historical person, since he is located in history as one “crucified under Pontius Pilate.”

Because the Bible has a divine author, it has a unified message, and that calls us to seek to synthesize that message as much as we can. And that’s what theology is—an attempt to synthesize that coherent and unified message of God found in the Bible.

6) A Christological Focus

⁹The Arian controversy also illustrates that simply repeating biblical language in a statement of faith is sometimes insufficient to preserve and protect biblical truth. The Arians insisted that only biblical language be used in the creed, but the orthodox party determined that the term *homoousios*, though philosophical and not biblical in origin, was necessary to ward off the Arian heresy.

¹⁰These have been referred to in church history as *sedes doctrinae* or “a seat of doctrine” which can function as boundary markers for interpreters. cf. Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 201.

The Ministerial Forum of the Evangelical Free Church Ministerial Association

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And what is that unifying center of the Bible's message? Our proposed SOF suggests that that center is found in the glory of God revealed in the gospel—which is God's gracious purpose to save a people for himself. And that gospel, God's gospel, is supremely revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. *Thus, the unifying message of the Scripture is found in Jesus Christ.* This is why we call the Hebrew Bible the "Old Testament"—it points forward to the New Testament or covenant, which comes to us in Christ.

This principle of hermeneutics comes to us from Jesus himself, for he taught his disciples to read the Hebrew Bible in this way: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me," Jesus said, "for he wrote about me" (Jn. 5:46). "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn. 8:56). "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27).

Jesus described himself as the true temple; he was the true vine and the good Shepherd; he was the antitype of the bronze serpent in the desert; he was the source of living water once found in the desert; and he was the light of life. Jesus was the Danielic Son of man, the Davidic King, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets; he came to fulfill them.

For Paul the Apostle, Jesus Christ is at the center of everything: "all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . in [him] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 1:16,17; 2:3).

But, importantly for Paul, this faith in the resurrected Jesus as Lord of heaven and earth did not form the basis for some new Roman mystery cult, with Jesus playing the role of the dying and rising god. No, this great event did not create a *new* religion—it fulfilled an *old* one. For Paul, this gospel of Jesus Christ was the same gospel that had been believed by Abraham (Gal. 3:8), and, he claimed, what had been promised to Abraham was now being fulfilled in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20; Rom. 4:13; Gal 3:19,22).

We must now understand the Bible in a way prescribed by our Lord: it finds its fulfillment in him.

7) Progressive Revelation

This leads to a further hermeneutical principle that emerges from our Statement about Christ. We say that Jesus is "Israel's promised Messiah," which points to the fact that the Bible is one long narrative, and all its various parts participate in this one great story.¹¹ Furthermore, it implies that *the Bible must be interpreted with an eye to progressive revelation.*

There is a reason why we accept the Old Testament as God's inerrant Word, and yet we do not sacrifice animals in a temple in Jerusalem, we do not require converts to be circumcised, and we do not insist on refraining from all work on Saturday. The

Bible is structured as promise and fulfillment,¹² as Old and New Testaments, and it is crucial for our understanding of the Bible that we are aware of *where we are* in that structure. As someone put it: in interpreting the Bible, you must know what time it is.¹³

A Cluster of Contested Issues

This raises a host of hermeneutical hot potatoes, which we cannot handle here. Some will be taken up in January at our Midwinter Conference. Let me just outline a few of the issues.

The biggest controversy related to progressive revelation is the degree of continuity or discontinuity between the two testaments.¹⁴ Some theological systems, like Covenant Theology, stress continuity, while others, particularly Dispensationalism, stress discontinuity, but a whole spectrum of views lie in between.

This issue of continuity and discontinuity is especially relevant to the subject of the relationship between the Church and Israel. Particularly, how do the Old Testament promises of God to Israel find their fulfillment? Is there one people of God or are there two? Are Israel and the Church

to be kept separate, now and for eternity, or are they to be joined as one in Christ? Or is the truth somewhere in the middle?

All Evangelicals affirm that all the promises of God to Israel will be fulfilled, but they differ on how that will take place. To what extent can we say that those promises to Israel were fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ? In what sense can we say that they are fulfilled through Christ in the Church today? In what sense may they be fulfilled in a future millennial age? And in what sense may they be fulfilled in the eternal state of the new heaven and the new earth?

Again, there are differences of opinion on this subject. Amillennialists see the Church in its union with Christ as the new Israel. Some Amillennialists see a future role for ethnic

Israel, some do not, but none believe that Israel will be reconstituted as a nation. They see all the promises of God to Israel being fulfilled in Christ, in the

Church, or in the new heaven and the new earth.

Postmillennialists take a more material/physical sense for a future millennial age, and some see ethnic Israel as playing a part in that age, and some do not.

There are even differences on this subject among those of us who are Premillennialists. Some Historic Premillennialists see the Church in its union with Christ as the new Israel; some do not. Generally, Historic Premillennialists emphasize that the millennium is not a *Jewish* age, but one in which the Jews will be joined to the

The biggest controversy related to progressive revelation is the degree of continuity or discontinuity between the two testaments.

¹¹Again, cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Heresies*, 1.8.1; 1.9.4.

¹²Cf. Jesus' remark that "the law and the prophets prophesied until John . . ." (Mt. 11:13).

¹³Cf. Augustine: "Distinguish the time and you harmonize the Scriptures", cited in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Third Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 37.

¹⁴On this issue, cf. John Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988).

Church, without the reconstitution of the institutions of national Israel—especially the temple worship. But a future role for even ethnic Israel is not an essential aspect of Historic Premillennialism. They say the promises of God to Israel can be fulfilled in all these ways—in Christ, the Church, the millennium, and the new heaven and the new earth.

Those referred to as Progressive Dispensationalists see some initial fulfillment of the promises to Israel in Christ and in the Church, but they insist that in some sense Israel will be restored as a nation in the millennium.

Finally, more classical Dispensationalists emphasize that the promises are only fulfilled in the millennium when Christ assumes the Davidic throne and Israel receives the kingdom and all the blessings that go with it. Classical Dispensationalists insist that Israel is always Israel and the Church is always the Church, and the two never mix.¹⁵ Non-Dispensationalists, and even Progressive Dispensationalists to some extent, do not hold to that hermeneutical rule.

Reasons for Differences

Why such diversity of opinion on these issues? Several important and related hermeneutical issues converge at this point, and the way they are answered affects the way you look at these questions.

1) How does one understand this progress of revelation?

Must the Old Testament be understood in the light of the New? And what does that mean? Is it true, as is sometimes stated, that “the New is in the Old *concealed*, and the Old is in the New *revealed*”? Or does the use of that principle result, as some Dispensationalists complain, in a situation in which “The Old is by the New *restricted*, and the New is on the Old *inflicted*”?¹⁶

Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by an interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. If God made an unconditional promise to Israel he must fulfill it as he gave it, they say.

But a non-Dispensational eschatology forms its theology from the

explicit teaching of the NT.¹⁷ They argue that after Pentecost, when the Spirit was given to “guide [the apostles] into all truth . . . and . . . tell them what is yet to come” (Jn. 16:13), no passage in the New Testament clearly mentions the restoration of Israel as a political nation. Therefore, they say, that ought not to be a part of our eschatological expectation.

2) How can the New Testament interpret the Old?

The suggestion that the New Testament can be used to interpret the Old Testament leads to a further question: Wouldn’t that be a denial of the grammatical-historical method, which insists upon the intent of the original author as the defining location of “meaning”? How can an Old Testament text be taken to mean

something else when viewed from the perspective of the New Testament?

Great debate surrounds the various ways that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, particularly assessments of the role of

typology as a hermeneutical principle in understanding the relationship of the two testaments.

Typology must be distinguished from allegorization. As opposed to allegory, typology depends on a real historical correspondence. It is based on a faith in the providence of God to so arrange historical events such that previous events can point forward to later ones as fulfillment of one great narrative.

Typology affirms that the New Testament establishes a spiritual correspondence between people, events, and things of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ. The Old Testament sacrificial system, for example, was a type, a prefigurement, of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross (cf. the book of Hebrews). The rock from which God enabled Moses to give water to the people was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

How much should this use of typology guide our interpretation of

the Old Testament? How far can it be stretched? Opinions differ.

New Meaning to Old Texts?

Some suggest that the New Testament’s use of the Old actually gives new meaning to Old Testament passages. They speak of the fuller meaning, the *sensus plenior*, which is part of the intent of the divine author of Old Testament passages which has now been made known through new revelation in Christ. Critics argue that this would have made it impossible for Christians to seek to persuade Jews from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.¹⁸

Others simply want to say that there is no *new* meaning, but that through Christ we are now able to see what was already there in a new way.

In our discussions regarding the

proposed revision of our EFCA Statement of Faith, it is important to note that there are Evangelical Premillennialists on both sides of this argument.¹⁹

I think both sides have a

point. Jesus does rebuke his opponents for not seeing what the Scriptures said about him, and he does the same to the disciples on the road to Emmaus—“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not

¹⁵Cf. Charles Ryrie: “the basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes of God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity.” (*Dispensationalism Today*, [Chicago: Moody, 1965], p. 45).

¹⁶Cited in Bruce Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in Feinberg, *Continuity*, p. 272.

¹⁷This description of the two positions is George Ladd’s, which John Feinberg considers accurate (Feinberg, *Continuity*, p. 75).

¹⁸Cf., e.g., Acts 28:23ff.

¹⁹The two views can be represented by Walter Kaiser (e.g., “The Single Intent of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. K. S. Kantzer [Nashville: Nelson, 1978], pp. 123-41.) and Doug Moo (“The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*,” in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1986], pp. 175-211).

The hermeneutical implications of the principle of progressive revelation continues to be a hotly contested area among Evangelicals.

the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

The evidence was there for all to see—they should have seen it and understood it, but they didn't. In fact, they didn't even recognize Jesus himself. It was only as they were at the table that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Luke 24:16,31). The Old Testament was as opaque to them as the identity of the Messiah.

I find that connection significant. When Peter confesses him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, doesn't Jesus say that it was not flesh and blood that revealed that truth to Peter but his Father in heaven (Matt. 16:17)?

Is the Old Testament clear on its own, or do we need the new revelation of Christ to understand it rightly? Paul himself seems to want it both ways.²⁰ In Rom. 16: 25,26, he refers to the gospel both as a revelation of a mystery long hidden and as something now revealed "through the prophetic writings" (which I take to be a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures). In other words, it was there all the time, but only now, after the coming of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit, is it understood (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-15).

Or consider the episode in John 2 in which Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews misunderstood his meaning, and, apparently, so did the disciples, for John writes, "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed *the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken*" (Jn. 2:22).

Perhaps we could make a comparison to the Federal 9/11 Commission. Their report rebuked the FBI for not seeing the plot of Al Qaeda to blow up the World Trade Center, to which the FBI responded that it was only *after the fact* that the dots could be connected and the various parts could be put together to portray a true picture. You could probably also say that even the individual terrorists involved in their "sleeper cells" didn't know the full meaning of their actions until after the event.

"Connecting the dots" is precisely what the author of the letter to the Hebrews appears to be doing. He is finding clues within the Old Testament itself that were pointing to the new and better thing God has now done in Jesus Christ.

For example, he describes the practice of the high priest in offering his annual sacrifices for the people, and says, "The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing" (9:8). The earthly tabernacle was itself a copy, a preliminary sketch, of the heavenly one into which Christ himself entered.

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the reality themselves.

The hermeneutical implications of the principle of progressive revelation continues to be a hotly contested area among Evangelicals. But I think it is important to understand that even our current SOF which includes Premillennialism, embracing both its Dispensational and non-Dispensational varieties, does not prescribe just one answer to these questions, and within the EFCA we already have diversity on these issues.

8) Hermeneutics and the Church

Our proposed statement affirms that God's gospel is now embodied in a new community called the Church, and this suggests a final hermeneutical principle—biblical interpretation must be a communal activity. We need one another to understand the Bible rightly.

Alexander Campbell, a leader of the 19th century Restoration Movement, said, "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me."²¹ That is both wrong and naïve. When the Reformers insisted on the priesthood of all believers, it wasn't meant to make each person his or her own Pope. It was the affirmation that God is at work in us all.

Just as the four gospels, like a hologram, give us a multi-dimensional picture of Jesus, so we need the combined voices of God's people to

speak the gospel in its fullness. Again, I appreciate Kevin Vanhoozer's comment: "There is a single meaning in the text, but it is so rich that we may need the insights of a variety of individual and cultural perspectives fully to do it justice."²²

This is one of the reasons I appreciate the Free Church. Within the parameters of orthodox, Evangelical theology we can share a variety of perspectives that I think help us all come to a better understanding of the Bible in all its depth.

But not only do we need various voices from within the contemporary Church, we also need to hear the voices from the past. We need to listen to our

Christian forebears through the centuries who have wrestled with the meaning of the Bible, seeking to hear the living voice of God.²³

"Two heads are better than one," wrote C.S. Lewis, "not because either is infallible, but because they are less likely to go wrong in the same way at the same time." And voices from the past can be helpful as a control to our interpretation, preventing us from going down dangerous dead ends.

Finally, voices from the past, some of the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), can also remind us that we, together with them, are part of that same biblical story. That's why the

Biblical interpretation must be a communal activity.

²⁰On this, see D. A. Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. II: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 393-436.

²¹Cited in Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), p. 25.

²²"Interpretation," p. 27.

²³Jaroslav Pelikan, the great Church historian, understood the importance of hearing from the tradition of the past. Something is missing if it is ignored. But he also was keenly aware that the past can wrongly take on an authority all its own. Bearing in mind both of these issues he aptly stated, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

²⁴On this, cf. Robert W. Jensen, "Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 89-105.

Bible is our book—the Old and New Testaments—and why only we in the Church can truly understand it.²⁴

Conclusion: Application and the Living of the Truth

Let me conclude by saying that hermeneutics is the art and science by which we as the Church seek to understand the meaning of the Bible.²⁵ But that meaning must include an application to our lives.²⁶

Application means seeking to answer the question: “If God said and did what the text tells us he did in the

circumstances recorded, what would he say and do to us in our circumstances?”

Let’s not forget what the Bible is about. Paul says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16,17).

We haven’t understood the Bible rightly unless we allow it to do its good work in us. That’s why Lesslie Newbigin calls the Church itself a “hermeneutics of the Gospel.”²⁷

All that we believe, all that we do, is to be evaluated by the truth of the Word of God. As the Body of Christ,

we are to be the visible embodiment of the Bible’s message—God’s evangel, the gospel of Jesus Christ. May “the word of Christ dwell in us richly” (Col. 3:16). ■

²⁵Cf. the forthcoming book edited by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel).

²⁶This was the focus of the third and final meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy III (1986), from which the Chicago Statement on Biblical Application was produced. The ICBI members wisely realized that inerrancy (Summit I), hermeneutics (Summit II) and application (Summit III) are inextricably connected.

²⁷*The Gospel In A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p.222.

I’VE BEEN THINKING...

John Herman,
Director of the EFCA Pastoral Ministries

A delightful lay person in my small group asked me, “What’s hermeneutics?” I explained with an illustration so she knew how routinely we all use the principles of interpretation.

The poet wrote, “Mary had a little lamb.” What does that mean? Is Mary holding a lamb? Does Mary own a lamb? Or perhaps Mary just gave birth to a lamb. How can I know what the poet meant to say?

My friend’s husband immediately replied, “Mary can’t be a ewe who gave birth because it says later she took the lamb to school.” Principle # **1, look at the context.**

Another person in the group pointed out that Mary must be doing more than just holding onto it because it follows her “everywhere she goes”. Good insight. The verb “had” can have a deeper meaning that implies ownership level. Is that likely in this case? Principle #2, **consider the range of word usage.**

I added, “Do we know if Mary is

an actual person who had a lamb, or is the whole poem a playful set of words designed to create fun?” How could one know? It might help if we knew the circumstances under which the poet wrote about Mary. See the story behind the poem at www.zelo.com/family/nursery/index.asp for the poem’s historical setting. Principle #3, **learn the author’s purpose for writing.**

I’ve been thinking. How familiar are you with the hermeneutical principles embraced by those who hold to theological positions different than your own? The 2007 Midwinter Ministerial discussion will help you find out. ■

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