

REDRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN HERMENEUTICS AND APPLICATION

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Bernard Ramm foresaw the hermeneutical problem among evangelicals that would arise through the advent of the New Hermeneutic. Hermeneutical theorists have departed from grammatico-historical principles and embraced the subjectivism of the New Hermeneutic. They are recommending a system that incorporates the step of application into the hermeneutical process, thereby confusing definitions of hermeneutics, exegesis, meaning, and interpretation. Dangers that the confusion brings include those of encouraging a man-centered interpretation, allowing cultural application to change meaning, and advocating a reader-response type of interpretation as well as others. To overcome those dangers, interpreters must be sure of their goal, determine what is normative, develop doctrine, and put into practice the lessons dictated by the meaning of a passage. The only way to achieve this is to redraw the line between hermeneutics and exegesis.

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As a pastor, it is important to me for my flock to be able to understand God's Word and apply it to their lives. Therefore, I am greatly excited over the prospect of teaching a class on hermeneutics to our church members. However, choosing a textbook for the course is a challenge. The difficulty is not the nonavailability of books on the subject, but the discovery that most recent treatments of the subject are promoting new philosophies and methods of interpretation.

My training grounded me in the idea that the disciplines of hermeneutics and application are separate from each other. Hermeneutics is the set of rules for biblical interpretation, and application is the practical implementation of those meanings yielded by interpretation to shape human lives. Application as I learned it has well-defined limits, being controlled by the meanings produced through use of hermeneutical

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principles. However, recent trends in biblical interpretation among evangelicals are obscuring the line between hermeneutics and application, making accurate interpretation and valid application difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

The purpose of this essay is to isolate one area of change among current trends in order to highlight a significant shift in modern hermeneutics. The discussion will focus on how application relates to hermeneutics. First, attention will focus on how new hermeneutical theories in the past thirty years promote merging contemporary application with hermeneutics and sometimes allowing it to become the controlling factor in interpretation. Second, the following will develop a comparison between these new theories and the traditional role of application in relation to hermeneutics. Third, the essay will survey recent works on hermeneutics to see how they relate to this comparison. Then will come an evaluation of these new proposals. Finally, the essay will close with a proposal for restating the relationship of application to hermeneutics.

ISOLATING A NEW HERMENEUTICAL THEORY

Bernard Ramm did not overstate the case in 1970 when he cautioned readers of his *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* that "a student of hermeneutics of the present faces two very cumbersome [sic] problems":² too many books and the new hermeneutic.

Too Many Books

The first problem Ramm addressed was the simple existence of more literature on the subject than any person could possibly read. Add twenty-five years and imagine the magnitude of today's proliferation. In fact, in the last six years at least ten major works on hermeneutics have hit the shelves of bookstores in this country.³ Add to this two multi-volume

²Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) vii.

³E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics, An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); R. B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991); W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation, An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991); G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral, A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991); Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992); W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993); G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Moisés Silva and Walter C. Kaiser, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand, A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994).

series in process of production currently⁴ and one puzzled by this flood of new helps might ask the question, "Has the Church Misread the Bible?"⁵ In other words, has earlier interpretation been so bad that Christians need new instructions on how to interpret? A further problem confronts anyone seeking to locate a definitive work on the subject: as books have multiplied, so has the amount of disagreement regarding rules, disciplines, and even definitions.

The New Hermeneutic

The second cumbersome problem that Ramm warned about was the introduction of the "New Hermeneutic" based on the theories of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. The importance of this for hermeneutics is that it reversed the whole concept of interpretation.

Historically, hermeneutics included various rules for interpreting ancient documents.⁶ So biblical hermeneutics listed the special rules for interpreting the Holy Scriptures. Traditionally, those rules have been historical-grammatical principles, but for the advocates of *hermeneutic* (notice the singular), interpretation "now means how the existent (the *Dasein*—Heidegger's existential word for person) sees or understands his own world and experience and sets this out in speech."⁷ In other words, when one reads the Scriptures, it is not simply a scientific study of what God has revealed, but the word speaks brand new thoughts as a "language-event."⁸

Bultmann believed the Bible to be unscientific and non-historical,⁹ and saw its concepts not as divine revelation, but as borrowed from

⁴They are *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, edited by Moisés Silva and published by Zondervan and *Guides to New Testament Exegesis*, edited by Scot McKnight and published by Baker.

⁵The title of the first volume in the Zondervan series *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, i.e., Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

⁶Even Bultmann concedes this point in his essay, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays: Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM, 1955) 235.

⁷Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 91.

⁸Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons, New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 356.

⁹Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, by Schubert M. Ogden, ed. and trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 3; idem, *Jesus and the Word*, Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntness Lanteno, trans. (New York: Scribner's, 1958) 8-11; idem, *Faith and Understanding*, Robert W. Funk, ed., Louise Pettibone Smith, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 247-52; idem, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, John Marsh, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 244-45.

contemporary religion or philosophy.¹⁰ Therefore, he encouraged a demythologizing of the Bible because of its mythological nature.¹¹ He used Form Criticism to recognize the culturally conditioned state of the Scriptures. Clearly, revelation for Bultmann was an existential encounter, not the receiving of Scripture.¹² So, Scripture for him was only a record that such encounters took place. Following Bultmann, those influenced by the New Hermeneutic have emphasized the role of the interpreter in understanding the text more deeply and creatively, not to find the historical-grammatical meaning, but to find an existential application. This has led theorists such as Fuchs and Ebeling to be more concerned about gaining an understanding through the medium of the words of the text than about understanding the language of the text. The text is simply an aid in this endeavor.¹³

The hazard is that modern-day hermeneutical theoreticians who see merit in this perspective have combined hermeneutics and hermeneutic to arrive at a new approach. It is two-sided and involves what they call the "fusion of horizons."¹⁴ Thiselton describes this "balanced" approach as first using critical methods (notice not historical-grammatical) and then critically testing one's understanding of the text,¹⁵ which involves letting the text interpret the interpreter.

An examination of the writings of many present-day evangelicals leads to the conclusion that the method has brought somewhat of an enlightenment. They emphasize the need to understand the interpreter's horizon, and highlight the view that every interpreter comes to the text with certain biases and presuppositions as though making a new discovery.

However, this suggestion deserves three responses. First, the history of hermeneutics itself makes crystal clear that interpreters of all time periods have been aware of the problem of preunderstanding. The tradition of the Reformation has established the principle that the interpreter must place himself under the Word,¹⁶ and studies on hermeneutics in the last century contain sections on understanding the

¹⁰Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* 2; idem, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* 231.

¹¹Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* 8-20.

¹²Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, Schubert M. Ogden, trans. (New York: World, 1960) 58-60.

¹³Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, Andrew Scobie, trans. (London: SCM, 1964) 211; Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, James W. Leitch, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 318.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 355.

errors of historical schools,¹⁷ presuppositions needed in interpretation, and guarding against personal bias.¹⁸ So why credit neo-orthodox thinkers with this supposed novelty?

Second, one can learn little or nothing from interpreters of a New Hermeneutic persuasion. They do not intend to lead the interpreter into a better understanding of the authorial intention of the biblical writer as God revealed Himself to him. They are advocating a new philosophy based on its own theory of knowledge. It is an epistemology they have largely succeeded in establishing as the basis for integrating university liberal arts curricula.¹⁹ Theirs is the school of thought that has set out to find the historical Jesus, believing that the Scriptures are elaborations of faith which include historical and factual errors.²⁰ Their existential view of language causes radical departures from traditional exegesis.²¹

In light of this, finally, to skim this basic sense of pre-understanding off the top of the New Hermeneutic thought is akin to having one's lunch out of a trash receptacle. It is as difficult to make positive use of "hermeneutic" without embracing the use of its Scripture-destroying theories as it is to eat from putrid garbage without experiencing sickening and possibly fatal results.

Many recent works have incorporated aspects of these developments into their views of hermeneutics. Most dangerous has been the inclusion of the undue emphasis on the role of the interpreter's horizon. Have these recent works by evangelicals come to the rescue to champion Ramm's cause, or have they not failed to heed his caution and fallen prey to the insidious nature of the post-Bultmannian movement?

TRADITIONAL HERMENEUTICS

The benchmark to measure deviations in the relationship of application to hermeneutics is the way they have related to one another traditionally. Bernard Ramm's discussion of hermeneutics itself in *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* clearly distinguishes application—sometimes called "significance" or "relevance"—from hermeneutics or interpretation when he writes, "Interpretation is one, application is

¹⁷Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (reprint of 1885 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947) 163-74; Archibald Alexander, "On Schools and Systems of Interpretation," *Princeton Review* 27 (April 1855):226-38.

¹⁸Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 595.

¹⁹Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 91.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 90.

²¹*Ibid.*, 91.

many."²² He discusses application after completing his treatment of hermeneutics and offers the following principle: "*All practical lessons, all applications of Scripture, all devotional material, must be governed by general Protestant hermeneutics.*"²³ Application is conspicuously separate from hermeneutics and controlled by that discipline.

An examination of Milton Terry's nineteenth-century *Biblical Hermeneutics* shows that Ramm's position is not new, but is the traditional perspective on hermeneutics and application. He carefully distinguishes hermeneutics from all other biblical disciplines.²⁴ Only after implementing hermeneutical principles can an expositor or average Bible reader be sure that an application conforms to proper ideas, doctrines, or moral principles.

After more than four hundred and fifty pages in which he carefully discusses biblical hermeneutics, Terry concludes with two paragraphs on application. The great importance of concepts therein justifies quoting them in their entirety:

In all our private study of the Scriptures for personal edification we do well to remember that the first and great thing is to lay hold of the real spirit and meaning of the sacred writer. There can be no true application, and no profitable taking to ourselves of any lessons of the Bible, unless we first clearly apprehend their original meaning and reference. To build a moral lesson upon an erroneous interpretation of the language of God's Word is a reprehensible procedure. But he who clearly discerns the exact grammatico-historical sense of a passage, is the better qualified to give it any legitimate application which its language and context will allow.

Accordingly, in homiletical discourse, the public teacher is bound to base his applications of the truths and lessons of the divine Word upon a correct apprehension of the primary signification of the language which he assumes to expound and enforce. To misinterpret the sacred writer is to discredit any application one may make of his words. But when, on the other hand, the preacher first shows, by a valid interpretation, that he thoroughly comprehends that which is written, his various allowable accommodations of the writer's words will have the greater force, in whatever practical applications he may give them.²⁵

If the distinction between hermeneutics and application has been so crucial to earlier generations, one would expect those who are in the

²²Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Hermeneutics* 113.

²³*Ibid.*, 185 (emphasis in the original).

²⁴Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 18-22.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 600.

Reformed and evangelical tradition to continue insisting on this separation and a proper control of application by undistorted interpretation. Yet an investigation of recent works on hermeneutics, which would expectedly clarify the distinction even more, discloses an increased blurring of distinctions. Therefore, since hermeneutics is the basis of exegetical practice, the whole field of biblical interpretation is in jeopardy.

RECENT HERMENEUTICAL PUBLICATIONS

Realizing that the field of biblical interpretation depends on hermeneutical theoreticians, one recent exegetical practitioner warns of danger in recent hermeneutical trends.²⁶ Thomas points out several areas in which changes have occurred and confusion has resulted, such areas as new definitions that are appearing and new philosophies that are beginning to control interpretation.

In his survey of confusion caused by recent hermeneutical publications, he emphasizes the emergence of new definitions of terms that conflict with traditional definitions and with one another.²⁷ Using his format, this essay will develop how the current changes are obscuring the definition of application. Rather than being a distinct practice separate from implementing hermeneutical principles, application is merging with other concepts and definitions.

Application Confused with Hermeneutics

Some works are confusing application with hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has traditionally meant a set of principles for biblical interpretation.²⁸ Established principles enable one to perform exegesis of a biblical text. However, Fee and Stuart see hermeneutics as the interpreter's second task, following exegesis.²⁹ They fallaciously concede that "hermeneutics" normally includes the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, and then choose to confine it to a "narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts."³⁰ They put application *after* exegesis in sequence, and define exegesis as "the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning."³¹ Consequently, "hermeneutics" for Fee and Stuart is simply

²⁶Robert L. Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?" *JETS* 39/2 (June 1996):241-42.

²⁷Thomas, "Current Trends" 242-49.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 247-48.

²⁹Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible* 25.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 19.

present-day application of the biblical text, a definition quite different from traditional parlance.

In this vein they follow Nida and Reyburn who define hermeneutics as "pointing out parallels between the biblical message and present-day events and determining the extent of relevance and the appropriate response for the believer."³² That differs radically from Terry's words about application cited above.

Though Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (hereafter KBH) do not use hermeneutics synonymously with application, they still confuse the picture further by including application as a part of hermeneutics and making it the goal of hermeneutics: "We would be misguided if we limited hermeneutics to the factors and issues that concern our understanding of the ancient text" without detecting "how the Scriptures can impact readers today."³³ Clearly, they view hermeneutics as more than simply the principles for discovering the original meaning of a text through historical-grammatical methods.³⁴ In fact, proving the inadequacy of the grammatico-historical method for producing a thorough understanding of the Bible's message is precisely their intention.³⁵

Osborne is another writer who includes application as a hermeneutical step. He says that hermeneutics includes what the text meant and what it means, and uses the term "contextualizing" to refer to contemporary application.³⁶ Silva continues this trend by speaking of "hermeneutic" (note the singular) as the meaning of Scripture for our day.³⁷ Kaiser agrees by calling application an integral part of the hermeneutical task.³⁸

Another study, this one by McCartney and Clayton, says that hermeneutics "is concerned with ascertaining not just the once-for-all meaning of Scripture, but also the way to apply that once-for-all meaning in one's own life."³⁹ Erickson joins the parade by writing, "A fairly common hermeneutical device in many evangelical circles is to take the biblical teaching and apply it directly to the situation today."⁴⁰

³²Eugene A. Nida and William D. Reyburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1981) 30.

³³Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 18.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 18.

³⁶Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 5.

³⁷Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 231.

³⁸Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 272.

³⁹McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 78.

⁴⁰Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 63.

Can hermeneutics be synonymous with application, include application, and have application as its goal? Can application be a hermeneutical device? Such a lack of clarity robs application of its constraints and, for some, makes it the controlling factor in biblical interpretation.

Application Confused with Exegesis

Until recently, exegesis has been the name given to "an implementation of valid interpretive principles,"⁴¹ but confusion reigns here too. Osborne says exegesis is inseparable from practical application.⁴² KBH teach that "effective exegesis not only perceives what the message meant originally but also determines how best to express that meaning to one's contemporaries."⁴³ Kaiser and Silva include current relevancy, application, and contemporary significance of a biblical text as parts of exegesis.⁴⁴ A work by J. Wilkinson, a historical critic, is one of only a few fairly recent volumes (nearly thirty-five years old) to separate exegesis and application into two mutually exclusive areas.⁴⁵

Application Confused with Meaning

With no differentiation between application on the one hand and hermeneutics or exegesis on the other, it is no wonder that, for many, Bible study amounts to a "what this text means to me" philosophy. In fact, even the idea of "meaning" is uncertain. In discussions of traditional hermeneutics, "meaning" has been the truth intention of the author.⁴⁶ But Fee and Stuart not only confuse application with hermeneutics, they also mix it with "meaning." Their stated goal in the use of hermeneutics is "to ask the questions about the Bible's meaning in the `here and now.'"⁴⁷

This follows D. E. Nineham's thinking when he said, "Many statements in ancient texts have *no* meaning today in any normal sense of the word `meaning.'"⁴⁸ He often used the words "contemporary meaning" to represent the application of biblical passages when framing present-day theology or views of life from the Bible.⁴⁹ Osborne's position that herme-

⁴¹Thomas, "Current Trends," 247-48.

⁴²Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 318.

⁴³Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 174.

⁴⁴Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Interpretation* 10.

⁴⁵J. Wilkinson, *Interpretation and Community* (London: Macmillan, 1963) 227-28.

⁴⁶Thomas, "Current Trends", 247-49.

⁴⁷Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible* 25.

⁴⁸D. E. Nineham, "The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (1969):181 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁹Nineham, "Use of the Bible" 180-81.

neutics includes what the text meant and what it means also obscures definitions of meaning and application.⁵⁰ Erickson continues the mix when he calls application "finding its [i.e., the text's] meaning for today."⁵¹ Even Kaiser includes application in one of his definitions of meaning—meaning as contemporary significance.⁵²

Application Confused with Interpretation

After seeing application mixed with hermeneutics, exegesis, and meaning, one might suspect that hermeneutical theorists have intermingled it with interpretation as well. Interpretation has historically meant an understanding of the authorial intention of a text.⁵³ Today, however, many follow Gadamer in holding that knowing how a text is applied today is integral to understanding that text. He finds this principle illustrated in the hermeneutics jurists use for legal texts. When a jurist interprets a law, he is seeking its validity for a particular case. Only in doing so can he arrive at the proper understanding of the law. That method he advocates for the Bible also. He writes, "The text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly, ie [sic] according to the claim it makes, must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application."⁵⁴

KBH contend that interpretation has to involve what the text might mean today as a prerequisite to understanding what the text originally meant.⁵⁵ Osborne too defends an overlap of application and interpretation.⁵⁶ Kaiser and Silva also believe that interpretation must decide the current relevancy, application, and contemporary significance of a text.⁵⁷

Cause of Confusion

Some observers may conclude that this muddled display of definitions is a simple lack of precision in language or that through semantics many of the words have become interchangeable. Even though one were willing to grant some carelessness, he would be naive to miss the common threads that tie contemporary trends with the New Hermeneutic,

⁵⁰Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 5.

⁵¹Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* 63.

⁵²Kaiser, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 41-44.

⁵³Thomas, "Current Trends" 247-49.

⁵⁴H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Garrett Barden and John Cumming, eds. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975) 275.

⁵⁵Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 83.

⁵⁶Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 355.

⁵⁷Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 10.

literary criticism, and philosophy.

Silva, without embracing the New Hermeneutic in its entirety, still speaks positively about "significant impact on subsequent discussions about biblical interpretation."⁵⁸ He is quite willing to allow hermeneutics to change when he remarks that "hermeneutic" is the meaning of Scripture for the present day, while "the term *hermeneutics* had been used in a much narrower sense to refer to a discipline that deals with the principles and methods of interpretation."⁵⁹

KBH speak of the positive contributions the New Hermeneutic has made to biblical interpretation. They believe that it has brought interpreters away from simply focusing on techniques to draw out meaning from a text and has instead linked them with the text in a more complex way. They assert also that the previous assumption about interpreter-controlled interpretation has given way to the idea of the text drawing the interpreter into its world and scrutinizing him. Further, they like the New Hermeneutic idea of the speech-event that the Scripture must relate to the contemporary audience.⁶⁰

On the contrary, the dangers of subjectivity in interpretation are far greater than the supposed benefits it brings. Zuck more correctly evaluates the New Hermeneutic: "Like neoorthodoxy, the new hermeneutic denies propositional truth. . . . The biblical text can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean."⁶¹

DANGERS OF DEVIATION

A number of serious consequences present themselves in the face of rising hermeneutical trends.

Man-Centered Interpretation

First, failure to isolate application from hermeneutics creates a man-centered rather than a God-centered interpretation of the Bible. It sounds pious and even humble for readers to let the text examine themselves. It appears to parallel the cry of the Reformation that man is to place himself "under" the Word. And the way modern writers have characterized the traditional position of the Scriptures as a passive object to be analyzed sounds as though those of the past did not view Scripture as "living and active."

Yet God has communicated by having men write in language that

⁵⁸Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 232.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 231 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁰Klein *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 51.

⁶¹Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* 54.

human beings can understand. The natural way for humans to interpret any such communication is through employment of rules of hermeneutics to understand a passage's meaning. That does not place an interpreter over the text; it simply submits to the way God determined He would communicate His Word.

Rather, it is the fusion-of-horizons approach that exalts the role of the interpreter. It de-emphasizes authorial intention by unduly amplifying the importance of application. Kaiser and Silva rightly state that Ramm was concerned mainly with "Is it true?" and "What does the text mean?"⁶² Instead they would emphasize finding ways to derive contemporary usefulness from biblical texts. This felt need arises from the trend of the current generation to prize the value of the individual and ask the question "Does it matter?"

Is application important? Yes, but allowing it to be the driving force in hermeneutics is the proverbial tail wagging the dog, when the tail in control needs to be severed. More important, though effects of the new trend may not be fully visible yet, that trend answers to man's selfishness rather than demonstrating a reverence for God's message, whatever the application may be.

Allowing Cultural Application to Change Meaning

A second danger in stressing contemporary significance, cultural application, and modern relevancy is a proclivity to let the way particular cultures apply the Bible affect its meaning. In fact, some would keep the applications and change normal methods of interpretation. Kraft's desire to legitimize various cultural applications of the Bible drives him to attribute to God a communication problem. He first describes the problem humans have in communicating:

We know, of course, that there is often a wide discrepancy between the meanings that the communicator seeks to get across and those meanings that the receptor understands. The process seems to be one in which the communicator has certain meanings in his mind that he encodes in cultural symbols (primarily linguistic symbols) and transmits in the form of a message to one or more receptors. The receptors, for their part, decode the message in their heads and thereby derive the meanings on the basis of which they act. . . .

The crucial thing in the transmission of messages via such culturally defined symbols is the extent of agreement between the communicator and the receptor concerning what the cultural symbols signify.⁶³

Speaking of the Bible, Kraft says,

⁶²Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 10.

⁶³C. H. Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *JETS* 21/4 (December 1978):359.

The fact that we who live in Euro-American culture attempt to interpret the Bible, none of which was spoken or written in Euro-American culture, raises great difficulty for us. For we are unlikely to share with the original authors many, if any, of the agreements concerning the meanings of the concepts that they use, since our cultural conditioning is so different from theirs.⁶⁴

Kraft views the problem as so great that "we can state boldly that no receiver of a message ever understands exactly what the communicator intends—even when both communicator and receiver participate in the same culture."⁶⁵ People compensate for this difficulty by using feedback from their audience and then changing their message based upon the misunderstandings. If this does not fully suffice, humans will settle for approximate understandings of what they seek to communicate.

Therefore, current interpretation of the Scriptures is problematic, since the human writers are not here to receive our feedback, and cannot compensate for their "communicational impreciseness."⁶⁶ As a result, today's Christians must rely upon "the fact that messages can be interpreted within a range."⁶⁷ Kraft believes that the Holy Spirit works in terms of such an "allowable range" as He assists in interpreting.

Within this allowable range of meaning fall both the intent of the human author and the intent of God who inspired the writing, but Kraft says the two are not always the same. This range of acceptable meaning allows for multiple legitimate interpretations of a passage and even of concepts of man and God Himself.⁶⁸ Kraft's solution is that the evangelical exegete must harness the perspectives of the anthropologist and the linguist if he is to interpret adequately.⁶⁹

Is God subject to those limitations of human communication? Does God settle for approximate understandings of what he seeks to communicate? Does He really allow for a range of understandings of Himself and His principles?

Kraft's belief that He does drives him to dispense with the traditional grammatico-historical method for a new approach to interpretation.⁷⁰ What underlies Kraft's beliefs is the assumption that "God communicates via culture and language in essentially the same way that

⁶⁴Ibid., 359.

⁶⁵Ibid., 360.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., 363.

⁷⁰Ibid.

human beings do."⁷¹ Though many because of God's use of human language and cultural forms may initially grant this assumption, reflection upon Kraft's explanation of the assumption leads to the opposite conclusion.

God does communicate via culture and language in His Word, but He is not subject to the limitations and deficiencies of human communication. God, being perfect, is wholly competent to communicate His intended meaning perfectly. The Lord often told the prophets that He would place His words in their mouths. Second Peter 1:20-21 clarifies that God is speaking in Scripture: "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

Kraft also overstates the difficulty humans have in understanding. Although the Bible cites instances when men did not understand what God was saying, those were the exception rather than the rule. Difficulty in understanding the Lord usually involves a failure to obey or judicial hardening, rather than a miscommunication. And when people fail to understand, that is sometimes God's intention, as in the case of the parables.

Certainly the fall and further effects of sin have altered the human mind, but when illuminated by the Holy Spirit, it is capable of receiving communication from God without distorting it.⁷² This is the assumption of NT authors as they utilize rational lines of argumentation in appealing to their readers to make cognitive choices. Luke's purpose in his gospel was "that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). Paul believes his readers can "know with certainty" (Eph 5:5) and be "convinced" of certain truths (2 Tim 1:12).

If God determined to reveal Himself, then He will be effective in doing so and man is capable of receiving that communication. It should not take thousands of years awaiting the advances of linguistics and anthropology (or any other science or philosophy) to arrive at a proper interpretation of God's revelation. The grammatico-historical approach has proven its effectiveness in giving interpretations of Scripture that have achieved a great measure of unanimity in the church throughout history. Those interpretations have also effectively crossed cultural barriers.⁷³ Therefore, interpreters can approach the Scriptures with a great measure of

⁷¹Ibid., 357.

⁷²Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends" 253.

⁷³Robert L. Thomas, "Some Hermeneutical Ramifications of Contextualization and Feminist Literature" (paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986) 5.

confidence even though some texts remain where meanings are not as clear as in others.

Poststructuralism

The emphasis on reader response rather than the text itself also lays a foundation for legitimizing the theories of Poststructuralism, creating another danger in intermingling application with hermeneutics. "Structuralism" was a further movement away from the authorial intention of the text. It argued that interests in the historical realm of a passage are actually a barrier to determining its true meaning.⁷⁴ The structuralist argued that thoughts are structured by the mind through codes which become universal patterns in the brain. So the interpreter of someone's writing must study the structure of the person's words to find codes that unveil the deeper meaning behind the author's surface words.⁷⁵ The goal of applying this to the Bible is to find the underlying message for today.

"Poststructuralism" departs ever further from concerns about the original author or his audience. The poststructuralist sees the text as art which has a life of its own apart from its writer. When one reads the text, it becomes his work.⁷⁶ Therefore, what is important is not a meaning in the text, but rather a meaning that now resides in the reader.⁷⁷

A category of Poststructuralism is "Reader-Response Criticism." It is the name of a discipline whose definition is "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words [of a given text] as they succeed one another in time."⁷⁸ The goal of this type of study is to reproduce the original responses of first-time readers to a text without their being influenced by understandings of other portions of Scripture or prior understandings of that text. The reader's perception of the text is what matters, not the writer's intended meaning.

Deere probably did not intend to advocate this view of interpretation, but his recommendation fits the pattern. In an attempt to debunk the traditional interpretation that miraculous gifts have ceased, he uses the argument that "a new convert, who prior to his conversion knew nothing about the history of Christianity or the New Testament" and who is locked in a room with a Bible for a week would come out as a noncessationist.⁷⁹ That is the same subjectivity that Poststructuralism

⁷⁴Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 371.

⁷⁵Ibid., 372.

⁷⁶Ibid., 377.

⁷⁷Klein, *et al.*, *Biblical Interpretation* 438.

⁷⁸S. E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1972), 387-88.

⁷⁹Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 114.

supports. What if two such converts were to leave the room with different views? That is no problem for the reader-response approach. It endorses a wide variety of interpretations and prefers interpreters without a knowledge of the Bible. Reading the Bible through inhibits one's ability to interpret in the eyes of Reader-Response Criticism.

Pervasive Confusion

Failure to distinguish application from hermeneutics is widespread and endangers Christians by creating an atmosphere of confusion. An illustration of that confusion is a recent work by DeYoung and Hurty entitled *Beyond the Obvious*. One in a recent flood of publications that seeks to correct the traditional "authorial intent" position, the book creates a new paradigm for explaining the NT use of the OT by advocating that the NT writers applied the OT to their own situations and thereby derived new meanings for numerous passages of the OT.⁸⁰ The authors recommend that as the goal for modern-day interpretation, i.e., finding out how the Scriptures apply to twentieth-century situations and contextualizing its message to fit modern audiences. That procedure promotes variable meanings for each passage applied and entails the same dangers as the theories above. Pervasive confusion among Christians will be the outcome if Bible readers follow this advice.

Other Dangers

The possible dangers are limitless. Failure to draw a clear line between hermeneutics and application will give credibility to the degenerative concepts of contextualization in modern day missiology⁸¹ and the imposing on the text of interpretive centers such as the preferential option for the poor from Liberation Theology⁸² and the Galatians 3:28 lens of feminist theology regarding the role of women.⁸³ The experience of the

⁸⁰James B. DeYoung and Sarah Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious* (Gresham, Ore.: Vision House, 1995) 109.

⁸¹Contextualization is the modus operandi of those who would develop theology by studying how ministry is practiced in various civilizations rather than applying traditional hermeneutical principles to the biblical text (Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund* (1970-77) [Bromiley, Kent, United Kingdom: New Life Press, 1972]).

⁸²E.g., G. Gutierrez, "Liberation and the Poor: The Puebla Perspective," *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey*, D. W. Ferm, ed. (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1986) 34-37; cf. also Bruce G. Fawcett, "A Critical Analysis of Some Hermeneutical Principles Found in Latin American Theologies of Liberation," *JETS* 37/4 (December 1994):569-81.

⁸³E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 190; cf. also Paul Felix, "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism," *TMSJ* 5/2 (Fall 1994):159-84.

interpreter drives those schools of thought, not a passion to understand the message of God as recorded by biblical writers.

The confusion of hermeneutics and application affects the field of Bible translations too. By defining hermeneutics as "pointing out parallels between the biblical message and present-day events and determining the extent of relevance and the appropriate response for the believer,"⁸⁴ Nida and Reyburn lay a hermeneutical foundation for their functional [or dynamic] equivalence approach to translating Scripture.

A volume edited by Radmacher and Preus furnishes another example of how widespread the confusion of application with hermeneutics is. The work entitled *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* resulted from The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) Summit II and contains a very helpful collection of articles on hermeneutics. The collection of articles had the purpose of completing "the solution to the problem of biblical authority . . . as far as its interpretation and practical application to our lives are concerned."⁸⁵ To maintain the distinction that the present essay is arguing for, that volume should have included "application" in its title—*Hermeneutics, Application, Inerrancy, and the Bible*—because if limiting its articles to hermeneutical topics, it should not have included topics such as "Normativeness in Scripture" which delves into ways of applying Scripture.

That article, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Verses Permanent" by J. Robertson McQuilkin, makes a clear distinction between "interpreting the meaning of Scripture" and applying "the teaching for contemporary faith and life."⁸⁶ He identifies ways in which he believes hermeneutics controls application.⁸⁷ However, George Knight's response to that discussion describes what McQuilkin did as charting "the course for interpreting Scripture in reference to its normativity."⁸⁸ Is that what McQuilkin did? Or, did he chart the course for *applying* Scripture in reference to its normativity?

Though normativity of the Scriptures is certainly a valuable topic, does the normativeness of a text have anything to do with interpreting a passage's meaning? No. An illustration of the frequent neglect of this principle lies in the way today's interpreters of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 want that passage to answer the question, "Should women

⁸⁴Nida and Reyburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* 30.

⁸⁵Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), xi.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 222.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 230-40.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 243.

wear head coverings today?"⁸⁹ This is a good question, but its answer can come only after determining the meaning of the text through an implementation of hermeneutics without regard to what the question's answer may be. In view of recent trends, utmost care is vital in keeping interpretation separate from application.

RESTATEMENT IN A STRENGTHENED FORM

Application is certainly indispensable in a believer's relationship to God and His Word, but it must be subject to sensible controls. Understanding God's Word is prerequisite to a legitimate application of it. In light of conflicting meanings produced by an inclusion of the reader's horizon among hermeneutical principles, how can interpreters keep themselves from drowning in the sea of subjectivity? They must redraw the line between hermeneutics and application. The following four steps will help achieve this.

Be Sure of the Goal

First, interpreters must clarify the goal of their quest. They must put on hold the needs of interpreter, expositor, and their respective audiences and cultures until they reach a conclusion about the meaning of the text. They cannot allow man's self-centeredness or even his enthusiasm for obedience to influence their use of hermeneutical principles. They must study God's Word objectively to determine the original message that God intended. Only this goal will exalt God's Word to its proper place as the only constant in the equation of interpretation. Variables from a contemporary horizon must not determine this interpretation. Readers as God's creatures must willingly receive His meaning truly and accurately.

To reach this goal, interpreters must choose a method. Since God has seen fit to record His message in a written form, humans must use the faculties He has given them to understand that communication. They have defined as a "science" the practice of using their faculties to discover something by observation, description, and experimentation. The science of interpreting written documents is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics must be the method of receiving God's message from His Word accurately.

However, in light of the modern confusion, one must limit the scope of hermeneutics. It must include only what helps achieve the priority goal of understanding God's Word. If it expands beyond this or includes less than what is necessary, the goal becomes obscure. Its traditional definition of being the science of interpretation has stood the test of time. As a science, it provides rules to be used in interpreting the Scriptures.

⁸⁹E.g., Kenneth T. Wilson, "Should Women Wear Headcoverings," *BSac* 148 (October-December 1991):442-62.

Hermeneutics must be completely distinct from other disciplines, or an interpretive process begins without a foundation. Interpreters must firmly resist letting even closely related disciplines—i.e., exegesis or exposition—become a part of hermeneutics. Most of all, they must staunchly turn back any attempt at introducing application into hermeneutics. Application cannot be the goal of, a part of, or synonymous with hermeneutics. Otherwise, a definitive meaning of hermeneutics disappears.

In fact, one must consciously postpone application till a later stage of study. He must keep in mind that not only are hermeneutics and application separate, but also steps of exegesis must come between them. After establishing rules of hermeneutics, biblical exegesis must put them into practice in the actual interpretation of a text. Only after exegesis can one proceed with intelligent application.

Determine What Is Normative

After determining the meaning of a text, one can move on to application. McQuilkin is helpful in emphasizing the need to determine whether a text is applicable "to every people in every culture" or is "intended to function as a mandate for normative behavior."⁹⁰ To help in determining this *after one has interpreted the text*, he proposes the following questions:

- A. Does the context limit the recipient or application?⁹¹
- B. Does subsequent revelation limit the recipient or the application?⁹²
- C. Is this specific teaching in conflict with other biblical teaching?⁹³
- D. Is the reason for a norm given in Scripture and is that reason treated as normative?⁹⁴
- E. Is the specific teaching normative as well as the principle behind it?⁹⁵
- F. Does the Bible treat the historic context as normative?⁹⁶
- G. Does the Bible treat the cultural context as limited?⁹⁷

These questions illustrate how hermeneutics controls application. In reality, though, answers to all of them depend on the specific meaning of a

⁹⁰McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness" 222.

⁹¹Ibid., 230.

⁹²Ibid., 231.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid., 232.

⁹⁵Ibid., 233.

⁹⁶Ibid., 234.

⁹⁷Ibid., 236.

verse in its context, which results from exegesis. That is what prevents applying a verse to situations it was not intended for. However, caution is essential even here, because question "C" above actually belongs back in exegesis.⁹⁸ In connection with this question, McQuilkin says that cultural insight may help in resolving an apparent contradiction.⁹⁹ In other words, grammatico-historical hermeneutics should already have included the facts of history (i.e., culture) and "double-checked" the results by applying the analogy of faith.¹⁰⁰ Applying a Scripture whose meaning one does not yet understand is premature.

Arrive at Doctrine

In Ramm's section on "The Doctrinal Use of the Bible," he discusses an important area of application—systematizing beliefs about God based upon the results of exegesis.

Yet before his suggestions for doing so, he has a disturbing statement: "Part of the task of hermeneutics is to determine the correct use of the Bible in theology and in personal life."¹⁰¹ He includes theology as a part of hermeneutics and even divides hermeneutics into two categories, *general hermeneutics* and *doctrinal hermeneutics*.¹⁰² Even more disturbing is his opinion that doctrinal interpretation "is advancing beyond the grammatical and the historical sense to the fuller meaning of Scripture."¹⁰³ In the first place, the use of the Bible in theology and in personal life is not a part of hermeneutics. Those are part of application. Secondly, doctrinal interpretation should not "go beyond" and thereby differ from the results of the exegetical process? Exegesis should control application.

Despite these shortcomings, Ramm does have some good proposals for building a system of theology:

1. *The main burden of doctrinal teaching must rest on the literal interpretation of the Bible.*¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸George W. Knight, III, in his response to McQuilkin, suggests rephrasing this question: "Is *my understanding* of this specific teaching in conflict with other biblical teaching?" ("A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Verses Permanent," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, Radmacher and Preus, eds. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984] 247).

⁹⁹McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness" 232.

¹⁰⁰Robert L. Thomas, "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: The Analogy of Faith," *JETS* 23/1 (March 1980):53.

¹⁰¹Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 163.

¹⁰²Ibid., 165.

¹⁰³Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 167. This writer would simplify the statement: *Doctrinal teaching must rest on the literal interpretation of the Bible.*

2. *Exegesis is prior to any system of theology.*¹⁰⁵
3. *The theologian must not extend his doctrines beyond the Scriptural evidence.*¹⁰⁶
4. *The theologian interpreter strives for a system.*¹⁰⁷
5. *What is not a matter of revelation cannot be made a matter of creed or faith.*¹⁰⁸

Put It into Practice

When an individual studies the Scriptures, if he follows proper hermeneutical principles, he will arrive at its correct meaning. After determining whether the context has limited it to a particular audience or circumstance (normativeness), he can then ask such questions as

1. Is there a truth to believe about God?
2. Is there a truth to believe about some other doctrine?
3. Is there a command to obey?
4. Is there a promise to claim?
5. Is there an example to follow?
6. Is there a principle to follow for personal guidance?
7. Is there wisdom to shape a Christian's thinking?

Danger surrounds any attempt to answer these questions without first applying sound principles of hermeneutics. However, if one follows a proper sequence, he will establish the proper limitations of a passage and guard against misapplications.

CONCLUSION

Some may believe that this paper has reduced the importance of application. On the contrary, in view of deviations from traditional methods and definitions by new hermeneutical theories arising over the last thirty years, the only way to be sure that application of the truth is valid is to redraw boldly a line that has been erased.

The definition of application is simply "the use or practice of God's message in personal life." It is only reasonable then that application must lie outside the disciplines used to determine meaning. Just as reasonable is the conclusion that the message found through the process of interpretation must define, confine, and control application.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 172. This writer prefers to omit "interpreter" at this stage in the process. Also, he would emphasize the word "strives," realizing that no system is perfect and all systems remain under the scrutiny of exegetical conclusions.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 178.

The meaning arrived at through hermeneutical principles governs application by setting limits or boundaries for possible applications. Many applications of a given text are possible because application is subjective, but its separateness from hermeneutics assures that the meaning of Scripture will remain intact as the objective truth God intended it to be.

Hopefully, this discussion has awakened an awareness that recent works on hermeneutics deviate substantially from traditional hermeneutics and thus confound the task of learning the meaning of Scripture. If hermeneutics is obscure, then valid application becomes impossible. A redrawing of the line between hermeneutics and application is crucial in order to regain the basics of grammatico-historical method.