

THE PRINCIPLE OF SINGLE MEANING

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That a single passage has one meaning and one meaning only has been a long-established principle of biblical interpretation. Among evangelicals, recent violations of that principle have multiplied. Violations have included those by Clark Pinnock with his insistence on adding "future" meanings to historical meanings of a text, Mikel Neumann and his expansion of the role of contextualization, Greg Beale and Grant Osborne and their views about certain features of Revelation 11, recent works on hermeneutics and their advocacy of multiple meanings for a single passage, Kenneth Gentry and his preterist views on Revelation, and Progressive Dispensationalism with its promotion of "complementary" hermeneutics. The single-meaning principle is of foundational importance in understanding God's communication with mankind, just as it has been since the creation of the human race. The entrance of sin in Genesis 3 brought a confusion in this area that has continued ever since.

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Many years ago Milton S. Terry laid down a basic hermeneutical principle that contemporary evangelicals have difficulty observing. That is the principle of single meaning:

A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.¹

Not quite as many years ago, Bernard Ramm advocated the same principle in different words: "But here we must remember the old adage: 'Interpretation is one, application is many.'" This means that there is only one meaning to a passage

¹Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 205. Milton Spenser Terry (1840-1914) was a nineteenth-century Methodist Episcopalian. He was a graduate of Yale Divinity School and professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis and theology at Garrett Biblical Institute. He was the author of *Biblical Apocalypics* and numerous commentaries on Old Testament books, but is most often remembered for his book *Biblical Hermeneutics*, which was viewed as the standard work on biblical hermeneutics for most of the twentieth century.

of Scripture which is determined by careful study.”² Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred with this principle: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.”³

Current Status of the Single-Meaning Principle

Almost anywhere one turns these days, he finds violations of this principle, however. As a consequence, evangelicals have drifted out “upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture,” as Terry predicted about a hundred years ago.⁴ The following discussion will cite several examples to illustrate this sea of uncertainty and conjecture, and will then elaborate on the importance and background of the principle.

(1) Clark Pinnock

In November of 1998 I was asked to respond to a paper by Clark Pinnock in the Hermeneutics Study Group that met prior to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. The title of his paper was “Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings,” a paper that has since appeared in print.⁵ In his paper and his article he offered an alternative to Antiquarian hermeneutics—as he called them⁶—otherwise known as grammatical-historical hermeneutics. I studied his alternative carefully and came to the conclusion that his approach was extremely close to Aquarianism. In responding to my response, he denied any leanings toward New Age teaching, but the similarities are undeniable.

As the title of his paper suggests, he proposed the combining of future meanings with past meanings in interpreting Scripture. I addressed this proposal in one section of my response:

Professor Pinnock is apparently unwilling to sever connections with past methods of

²Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 113. Ramm’s work served as a standard textbook on hermeneutics in many evangelical institutions through the middle decades of the twentieth century.

³Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, November 10-13, 1982.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., noted this same trend among evangelicals over twenty years ago when he said that the assigning of multiple meanings was part of the slippage of evangelical scholarship into “easygoing subjectivism” (“The Single Intent of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer [Nashville: Nelson, 1978] 123). He urged evangelicals “to begin a new ‘hermeneutical reformation’ to correct this type of growing malpractice” in exegetical practice (*ibid.*, 138). His warning has gone unheeded by many.

⁵Clark Pinnock, “Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34/2 (Fall 1999):136-51.

⁶*Ibid.*, 137, 138.

hermeneutics as evidenced in these words: “While making use of literary and historical scholarship, we are not the prisoners of the textual past, but are privileged for the opportunity and accountable for listening for the Word of the Lord and watching for the fulfillment of God’s promises which are still outstanding.”⁷ But he wants to combine the “traditional” method with the method that will yield the “new” and “fresh” meanings.

He seems unaware, however, that the moment he does that he has junked the traditional method. Traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics place tight restrictions on what the text can yield by way of interpretation. Proposals such as Professor Pinnock’s violate those restrictions so that his approach cannot fall into the category of “literary and historical scholarship.”

One of the restrictions he violates is that which limits the meaning of the text to what it meant in its original setting. He exceeds that limitation in his statement, “Witnesses to the gospel cannot be content with past meanings in an antiquarian way.”⁸ That statement is contrary to the principle that according to traditional guidelines the past meanings are the substance of biblical interpretation.

He writes elsewhere, “The meaning of the Bible is not static and locked up in the past but is something living and active.”⁹ On the contrary, meaning *is* static and locked up in the past insofar as traditional hermeneutics are concerned.

He adds to this: “It [i.e., cruciality] means that we ask not only whether a given interpretation is true to the original meaning, but also whether it is pertinent to the present situation or an evasion of what matters now.”¹⁰ From these words it would appear that a given interpretation could be true to the original meaning and also an evasion of what matters now. In the latter case, presumably a traditional interpretation could be at odds with a new interpretation pertinent to the present situation. That too goes against the principles of traditional interpretation.

He evidences that he allows for truthfulness of conflicting interpretations of the same passage when he states, “Interpretation is an unfinished task and even the possibility that there may not be a single right answer for all Christians everywhere cannot be ruled out.”¹¹ In such an instance the right brain has clearly gained the upper hand and the rationality of traditional interpretation crumbles into ashes.

Traditional hermeneutics limit each passage to one interpretation and one only. From that one interpretation may stem many applications that are “crucial” to

⁷Ibid., 138. My response took wording from Pinnock’s original paper. His wordings cited here have been revised slightly to match those in the published article.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 140. In speaking about “the event of Jesus Christ,” the centerpiece of Scripture, Pinnock writes, “To read it properly, we have to go beyond the historical descriptions and consider the extension of the story into the present and future” (ibid., 139). “Going beyond” the historical descriptions necessitates assigning additional meanings to that event and to Scripture.

¹⁰Ibid., 137.

¹¹Apparently Pinnock expunged this comment—found on p. 8 of his paper—before submitting his essay for publication, but he still maintains the viewpoint represented in the cited statement. In his published piece he writes, “Different answers are given in the Bible to similar sorts of issues because the text itself has been contextualized in different ways. This leaves room *for us to decide* about future meanings and applications” (ibid., 143 [emphasis added]).

contemporary situations, but to call those applications interpretations is a serious misnomer. The practice of assigning "future" meanings to the text cannot be combined with traditional hermeneutics without destroying the latter.

My response apparently fell on deaf ears, because the version that appeared in print in 1999 did not differ substantially from what Pinnock read to the Hermeneutics Study Group in 1998. He appears to be completely oblivious to the single-meaning principle. Hence the sea of uncertainty.

(2) Mikel Neumann

At that same meeting in November of 1998 I responded to a paper by missiologist Mikel Neumann of Western Baptist Theological Seminary, Portland, Oregon. He entitled his paper "Contextualization: Application or Interpretation?" In his paper he made statements such as the following: "Contextualization might be seen as an umbrella which covers interpretation and application" (8);¹² "Context is not merely an addendum called application" (4); again, "Contextualization begins with the interpreter's personality as a function of his or her culture and encompasses the process of interpretation and application" (3).

His point was that contextualization overshadows interpretation of the biblical text. In defense of that theory he said the following: "However, a hermeneutical approach that ignores either the culture of the interpreter of Scripture or the culture of the person to whom he or she desires to communicate, is an inadequate approach" (3-4). My response to that position ran as follows:

Neither the culture of the interpreter nor the culture of the person to whom the interpreter communicates has anything in the world to do with the meaning of the biblical text. The meaning of the biblical text is fixed and unchanging. This is not to say that the exegetical task is finished. It must ever be open to new insights as to a more refined understanding of what the Spirit meant when He inspired the writers to pen Scripture, but that refined understanding must come through a closer utilization of the rules of grammar and the facts of history surrounding the text in its original setting. It is not open to a redefined understanding stemming from a reading back into the text of some consideration either from the interpreter's culture or from that of the one to whom the interpreter communicates.

Through his insistence on making the cultural situation of the interpreter and that of the people to whom he communicates the message of the text an integral part of interpretation, Professor Neumann—unwittingly I believe—introduced meanings additional to the one meaning of the text as determined by its grammar and historical setting. More paddling around in the sea of uncertainty.

(3) Greg Beale and Grant Osborne

¹²Numbers in parenthesis are page numbers in Neumann's unpublished paper.

In November of 1999 the chairman of the Hermeneutics Study Group invited me back to respond to Greg Beale and Grant Osborne and their handling of apocalyptic genre in the book of Revelation. Both men described their hermeneutical approaches to the book as eclectic. Osborne's eclecticism combined futurist, preterist, and idealist principles.¹³ Beale's combination was idealist and futurist.¹⁴ It is beside the point for the present discussion, but worth noticing that an eclectic system of hermeneutics allows an interpreter to choose whatever meaning suits his preunderstood theological system in any given passage.

Of relevance to this essay, however, is Osborne's interpretation of "the great city" in Revelation 11:8. He assigns the designation at least two and possibly three meanings: Jerusalem and Rome and secondarily all cities that oppose God. Beale does essentially the same: Babylon = Rome = the ungodly world-city. Perhaps Osborne's identification of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 is a more flagrant violation of the single-meaning principle. He sees them both as two individuals of the future and as a corporate picture of the church. Yet the rapture of these two witnesses pictures only the rapture of the church, he says. One would ask, What happened to the two individuals?¹⁵ More waves from the sea of uncertainty.

(4) Grant Osborne

In the panel discussion following papers and responses at this November 1999 meeting, Osborne challenged my statement that a passage can have only a single meaning. Therefore I went to his volume *The Hermeneutical Spiral* to refresh my memory on his view of this principle and found that he differs from the time-honored grammatical-historical standard. In his hermeneutical volume he advocates double meanings in cases of single words. He speaks of "deliberate ambiguity" on the part of authors of Scripture. He cites "the famous word-play on wind/spirit in Genesis 1:2" as "a fairly simple example" of this.¹⁶ He also cites the Gospel of John as famous "for its widespread use of double meaning."¹⁷ His examples include *anōthen gennēthēnai*, "born from above/again" in John 3:3, 7; *hydōr zōn*, "living/flowing water" in 4:10-11; and *hypsōthō*, "lifted up (to the cross/the Father)"

¹³Grant Osborne, "My Interpretive Approach" (paper presented to the Hermeneutics Study Group, November 1999) 1. Osborne's commentary on Revelation is forthcoming from Baker Book House.

¹⁴G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48-49.

¹⁵By following grammatical-historical principles, the writer of this essay has identified "the great city" as Jerusalem and the two witnesses as two individuals—probably Moses and Elijah—who will testify in Jerusalem during the future seventieth week of Daniel (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1995] 87-89, 93-94).

¹⁶Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 88-89.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 89.

in 12:32.¹⁸

Such hermeneutical advice as this creates further turbulence on the sea of uncertainty.

(5) Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard

Among recent books on hermeneutics, Osborne's volume is not alone in fostering uncertainty. The work *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard offers the same advice as Osborne. In their chapter on "The Goals of Interpretation," they entitle one section "*An author may intend a text to convey multiple meanings or levels of meaning.*"¹⁹ They cite Isa 7:14 as an example of intended double meaning, as being fulfilled in the immediate future (Isa 8:1-10) and in the distant future (Matt 1:23).²⁰ They also cite John 3:3 and Jesus' use of *anōthen* with its double entendre "again" and "from above" followed in its context by the use of *pneuma* with its double entendre of "wind" and "spirit."²¹

Examples of double meaning cited by Osborne and by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard are at best highly questionable and at worst outright error. Nothing in either context cited justifies the conclusion that the authors or Jesus, the speaker, intended a double meaning in these passages. In isolated instances elsewhere, however, when a text has a double meaning, the context will always make that clear. One case that comes to mind is John 11:50 where Caiaphas the high priest said, "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish," as he addressed the Sanhedrin. In 11:51-52 John takes the words in a sense different from the way Caiaphas intended them. Caiaphas meant them to speak of Jesus' death being necessary to keep peace with the Romans, but John understood them to refer to Jesus' sacrificial death for the Jewish nation and for all people everywhere.

The context of John 11 makes the double entendre quite conspicuous. Wherever biblical authors use such a double entendre, it will always be clear. But it is a violation of grammatical-historical principles to find double meanings in a context where no such indicators occur. No such signposts occur with the two witnesses in Revelation 11, Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth of the Messiah, Moses use of "spirit" in Genesis 1, John's reference to the new birth and his use of *pneuma* (John 3), living water (John 4), and Christ's being lifted up (John 12).

(6) Gordon Fee

The confusion of application with interpretation also causes violation of the

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 122 [emphasis in the original].

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 123 n. 19.

principle of one interpretation. The incorporation of application—or as some call it “contextualization”—into the hermeneutical process leads inevitably to multiple meanings for a single passage. Almost every recent work on hermeneutics advocates merging the two disciplines of interpretation and application which were formerly kept quite distinct.²² With that policy advocated, the transformation of some of the many applications into multiple interpretations is inescapable.

This is a feature that distinguishes an egalitarian explanation of 1 Tim 2:11-15 from a complementarian approach. For example, Fee writes,

My point is a simple one. It is hard to deny that *this* text prohibits women teaching men in the Ephesian church; but is the unique text in the NT, and as we have seen, its reason for being is *not* to correct the rest of the New Testament, but to correct a very *ad hoc* problem in Ephesus.²³

In applying 1 Tim 2:11-15 to modern situations, Fee has in essence given the text a new meaning that is an exact opposite of what, by his own admission, is Paul’s meaning. As a result, the text has two meanings, one for the kind of conditions that existed at Ephesus and another for the conditions that existed elsewhere and exist today.

Fee’s definition of hermeneutics coincides with his conclusion about multiple meanings, however. In a book he co-authored with Stuart, he says that the term “hermeneutics” includes the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, but chooses to confine it to a “narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.”²⁴ In other words, for him hermeneutics is simply present-day application of a biblical text.

No wonder Fee and Stuart in their book on hermeneutics include nothing about limiting interpretation to a single meaning, and no wonder the stormy waves on the sea of uncertainty are getting higher and higher.

(7) DeYoung and Hurty

DeYoung and Hurty strongly advocate seeking a meaning beyond the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.²⁵ Since the NT writers found such a “deeper” meaning in their use of the OT, they reason, we should follow their

²²Cf. Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 8/1 (Spring 1997):89-91.

²³Gordon D. Fee, “Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics, Part III: The Great Watershed—Intentionality & Particularity/Eternality: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as a Test Case,” *Crux* 26 (December 1990):36 [emphasis in the original].

²⁴G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 25.

²⁵James DeYoung and Sarah Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* (Gresham, Ore.: Vision House, 1995) 67-80.

example of exegetical methodology.²⁶ They call the meaning derived from grammatical-historical interpretation the existential meaning of a passage, and the deeper meaning they call the essential meaning. They allow that a single passage may have a number of essential meanings because the essential meaning of a word may differ from that of a sentence and its passage and its whole story.²⁷

How do they limit the possible essential meanings? They apply a paradigm of reality that they call “the Kingdom center.”²⁸ They call this the central theme and worldview of the Bible. Yet that control seems to have no significant impact on their finding whatever deeper meaning they choose. It does not restrain them from presenting an egalitarian view of women’s role in the church.²⁹ In this case their “deeper meaning” overrides the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.

(8) McCartney and Clayton; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard

The work by McCartney and Clayton and that by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard suggest another route for placing some kind of control on these extra meanings that “go beyond” the grammatical-historical ones. Klein and company advocate a controlled reader-response approach to the text. The limit they place on the meanings beyond the historical meaning of a text is the consensus of the believing community.³⁰ McCartney and Clayton resemble Klein when they speak of typology or *sensus plenior*. They reason this way: “Since the NT writers do not cover everything in the OT, we may expect large areas where the typology or *sensus plenior* has not been stated explicitly in the NT.”³¹ How do they propose to place a limit on these additional meanings of the OT? Their solution involves ultimately observing how “the Holy Spirit’s [is] directing of the church.”³²

That type of limitation essentially leaves the meaning of Scripture “up for grabs.” The evangelical believing community or the church currently uses the Bible to support all sorts of teachings, everything from covenant theology to dispensationalism or somewhere between the two, from complementarianism to egalitarianism, from homosexuality to heterosexuality, from the openness of God to the narrowness of God, from conditional immortality to unconditional eternal punishment for the lost. Ultimately all these differences stem from someone allowing a given passage to have more than its grammatical-historical sense. The believing Christian community has no consensus that enables an interpreter to place

²⁶Ibid., 33-48, 225.

²⁷Ibid., 230-31.

²⁸Ibid., 83-98.

²⁹Ibid., 280-87.

³⁰Klein *et al*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 139, 145.

³¹Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994) 157.

³²Ibid., 164.

a limit on the meanings beyond the grammatical-historical one. The absence of a consensus leaves him free to follow his own whims.

McCartney and Clayton go so far as to call the practice of limiting a passage to a single meaning “ridiculous from a general hermeneutical point of view” and “perverse from a theological one.”³³ They are obviously disciples of neither Milton Terry nor Bernard Ramm nor grammatical-historical principles. They make such statements in connection with their practice of reading NT meanings back into the OT as additions to the grammatical-historical meaning of the OT. That, of course, is the basis for the system of covenant theology when it allegorizes large portions of the OT.

(9) Kenneth Gentry

The writings of theonomist Kenneth Gentry also illustrate the contemporary practice of finding multiple meanings in a single passage. When discussing the 144,000 of Revelation 7, he expresses the possibility that they may represent the church as a whole, including both Jews and Gentiles.³⁴ Yet just ten pages later he sees them definitely representing Christians of Jewish extraction.³⁵ He makes the latter identification because he needs something to tie the prophecy’s fulfillment to the land of Judea as his theological system requires. The double meaning assigned to the same group apparently does not phase him.

He goes further in connection with the theme verse of Revelation. He identifies the “cloud coming”—as he calls it—of Christ of Revelation 1:7 with the Roman invasion of Judea in A.D. 67-70.³⁶ On the next page he says Christ’s cloud coming was the Roman persecution of the church in A.D. 64-68. So for him, the cloud coming mentioned in the Revelation’s theme verse refers to two comings of Christ in the A.D. 60s. In other words the verse has two meanings.

The waves of uncertainty are about to capsize the ship.

(10) Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Marvin Pate

Another recent example of finding multiple meanings in a single passage comes in the methodology of Progressive Dispensationalism. That system allows for complementary additions in meaning which of necessity alter the original sense conveyed by a passage.³⁷ These later alterations are in view when Blaising and Bock

³³Ibid., 161.

³⁴Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell, Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) 223-24.

³⁵Ibid., 233.

³⁶Ibid., 143.

³⁷Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 392-93.

write, "There also is such a thing as complementary aspects of meaning, where an additional angle on the text reveals an additional element of its message or a fresh way of relating the parts of a text's message."³⁸ Bock admits at least in part that this amounts to a change of meaning:

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? . . . This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce "change" to it through addition.³⁹

He goes on with an attempt to justify the "no" part of his answer by calling the change "revelatory progress."⁴⁰ Revelatory progress, however, has to do with later additional revelation on the same general subject through another writing, not—as he holds—additional meanings being affixed to a single earlier passage.

Blaising and Bock illustrate their "multi-layered" approach to hermeneutics by identifying Babylon in Revelation 17–18 in three different ways: as Rome, a rebuilt Babylon, and other cities in "the sweep of history."⁴¹ Progressive dispensationalist Pate further illustrates the multi-meaning approach of that system when he joins with preterists in adding Jerusalem of the past to the meanings assigned to Babylon.⁴² His approach to Revelation utilizes an eclectic hermeneutic, combining elements of preterism and idealism with futurism.⁴³ In other words, he can agree with preterists, idealists, and futurists regarding the meaning of almost any passage in the book. His eclecticism leads him to ridiculous interpretations such as having the second, third, and fifth seals predictive of wars occurring long before Revelation was written.⁴⁴

Bock goes so far as to accuse this essay's writer of holding to "a similar multiple setting view for some prophetic texts in a way that parallels" what he means

³⁸Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993) 68.

³⁹Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15NS (1994):71.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 93-96. The "layered" approach approximates that of amillennialist Poythress who proposes four levels of communication in the symbolism of Revelation (Vern S. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6," *JETS* 36 [1993]:41-43).

⁴²C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensational View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 160-61, 168-69. Pate actually allows for dating the book both early in the sixties and late in the nineties.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 145-46.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 151-57. Even with Pate's highly improbable early dating of the Revelation in the sixties, the predicted events preceded the prophecy that predicted them, which sequence is of course absurd.

by typology.⁴⁵ He then quotes a lengthy paragraph from my chapter in *Israel: The Land and the People* to prove his point.⁴⁶ In that paragraph I point out how Paul in Acts 13:47 applies a portion of one of Isaiah's Servant Songs (Isa 42:6) to himself and his ministry. Acknowledging my recognition that this is an additional meaning not gleaned from a grammatical-historical analysis of Isa 42:6, he cites my further statement: "The new meaning of the Old Testament prophecies applied to the church introduced by New Testament writers did not cancel out the original meaning and their promises to Israel. God will yet restore the nation of Abraham's physical descendants as He promised He would."⁴⁷ Then he immediately adds, "This final statement is precisely what progressives say about how complementary meaning works."⁴⁸

In order to cast me in a "complementary hermeneutical" role, however, Bock had to skip a paragraph between the lengthy paragraph he quoted and my summary statement about God's continuing purpose to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy to Israel. In the intervening paragraph that he chose to omit, I made several points that complementary hermeneutics would not tolerate. In the first sentence I stated, "That [i.e., Paul's use of Isa 42:6] was not a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. . . ."⁴⁹ Complementary hermeneutics would say that it was a fulfillment. I also stated, "It [i.e., Paul's use of Isa 42:6] was an additional meaning furnished through the apostle to the Gentiles during the period of Israel's rejection."⁵⁰ In the same paragraph I made this point: "Any [OT texts] that they [NT writers] used relating to the new program and new people of God, the church, of necessity took on a different nature simply because OT prophecy did not foresee the NT church."⁵¹ No progressive dispensationalist advocating complementary hermeneutics would speak of the church being a new program and a new people in the sense that it was unforeseen in the OT.

I cannot say whether or not Professor Bock's omission of that paragraph was intentional, but the fact is he hopped right over the intervening paragraph so as to portray me in a certain way. His omission could have resulted from another characteristic of progressive dispensational hermeneutics, one that I have elsewhere

⁴⁵Darrell L. Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. by Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 107.

⁴⁶Ibid., 107-8.

⁴⁷Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Robert L. Thomas, "The Mission of Israel and the Messiah in the Plan of God," *Israel: The Land and the People*, ed. by H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 272.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

called “hermeneutical hopscotch.”⁵² A player in hopscotch chooses the squares he wants to hop into and avoids stepping in others that would lose the game for him. That parallels PD’s selective use of passages to support their system of complementary hermeneutics. Perhaps that accounts for the exclusion of the paragraph from my work that explicitly opposed complementary hermeneutics.

The Foundational Importance of the Single-Meaning Principle

The Standard

With statements such as the following, Terry puts special emphasis on the importance of single meaning when interpreting prophetic passages.

The hermeneutical principles which we have now set forth necessarily exclude the doctrine that the prophecies of Scripture contain an occult or double sense. . . . We may readily admit that the Scriptures are capable of manifold practical *applications*; otherwise they would not be so useful for doctrine, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. iii, 16). But the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or double sense we introduce an element of uncertainty in the sacred volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation. “If the Scripture has more than one meaning,” says Dr. Owen, “it has no meaning at all.” “I hold,” says Ryle, “that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it. . . . To say that words *do* mean a thing merely because they *can* be tortured into meaning it is a most dishonourable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.”⁵³

Terry adds,

We have already seen that the Bible has its riddles, enigmas, and dark sayings, but whenever they are given the context clearly advises us of the fact. To assume, in the absence of any hint, that we have an enigma, and in the face of explicit statements to the contrary, that any specific prophecy has a double sense, a primary and a secondary meaning, a near and a remote fulfilment, must necessarily introduce an element of uncertainty and confusion into biblical interpretation.⁵⁴

Though Terry’s use of his own principles in eschatology are at times suspect, his basic principles of hermeneutics make the most sense. That is what grammatical-historical interpretation consists of. Interpret each statement in light of the principles of grammar and the facts of history. Take each statement in its plain sense if it matches common sense, and do not look for another sense.

⁵²Robert L. Thomas, “A Critique of Progressive Dispensational Hermeneutics,” *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. by Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995) 423.

⁵³Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 493.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 495.

Initial Departure from the Standard

That is the way God has communicated with humans from the beginning. His first words to man in Gen 1:27-30 were,

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, *I have given every green plant for food*”; and it was so [NASB].

Scripture does not detail man’s response to God’s instructions, but apparently he understood them clearly, responded properly, and the human race was off to a great start.

But then God added to His communication with man. In Gen 2:16b-17 He said, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” [NASB]. How did Adam understand this statement? Apparently as God intended it, according to the grammar of His command and the historical situation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. In fact, he communicated it to Eve so well that Eve in Gen 3:2b-3 was able to repeat it to the serpent quite accurately: “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die’” [NASB]. That was her answer to the serpent when he asked about God’s prohibition against eating from trees in the Garden of Eden. So far Eve’s hermeneutics were in great shape as was God’s communicative effectiveness with mankind. She worded her repetition of God’s command slightly differently, but God probably repeated His original command to Adam in several different ways. Genesis has not preserved a record of every word He spoke to Adam.

When did confusion enter the picture? When the serpent suggested to Eve that God’s plain statement had another meaning. He said, “You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 4b-5, NASB). The serpent was probably not calling God a liar—he knew better than to suggest that in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden—but simply suggesting to Eve that she had misinterpreted God’s statement, or that by limiting her understanding to the plain sense of God’s words, she had missed a second meaning intended by God’s command. That she had missed God’s double-entendre or *sensus-plenior* was the serpent’s implication. The serpent’s message to Eve was, “This is just God’s way of telling you how to gain a knowledge of good and evil.” The first human experience on the “sea of uncertainty” resulted when Eve and then Adam bought into

the serpent's suggestion that God's statement was not limited to a single meaning. Such was how hermeneutical difficulties in understanding God's Word began.

Danger of Even a Slight Departure from the Standard

Zuck chooses the principle of single meaning, but treads on dangerous ground when, in following Elliott Johnson, he adds related implications or "related submeanings."⁵⁵ To speak of a single meaning on one hand and of related submeanings on the other is contradictory. A passage either has one meaning or it has more than one. No middle ground exists between those two options.

Zuck uses Psalm 78:2 to illustrate related implications or related submeanings. The psalmist Asaph writes, "I will open my mouth in a parable." Zuck limits the passage to one meaning, but says the passage has two referents, Asaph and Jesus who applied the words to Himself in Matthew 13:35.⁵⁶ Instead of saying the psalm has two referents, which in essence assigns two meanings to it, to say that the psalm's lone referent is Asaph, thereby limiting the psalm to one meaning, is preferable. Either Psalm 78:2 refers to Asaph or it refers to Jesus. It cannot refer to both. It is proper to say that Psalm 78:2 refers to Asaph, and Matthew 13:35 refers to Jesus. By itself, Psalm 78:2 cannot carry the weight of the latter referent.

In defending his double-referent view, Zuck apparently makes this same distinction, though he does not repudiate the double-referent terminology. He discusses Psalms 8, 16, and 22, noting that David wrote them about his own experiences, but that the NT applies them to Christ in a sense significantly different from how David used them.⁵⁷ His conclusions about these psalms and the NT use of them is accurate, but the psalms themselves cannot have more than one referent, hermeneutically speaking. Such would assign them more than one meaning. Neither the human author David nor the original readers of the psalms could have used the principles of grammar and the facts of history to come up with the additional referent or meaning that the NT assigns to the psalms. The source and authority for that additional meaning is the NT, not the OT.

A discussion of how this single-meaning principle works out in the broader discussion of the NT use of the OT must await a future article on the subject.

The Contemporary Dilemma

Evangelicals today are drifting on the sea of uncertainty and conjecture because of their neglect of foundational principles of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. They have become sophisticated in analyzing hermeneuti-

⁵⁵Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991) 274; cf. Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 34.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 275-77.

cal theory, but in that process have seemingly forgotten simple principles that exegetical giants of the past have taught. They are currently reaping the harvest of confusion that neglect of the past has brought upon them.

Daniel Wallace has provided a recent grammatical work entitled *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, a work that has a number of helpful features. In seeking to advance beyond the basics, however, Wallace has fallen into the same pit as so many others by his neglect of the basics of hermeneutics. One of his glaring errors violates the principle of single meaning about which the discussion above has spoken. In his consideration of a category he calls the “Plenary Genitive,” he labors the point that a particular passage’s construction may be at the same time both objective genitive and subjective genitive. In defense of his position he writes,

One of the reasons that most NT grammarians have been reticent to accept this category [i.e., “Plenary Genitive”] is simply that most NT grammarians are Protestants. And the Protestant tradition of a singular meaning for a text (which, historically, was a reaction to the fourfold meaning employed in the Middle Ages) has been fundamental in their thinking. However, current biblical research recognizes that a given author may, at times, be *intentionally* ambiguous. The instances of double entendre, *sensus plenior* (conservatively defined), puns, and word-plays in the NT all contribute to this view. Significantly, two of the finest commentaries on the Gospel of John are by Roman Catholic scholars (Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg): John’s Gospel, more than any other book in the NT, involves double entendre. Tradition has to some degree prevented Protestants from seeing this.⁵⁸

Instead of following traditional grammatical-historical interpretation and its insistence on limiting a passage to one meaning, Wallace consciously rejects the wisdom of past authorities so that he can keep in step with “current biblical research” and Roman Catholic scholars advocating multiple meanings for the same passage. His volume could have been very helpful, but this is a feature that makes it extremely dangerous.

Someone needs to sound the alarm about recent evangelical leaders who are misleading the body of Christ. A mass evangelical exodus from this time-honored principle of interpreting Scripture is jeopardizing the church’s access to the truths that are taught therein. Whether interpreters have forsaken the principle intentionally or have subconsciously ignored it, the damage is the same. The only hope of escape from the pit into which so many have fallen is to reaffirm the principle of single meaning along with the other hermeneutical principles that have served the believing community so well through the centuries.

⁵⁸Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 120 n. 134 [emphasis in the original].