

SOME PROBLEMS IN HERMENEUTICS FOR CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALS¹

J. Julius Scott, Jr.*

For many evangelical Christians, hermeneutics is an area whose importance is granted but whose nature and content is little understood. Hermeneutics² has traditionally been defined as that discipline concerned with the identification and explication of rules or principles,³ procedures and techniques for interpreting a body of literature.⁴ In religious studies it is distinguished on the one hand from exegesis, the application of principles for interpretation to a particular Biblical passage in order to ascertain its meaning, and on the other from Biblical theology, which seeks to organize the teachings of all of the passages in the Scriptures or in a particular part of them into a coherent whole.

The works of Friedrich Schleiermacher⁵ (d. 1834), Wilhelm Dilthey⁶ (d. 1911)

*Julius Scott is professor of Bible and theology at Wheaton College Graduate School.

¹This essay is dedicated to William Childs Robinson, Sr., professor emeritus of ecclesiastical history, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia—teacher, counselor and friend, who by word and example taught the meaning of reverent scholarship.

²The term "hermeneutics" comes from the name "Hermes." In Greek mythology Hermes was the herald, messenger and, hence, interpreter of the gods. In Greek *hermēneūō* usually means to explain, expound or interpret.

³On principles rather than rules see A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 19.

⁴I know of no universally accepted list of steps in traditional hermeneutics. The discipline is frequently divided into "general hermeneutics"—rules pertaining to the interpretation of the Bible as a whole—and "special hermeneutics"—procedures for dealing with specific parts of the Bible.

A sampling of topics covered in traditional hermeneutics includes the following: (1) determination of the text (textual criticism); (2) the identity of the author, recipients, date, purpose, sources, and any special problems associated with the writing (Biblical introduction); (3) the phenomena of language, literary types, and the literary context and setting of the passage under consideration; (4) the facts and possible influences of such elements of the physical setting as geography, history, culture, and socio-political relationships; (5) the content of the passage (facts and plain, logical meaning); and (6) special factors, such as the spiritual, which many Christians believe to be operative behind and through the text.

Good illustrations of this basic approach include M. B. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan [1883]); L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950); A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*; B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3rd rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970). Less acceptable to evangelicals but a worthwhile contribution to the survey of hermeneutics is J. D. Smart, *The Interpretation of the Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); cf. his *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

⁵It is significant that the first English translation of one of Schleiermacher's works on hermeneutics has just appeared: *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (ed. H. Kimmerle, trans. J. Duke and J. Forstman; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977).

⁶W. Dilthey, *The Essence of Philosophy* (trans. S. A. Emery and W. T. Emery; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954); *Pattern and Meaning in History* (ed. and intro. by H. P. Rickman; New York: Harper, 1962).

and, more recently, Hans-Georg Gadamer⁷ introduced the elements of subjectivity and relativism (variously defined) into the discussions of hermeneutical theory in general.⁸ They opened the gates to a new current in the hermeneutical stream, one well illustrated by the existential interpretative objectives and methods of Rudolf Bultmann,⁹ the practitioners of the "New Hermeneutic,"¹⁰ and others.¹¹ This modern breed of interpreters tends to relegate the quest for the original author's meaning to a secondary place, at best, in favor of an interpretation directed toward the immediate, contemporary situation and/or to the attainment of authentic personhood by the interpreter.¹²

The eddies of this current have touched virtually every field concerned with understanding written materials. University of Virginia English professor E. D. Hirsche, Jr., describes the resulting crisis as one centered on the question of validity—the possibility and desirability of obtaining a consensus of the meaning of a given document. He demonstrates the breadth of the crisis:

The problem [of validity] has been neglected in recent years largely because the very conception of absolutely valid interpretation has come to be regarded with profound skepticism. In law, for example, a so-called pragmatism prevails which holds that the meaning of a law is what present judges say is the meaning. Similarly, in

⁷H. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965²), cited here from D. P. Fuller, "Hermeneutic" (mimeographed text; Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1976⁴); cf. *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (trans. D. E. Linge; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

⁸See R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969); cf. A. N. Wilder, "New Testament Hermeneutics Today," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper* (ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder; London: SCM, 1962) 38 ff.; H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁹R. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (ed. H. W. Bartsch, trans. R. H. Fuller; New York: Harper, 1961) 1 ff.; "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?," in *Existence and Faith* (ed. S. Ogden; New York: Meridian, 1960) 291 ff.; "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (trans. J. Grier; London: SCM, 1955) 238 ff. Cf. R. C. Roberts, *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology: A Critical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 125 ff.

¹⁰J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, eds., *The New Hermeneutic*, Vol. II of *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper, 1964); P. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

¹¹Cf. J. A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics," *IBDSup* 402 ff.; E. Achtemeier, "Interpretation, History of of: I. Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Christian," *IDBSup* 455 ff.; K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *IDB*, A-D, 425 ff.; J. Barr, *The Bible and the Modern World* (New York: Harper, 1973).

Another method, closely aligned with the existentially influenced ones already mentioned, is "word-object" theology, which assumes that the means of communication actually becomes a part of that which is communicated and shares in the result. Cf. G. Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (trans. R. A. Wilson; London: Collins, 1973).

¹²Cf. the remark by A. C. Thiselton: "The final goal of hermeneutics, according to Fuchs, is not so much that the interpreter should interpret the text, as that the text should interpret him," in "Explain," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1. 583 f. Many contemporary interpreters profess to be more concerned to interpret the world "in front of the text" rather than that "behind" it.

biblical exegesis, Bultmannians hold that the meaning of the Bible is a new revelation to each succeeding generation. In literary theory the most familiar form of the analogous doctrine holds that the meaning of a literary text is "what it means to us today."¹³

For most of this century American evangelicals have stood aloof from the discussions and controversies surrounding hermeneutics.¹⁴ They were content to transmit and practice the theories and techniques of the past with minimal evaluation or modification. But since the mid-1950s conservative scholars, in increasing numbers, have been drawn into the fray.¹⁵

Some, emerging from the cocoon that shielded them from the theories and pronouncements of the greater theological world, have sought to come to grips with the subjective and/or existential concerns of contemporary interpretation theory. Others, sensing a renewed imperative to speak meaningfully to the moral and social as well as spiritual problems of their contemporaries, seek a Biblical basis for so doing. For still others, hermeneutics has gained a prominent place in the discussion of the numerous issues rising from the "spirit of the times." Hence in the western world hermeneutics is being asked for help in clarifying the Biblical view of such concerns as the role of women in the Church and some features of the neo-charismatic movement, of nontraditional forms of church order and worship, and of Christian attitudes toward alternate life styles that might include communal living, trial or open marriages, or homosexuality by those professing to be Christians. Missiologists and third-world Christian thinkers seek hermeneutical principles to guide in determining the Christian's attitudes and actions toward oppressive societies, religio-cultural practices rooted in non-Christian religions, and the "contextualization" of theology.

Many evangelicals feel trapped. On the one hand, they are determined to remain faithful to the principles for the literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of the Scriptures as the objective, authoritative, unchanging Word of God. On the other hand, they wrestle with the seldom-voiced conviction that the rules for interpretation, especially the traditional ones, have proven ineffective in meaningfully applying Biblical revelation to the complex needs of modern man and societies.

¹³E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) viii; cf. *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University Press, 1976).

¹⁴Suspicion toward some evangelicals engaging in hermeneutical investigations by other evangelicals is illustrated by J. B. Payne, "Hermeneutics is a Cloak for the Denial of Scripture," *BETS* 3 (Fall 1960) 93 ff.

¹⁵It is difficult to pinpoint the cause of this renewed concern among evangelicals. Certainly it is a by-product of the developments described by R. H. Nash in the opening chapters of *The New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963).

The names of C. F. H. Henry and E. J. Carnell loom large in the shifting attitudes among evangelicals at mid-century. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) verbalized the concerns of many of his fellow evangelicals (for an assessment of the place of Henry see L. D. Sharp, "Carl Henry: Neo-Evangelical Theologian," unpublished D.Min. Thesis, Vanderbilt Divinity School, 1972, esp. pp. 28 ff. and 84 ff.). Carnell also provided intellectual leadership for the evangelical renewal (cf. his *The Case for Biblical Christianity* [ed. R. H. Nash; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969]). Carnell's chapter on "Hermeneutics," however, in *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) is disappointing in its uncritical assumption of the sufficiency of traditional procedures.

This essay seeks to describe and comment on some of the hermeneutical issues I believe evangelicals must honestly face. It eschews attempts at creativity or comprehensiveness in hopes of enlisting some from its audience for renewed efforts in the study of hermeneutics.

I. THE HERMENEUTICAL TASK

The Biblical interpreter faces problems posed by a series of gaps. The first separates our world from that of the writers. Even after translations have lowered the linguistic barrier, the modern reader faces historical situations, social institutions, cultural practices and thought patterns vastly different from his own. He must familiarize himself with these before the words, phrases and thoughts of the Bible can be accurately understood. For, to the degree made possible by historical study, the interpreter must seek to enter the frame of reference of the original readers. Only in this way can he bridge the gap and honestly begin to grapple with what the writer intended and begin to approach what the first readers understood.

For Christians, bridging this gap requires also seeking the theological meaning of the text. To know of journeys, covenants, battles, apostles, laws and letters of the past is not enough. The evangelical believes these events, institutions and preachments to be those through which God revealed his person and will, made salvation available, entered into relationship with man, and provided instructions and examples for faith and life. And so, as the student walks through the roads and past the monuments of the days and men gone by, he must seek to discern what they told about God, man and their relationship.

Apprehension of the message of the Bible in its original setting leads to the necessity of bridging the second gap. The Word of God cannot be allowed to remain an antiquarian or academic curiosity in the world of the ancient Near East. If it is to be redeemingly significant and to have maximum practical impact it must be brought back across the gap separating its world from ours. It must be pointedly applied to men and conditions in our age of technological advance, social complexities and ideological sophistication.

These first two gaps force upon the student of Scripture the necessity, as C. H. Dodd put it, of journeying *There and Back Again*.¹⁶ He says:

The ideal interpreter should be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, has felt its whole strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came, and who will then return into our world, and give to the truth he has discovered a body out of the stuff of our own thought.¹⁷

But there remains yet another gap, perhaps the most difficult of all. It is the gap between the attainment of knowledge and what many contemporary interpreters call "understanding." Schleiermacher and his train, although going to dangerous extremes, have done noble service in emphasizing the subjective side

¹⁶The title of Dodd's collection of stories for children (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932).

¹⁷C. H. Dodd, *The Present Task in New Testament Studies* (an inaugural lecture delivered in the Divinity School, 2 June 1936; Cambridge: University Press, 1936), quoted here from J. A. T. Robinson, "Theologians of our Time: XII. C. H. Dodd," *Exp Tim* 75 (1964) 102.

of interpretation. Somehow the divine message must sink deep into the hearer, become a part of him, and thus serve as the channel originating from without through which God effects inner regeneration and change.

Hermeneutical rules, the traditional interpretative procedures, are most effective in bridging the first gap—in getting us “there,” into the world of the Bible. But their effectiveness becomes progressively weaker on the journey “back again,” as the voyager attempts to bring his precious cargo across gaps two and three.

II. SOME ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

A survey of the history of interpretation reveals several alternatives that have been employed for the hermeneutical task.¹⁸ The first seeks, through use of allegory, typology or similar techniques, to translate the text into symbols that permit free adaptation without regard to historical or cultural situations. It disregards the intent of the author and the historical-cultural situation of both the original and modern readers. It seeks to discover timeless, spiritual truths that rise above the conditioning effects of time and place. But proponents of this approach have no real guides or controls to protect them from reading their own notions into the text and then claiming divine authority for those ideas.

A second alternative sees in the Bible concern for attaining ever more refined religious insights with increasingly higher levels of ethics. It regards the Biblical record as either the account of an ongoing developmental process (religious evolution) or as the portrayal of the ideal and goal for such a process. With this approach, old liberalism sought to bridge the gap between the ancient and modern worlds by, in effect, attempting to force the modern world and its categories back into their own materialistic, antisupernaturalistic reinterpretation of Biblical times.

The opposite extreme is illustrated by interpreters who seek to drag the Biblical world into the present. They make no attempt to find modern equivalents or translations. They proceed as if convinced that revelation not only occurred but is limited to a particular culture, thought pattern, social order and life style. These, they assume, must be recreated in every age. The hermeneutical task is complete when the results of descriptive exegesis are “dumped”¹⁹ into the modern scene.

Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann are illustrative of interpreters who undertake a thoroughgoing transformation of the concepts of the Bible into modern terms. They believe that history is mute as far as theological meaning is concerned and that nothing in the Bible is normative. They seek some connecting link other than history or religious doctrine between Biblical and modern times. Hence for them an analysis of “being” and human self-understanding become the possible focuses of Biblical research.

Many observers from outside the evangelical camp seem to think that a majority of conservative interpreters are committed to a semihistorical translation of

¹⁸Some of the following material has been summarized from K. Stendahl, “Biblical Theology,” pp. 427 ff.

¹⁹Stendahl's term.

Biblical data into the modern world. This approach seeks to take seriously the historical nature of revelation, the Bible as the record of the acts of God in history, the proclamation of the early Church (*kērygma*) as the declaration of these acts and their meaning which shares in the creative power of the acts themselves. Yet it seems to assume that sacred history has stopped, that God is the One who *did* act in Biblical history; but now that the canon is closed there has come a change in the divine means of dealing with man. Hence this approach faces the constant danger of scholasticism and the almost unsolvable problem of how to understand and establish a necessary connection between historical Biblical truth and the ongoing, never-ending activity of God.²⁰

The approach that seems to be most popular today within the mainstream of theological thought looks to the actual history of the Church to bridge the gap by representing the still ongoing sacred history of God's people. Revelation, it is held, continues, and the Bible is but the initial part of this continuing stream. The history and self-understanding of God's people in the past is the blueprint for

the Christian experience as a life by the fruits of God's acts in Jesus Christ, rather than as a faith according to concepts deduced from the teachings of the prophets, Jesus, and Paul regarding God's acts. It would exercise some of the same freedom which Paul's and the other NT letters do when they refrain from any nostalgic attempt to play Galilee into their theology by transforming the teachings of Jesus' earthly ministry into a system of theology and ethics. It would recognize that God is still the God who acts in history when he leads his church into new lands and new cultures and new areas of concern. A theology which retains history as a theologically charged category finds in its ecclesiology the overarching principles of interpretation and meaning. It does not permit its ecclesiology to be transferred into the second last chapter in its systematic works, followed by that of an equally inactivated eschatology.²¹

For the evangelical such an interpretative stance is untenable. It denies to the Bible the place of necessarily normative authority. It endangers admitting the old specters of relativism and evolution under the guise of process thought or some similar view with a relativistic epistemology. It appears to establish experience, the experience of the Church as a corporate body, as the primary authority. Students of Church history will greet such a proposal with Luther's statement at Worms ringing in their ears. Reflecting on the past and present evidences of ecclesiastical fallibility evidenced by self-serving and pragmatic decisions, misconduct and false teachings, the Reformer affirmed, "I believe neither Popes nor councils alone; it is evident they have often erred and contradicted themselves. I

²⁰While the weaknesses and dangers usually noted in this position are real enough, it seems to me that much of the criticism of it is based on misconception and false assumption. For example, belief that God's self-revelation and the historical provision of salvation was completed in Jesus Christ and that the canon is closed does not necessarily imply rejection of belief in the continuing activity of God in history or that sacred history has ended. I, for one, would want to affirm that the same God who revealed himself and acted in the events and records of the Bible continues, though his Word and Spirit, to be immediately involved in the affairs of men and nations. The persistent and firm expectation of evangelicals in the future return of Christ, the final judgment, and the consummation of God's redemptive purpose is proof enough of their commitment to the continuing character of sacred history. Furthermore, although the potentials for scholasticism or lack of concern for the contemporary implications of Biblical truth are present and have become realities in some instances, it is by no means certain that proponents of this fifth alternative will inevitably adopt one or both of these stances.

²¹K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," p. 428.

am conquered by the Holy Scriptures . . . and my conscience is bound by the word of God."²²

The evangelical who seeks to bridge all the interpretative gaps may see value in each of these alternatives but will find none completely satisfactory. He must still seek a framework for translating the normative, authoritative message of the Bible for the modern world without doing violence to its once-for-all character. He must beware of the pitfalls of excessive objectivity or subjectivity; he must maintain a balance between the historical and conceptual content of revelation and its personal and relevant application.

III. SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETATION

In seeking to delineate hermeneutical theories appropriate for evangelicals, I suggest that interpreters be prepared to keep in view *both* the world *behind* the Biblical text (the situation in which it was written) and that *in front of* it (the one in which the interpreter lives). But—and I view this as essential—the former must control the conclusions for the latter.

Thus I believe traditional hermeneutical procedures to be both a valid and necessary initial part of the interpretative process. They appear ineffective only when applied superficially and without regard for their inherent limitations. For this reason there are several of the traditional steps that I believe must be given even more careful attention than they have been given in the past.

First, care must be taken to assure that a particular part of the Bible is genuinely interpreted in view of the whole. This is easier said than done. It requires the interpreter to maintain an overall view of the Biblical data, including both the broad sweep of the historical outlines of the OT and NT and also of the doctrinal framework of the Bible, the distinctives of the faith. The interpreter should also be able to profit from lessons drawn from at least a survey knowledge of the experience of Christians depicted by Church history. Such a perspective is a rare part of the equipment of most lay Christians and of far too many pastors and leaders. Still, I believe it is within the reach of most and an essential goal for which all serious Bible students should strive.²³

Second, we must take more seriously the implications for interpretation of the nature of the Biblical world. The twentieth century has seen an explosion of new information about life in those times and areas. Today we probably have the potential for a more complete knowledge of Biblical times than has been available at any point since their close. This information²⁴ must be fully utilized. The in-

²²Quoted here from P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910²; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1953), 7. 304.

²³If this assumption is correct it contains broad implications for the goals for which individuals should strive in personal Christian development, for planners of Christian education curricula and programs, and for general education requirements for Christian colleges and Bible schools.

²⁴General summaries of the historical events, cultures, institutions, and broad lines of thought of the ancients are readily available. A study of the ancient Near East and of classical Greece and Rome adds much to the background information of the Bible reader. I am particularly concerned about the lack of use made by most evangelical scholars of the stores of information available in the documents that have come to light from ancient Egypt, Canaan, Syria, Assyria, Babylonia and Persia. Also, students of the NT are much the poorer for neglecting the Jewish apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and other documents of intertestamental Judaism (such as the Dead Sea scrolls).

terpreter needs not only awareness of the events, institutions and customs of the past, but also of its tensions, thought forms, expectations, fears and cultural diversity.

Finally, greater care must also be taken to recognize the diverse character and implications of the different literary genres of Scripture. Evangelical zeal for literal interpretation has too often resulted in running roughshod over those literary forms for which literal interpretation is inappropriate. The problem is compounded since some Biblical genres, such as Hebrew poetry, wisdom literature and apocalyptic, are strange to western readers. Contemporary studies are also suggesting that some forms, such as gospel and epistle, may actually be more complex than has been realized previously. Evangelicals have lagged far behind in the study of Biblical genres.²⁵ More needs to be done to uncover the intricacies of the various forms. Serious interpreters must be willing to pay the price necessary to gain familiarity with the distinctive features of the various genres and also to acquire that skill in handling them which comes only through meeting these forms in a variety of contexts, both outside as well as within the canon.

The aim of interpreting the text in its original setting must be to learn from it what it tells about God, how he views things, what eternal principles are operative in a given situation, and how they were applied by Spirit-inspired men. With this type of knowledge the interpreter must journey "back again" to represent the same God and to apply the same principles to the different situations and cultures of the modern world.

The interpreter, then, must consider whether all Biblical directives are of the same sort. There is disagreement on this point. There are some who insist that all are to be taken literally and are normative for all situations, while others assume that all are cultural and can only be applied to contemporary situations after they have been reinterpreted. I believe there are in Scripture both normative commands and culturally conditioned injunctions and that part of the interpreter's responsibility is to determine to which category a particular imperative or admonition belongs.

If this is so, then an urgent task for hermeneutics is to establish guidelines for making this distinction. Very little has been done in this area, and those attempts that have been made are usually directed toward a particular problem.²⁶ I do not claim to have the final solution for this problem, but I offer the following suggestions.

First, the interpreter must deal thoroughly and honestly with the text. He must faithfully follow the principles for grammatical-historical exegesis in order to carefully and painstakingly ascertain the meaning of the passage in its original

²⁵But see several fine articles on this subject in S. J. Schultz and M. A. Inch, eds., *Interpreting the Word of God: Festschrift in Honor of Steven Barabas* (Chicago: Moody, 1976); see esp. G. Fee, "The Genre of New Testament Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," in this volume. A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, does a better job than most in surveying the basic features of the more important Biblical genres.

²⁶Cf. articles dealing with the question of the role of women in the Church such as K. Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics* (trans. E. T. Sander; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 7 ff; G. W. Knight, "The Role Relation of Man and Woman and the Teaching/Ruling in the Church," *JETS* 18 (Spring 1975) 81 ff.; G. R. Osborne, "Hermeneutics and Women in the Church," *JETS* 20 (December 1977) 337 ff. Note that these writers, although all seeking sound hermeneutical principles, come to differing conclusions.

setting. He must focus on (1) its major message and (2) the principles operative behind the text. Search must be made to determine if there are (3) unique conditions or circumstances present in either the general socio-cultural setting or in the group addressed that required the author to make specialized statements or to give particularized directives that should not be regarded as universally applicable in their present form.

Some texts will contain material that is obviously to be regarded as abiding truths, principles and commands (e.g., the ten commandments, "you are all one in Christ Jesus," etc.). Other statements are more or less clearly situationally or culturally conditioned ("Get Mark and bring him with you," 2 Tim 4:11; "greet one another with a holy kiss," Rom 16:16). But there will also be some statements that are not so easily classified.

In less-than-obvious situations the interpreter must seek evidence in the text to indicate the type of material present. Consideration of the answers to several questions may help in indicating the appropriate classification. Is this passage dealing with moral and theological subjects or with nonmoral and nontheological topics? Is the inspired writer issuing precise commands or directives, or is the passage an example of "case law"—the application of assumed, unstated laws or principles to a given circumstance? Are there principles stated explicitly elsewhere in Scripture that are here applied specifically? How are the same or almost identical situations treated elsewhere in Scripture? Is there any hint that the author is answering questions, dealing with localized customs, or facing a particularized situation? Are there other indicators of the presence of historically or situationally controlled materials?

What if it can be determined that certain statements are directed to a specialized setting? These must not be set aside or ignored, for "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable" (2 Tim 3:16). At the same time violence must not be done to the intent of the passage by applying it literally and legalistically to circumstances disharmonious with those to which it was originally addressed. The interpreter must identify the moral, theological and spiritual principles with which the author is working. He must also clarify for himself the methodology²⁷ employed by the writer. These principles and methods will become the basis for the interpreter's understanding of God's message to related situations in the modern world.

Of course this means that the interpreter must have a thorough knowledge of his own world.²⁸ He must be able to see through the phenomena of modern life and society to the real issues and principles that underlie them. He must be able to discern both the equivalents and the differences between the conditions and situations of the Biblical and modern worlds. It is only from such a perspective that the interpreter can develop the sensitivity needed to attempt to transfer the Word of God from one time and culture to another.

In making this transfer the interpreter must do so with a firm resolve to be

²⁷Cf. studies by F. F. Bruce, W. D. Davies, E. E. Ellis, R. T. France, R. Longenecker and others showing the use made by NT writers of such Jewish interpretive methods as rabbinic interpretation, peshet, allegory, etc.

²⁸Note the example of Ezekiel who, having been sent to the captives by the river Chebar, before beginning to deliver God's message, "sat where they sat" (Ezek 3:15, *KJV*).

faithful to the statements and intent of the Word of God. He must have a clear understanding of the distinctives of the Christian faith and such a commitment to them that he will never permit compromise. As he works from a thorough grounding in the data of both the Biblical and modern periods and with some understanding of how the Biblical writers themselves applied God's message to different situations, he should begin by clarifying and announcing the principles involved and then move to the specific application of them.

As the interpreter seeks to apply God's timeless word to modern men, he must beware of the extremes of either relativism or legalism. He must resist the temptation to be overzealous in making the gospel palatable or attractive rather than simply relevant. There is an unavoidable offense in the gospel.²⁹ In matters of disagreement over what in Scripture is abiding principle and what is culturally conditioned, excessive dogmatism must be tempered by submission to a command all acknowledge as ever-relevant: "We should love one another" (1 John 3:16).

IV. CONCLUSION

Bernard Ramm refers to hermeneutics as an art as well as a science.³⁰ I believe it was also he who likened the task of the interpreter to that of a bilingual translator.³¹ Let me expand upon this suggestion. The translator must be thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary, idioms, syntax and grammar as well as with the circumstances that make a linguistic unit appropriate in both of the languages in which he is working. But translation involves more than a mechanical, automatic process. From his knowledge and experience the translator must make choices based on his subjective assessment of what is said and meant in one language and how it should be transferred into the second. Here is the art, the subjective, the personal element. But the conscientious translator studies continually the languages and customs, seeks constantly to develop and improve himself, in order to give the subjective the maximum with which to work and thus minimize the chance for error in this part of the translation process.

The Biblical interpreter is a sort of bicultural translator. He is charged with taking information originally conveyed in the linguistic, cultural and thought forms of the Biblical world and making them understandable and meaningful to his contemporaries. To know that other world he must skillfully employ the rules and principles for interpretation. Yet the actual act of making the transfer of meaning from the one world to the other involves also a subjective element; something inexplicable takes place within the person of the translator-interpreter. This is the art of interpretation. It cannot ultimately be governed by rules or prescribed procedures. Its accuracy depends upon that "certain something" within the translator-interpreter himself.

²⁹History is replete with examples of the dangers or extremes in assimilating the gospel to a particular culture. Excesses in the westernization or Americanization of Christianity is a case in point. Minority and third-world groups who are legitimately seeking their own theological emphases and expressions would do well to benefit from the regrettable past instances of going too far in avoiding the offensive distinctives of Christianity.

³⁰B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 1.

³¹I believe I found this suggestion in Ramm but cannot now locate the precise reference.

Other than the integrity of the individual, the major safeguard or control within this subjective phase lies in the quality of the preparation, knowledge and expertise of the translator-interpreter. As his familiarity with the objective data of his discipline increases, the possibility of error in the subjective side of his task decreases. Thus his growth in his knowledge of and skills in handling the facts, thoughts, feelings and forms of the two worlds must always continue in order to maximize the accuracy of his work.

And accuracy, although not always completely possible, is the goal of the translator-interpreter. His concern must not be for personal reputation or pride, but for truth—God's truth. Thus he engages in revision and seeks criticism and correction. With Augustine he affirms, "The lover of truth need fear no man's censure."³²

Finally, but foremost, the interpreter of Scripture is not alone. Our Lord promised the presence of his Spirit to "guide into all truth" (John 16:13). The interpreter must use the best data, techniques and procedures available. He must also seek the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit and be open and submissive to him. The interpreter-translator thus approaches his task with the knowledge that he is but an instrument through which God works. For, as Joseph said to Pharaoh's imprisoned officers, "interpretations belong to God" (Gen 40:8).³³

³²*Retractions.*

³³I am indebted to my colleague, John A. Gration, for reading and making helpful comments on this manuscript. The opinions herein stated remain solely my own responsibility.