

GENERAL REVELATION AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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General revelation's noticeable impact on biblical interpretation has resulted from applying a broader definition of general revelation than is justifiable. Considerations for prohibiting general revelation from including such matters as science, mathematics, literature, and music include the following: (1) "General" cannot refer the content of the revelation; (2) biblical references to general revelation limit it to information about God; (3) sin distorts human discoveries of the non-Christian world in secular fields; and (4) general revelation is readily accessible to all, not just to specialists in various fields. Hermeneutics deals with the principles of biblical interpretation. Unwarranted definitions of general revelation have led to widespread attempts to integrate general with special revelation, a step that is unwarranted because truth exists in varying degrees of certitude, all truth does not possess the same authority, all truth does not fall on receptive ears, and general revelation does not include the fields of secular study. The emergence of integrative efforts has coincided with a growing tentativeness in biblical hermeneutics because of the integration of secular disciplines with biblical hermeneutics. Psychology's promotion of self-love provides a good example of the adverse effects of general revelation and integration on biblical hermeneutics.

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In recent years, the field of general revelation has had a significant impact on methodology in biblical interpretation. An investigation of how that has happened divulges interesting information about the relationship between general revelation and biblical hermeneutics and whether or not that relationship is a healthy one. First in order of business in such an investigation must come definitions of general revelation, hermeneutics, and terms and expressions relevant to them.

DEFINITIONS

General Revelation

Its scope. Demarest and Lewis define general revelation—sometimes

referred to as natural revelation—as “the disclosure of God in nature, in providential history, and in the moral law within the heart, whereby all persons at all times and places gain a rudimentary understanding of the Creator and his moral demands.”¹ Demarest adds, “General revelation, mediated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God’s existence and character.”² He lists the sources of man’s knowledge of God through general revelation as a reminiscent knowledge of God, an intuitional knowledge of God (John 1:9; Rom 1:19, 32; 2:14-15), and an acquired general knowledge of God (Ps 19:1-6; Acts 17:22-31; Rom 1:19-21).³

Erickson notes that the traditional loci of general revelation are nature, history, and the constitution of the human being.⁴ His initial definition of the field coincides with that of Demarest and Lewis: “[G]eneral revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places.”⁵ But he

¹Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology: Knowing Ultimate Reality, the Living God*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 1:61.

²Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 14.

³Demarest, *General Revelation* 227-50.

⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 1:154; idem, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 34.

⁵Erickson, *Christian Theology* 1:153.

follows it up with a description that muddies the water somewhat: “It is general in two senses: its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times) and the content of the message (it is less particularized and detailed than special revelation).”⁶ Note the added connotation attached to the word “general” in reference to the *content* of general revelation. By applying the term “general” to the content of general revelation, he introduces an entirely new arena of subjects. That second sense opens the door for him to incorporate a wide variety of subjects as parts of general revelation.⁷ He does this later a number of times, as when discussing the harmful effects of sin on man’s ability to receive general revelation: “Thus, sin produces relatively little obscuring effect upon the understanding of matters of physics, but a great deal with respect to matters of psychology and sociology.”⁸

Its limitations. That second sense of “general” and the consequent widening of the realm of general revelation are beset by several problems. (1) The first is that the added meaning of “general” is contrary to the original and more traditional sense of general revelation, i.e., it is the revelation that comes to all people at all times and in all places. Certain data that Erickson would class as general revelation have come to light only recently and have not been available at all times, neither are they at present available to all people in all places. Some of the principles

⁶Ibid., 1:154.

⁷As an illustration of the breadth of general revelation when “general” is applied to the *content* of revelation, John D. Carter and Bruce Narramore reason, “If all truth is God’s truth, there is a basic unity between all disciplines. This unity is the basis for all attempts at integrating one’s Christian faith with academic and professional pursuits” (*The Integration of Psychology and Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979] 14). In such reasoning as that, they fall prey to the criticism of C. L. Deinhardt who writes, “A reading of these books [including that by Carter and Narramore] and related literature will show that the task of integration tends to be approached without substantial clarification of the writer’s position on general revelation” (“General Revelation As an Important Theological Consideration for Christian Counselling and Therapy,” *διδασκαλία* [Fall 1995]:50). Without thorough analysis, one could include just about anything he wants under the heading of general revelation.

⁸Erickson, *Christian Theology* 1:173; cf. 72, 378-79.

of mathematics and astronomy, for example, would not qualify as general revelation because their discovery came after many generations of humans had inhabited the earth. Also, those principles remain hidden to significant portions of people alive today, so they cannot qualify as general revelation. The same limitations apply to fine creations of art and music. Those have not always been neither are they currently available to all men everywhere. It is therefore contradictory to posit that double sense to the term “general” when speaking of general revelation because the two senses mutually exclude each other. To be classed as revelation, truth revealed to certain people and not to others would have to be some sort of special revelation.

(2) The second reason for the impossibility of a broad extension of the expression “general revelation” is a biblical one. The various passages so often cited as scriptural grounds for the existence of such revelation unite in projecting one grand subject of that revelation: God Himself. A sampling of the usual passages will reflect this:

Ps 19:1-6—“The heavens proclaim the glory of God and the expanse declares the works of His hand. Day to day utters speech and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech and there are no words where their voice is not heard. Their measuring-line has gone out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world; in them He has set up a dwelling-place for the sun. And it comes forth from its canopy like a bridegroom. It rejoices like a hero who runs a race. It goes forth from the end of the heavens, and its orbit to their ends; and nothing is hidden from its heat.”⁹

⁹Throughout this article, translations of Scripture are by the author.

In other words, the created order attests the divine glory, i.e., the external manifestation of God's inner being and attributes.¹⁰ Showers summarizes his detailed examination of Ps 19:1-6 as follows: "David's statements in Ps 19:1-6 imply that there are no time, language, or geographical limits on this revelation of knowledge concerning God through the heavens. Regardless of historic time of life, language, or geographical location, every human being has been exposed to it."¹¹

Rom 1:19-21—"Because what is known of God is manifest among them: for God has manifested it to them. For the invisible things of Him are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and godhood, so that they might be without excuse; because though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God nor were they thankful, but they became vain in their reasonings and their foolish heart was darkened."¹²

In effect, the Romans passage says that nature communicates a universal revelation of God, including His invisible qualities such as His eternal power and divine nature.¹³

Acts 14:15, 17—"And saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of passions like yours, preaching that you turn from these vain things to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all things which are in them. . . . Although He did not leave Himself without a witness, doing good, giving rain from heaven and fruit-bearing seasons, filling your hearts with nourishment and gladness.'"

Paul preached that God is creator of all and the providential provider of life's necessities.¹⁴

Acts 17:24-28—"God . . . made the world and all things in it. . . . He is the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things. . . . He made from one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined the appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation. .

¹⁰B. A. Demarest, "Revelation, General," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 944-45.

¹¹Renald Showers, "General Revelation (Part 1)," *Israel, My Glory* 53/4 (August-September 1995):23.

¹²C. L. Deinhardt ("General Revelation" 50) uses Rom 1:19-21 to conclude that God is the one revealed, not some abstract "truth."

¹³Demarest, "Revelation, General" 944-45.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

. . . He is not far from each one of us. . . . In Him we live and move and exist. . . . We also are His offspring.”

The apostle also proclaimed God as creator and sovereign of the universe, as self-sufficient, as the source of life and all good, as an intelligent being who formulates plans, as immanent in the world, and as the source and ground of human existence.¹⁵

¹⁵Ibid.

Those illustrations suffice to show that the content of general revelation deals with God and various aspects of His being and activities.¹⁶ Any efforts to widen the scope of general revelation to include information or theories about aspects of creation, man, or anything else besides God do not have support from the Bible, which limits the scope of general revelation to information about God.

Gangel includes science, mathematics, literature, music, and the like as parts of natural [i.e., general] revelation.¹⁷ He states that the humanities as well as the hard sciences are part of God's revelation.¹⁸ Both opinions are unwarranted. God's general revelation divulges information about God, but that is all.¹⁹

Someone might cite Rom 2:14-15 to prove that general revelation also includes man as its subject, but those verses are in a context dominated with accountability to God and His moral standards. Someone else might say that because people understand God, they understand man who was made in His image, and would thereby justify concluding that general revelation deals with the human make-up. That conclusion overlooks the damage inflicted on man by the fall and the consequent defacing of God's image in man. It is a major flaw to include characteristics of humanity in the scope of general revelation's content.

(3) A third reason for not broadening the scope of general revelation to include science, math, literature, music, and the like is that biblical teaching indicates that man's invariable response to general revelation is negative.²⁰ Romans 1:18 reveals that men "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." For human discoveries to

¹⁶Bruce A. Demarest and Richard J. Harpel express it this way: "Rather, general revelation performs the limited function of enabling all persons to know that God *is* and something of what He is like" ("Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies' and the Biblical Idea of Revelation," *BSac* 146 [July-September 1989]:335 [emphasis in the original]).

¹⁷Kenneth Gangel, "Integrating Faith and Learning: Principles and Process," *BSac* (April-June 1978):102.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Cf. Kenneth Kantzer, "The Communication of Revelation," *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, Merrill C. Tenney, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968) 64-69.

²⁰Demarest and Harpel, "Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies'" 335-36.

be categorized under the heading of general revelation, those discoveries must be objects of rejection by the non-Christian world, not revelations of truth.

Many heathen religions have derived false conclusions about God from general revelation. Whatever elements of apparent truth that remain couched within those religions are merely incidental. The broad thrust of their worship is a rebellion against God.²¹ Mbiti proposes the exactly opposite view of heathendom. He has several suggestions about the relationships between African traditional religions and Christianity. They include an overlapping of Christianity and non-Christian African religions, a large degree of compatibility of African traditional religions with Christianity, Christianity as fulfillment and savior of those traditional religions, and those religions as an enrichment for the Christian presence in Africa.²² Contrary to the biblical appraisal of human reaction to general revelation, he pictures African traditional religions as largely positive responses to what God has revealed of Himself to all people in all places and at all times. That contradicts what the Bible says about those responses.

Likewise, to suggest that discoveries of the secular Western mind are direct results of positive responses to general revelation is to contradict what Scripture says about unregenerate mankind's response to that revelation.

(4) A fourth problem with broadening the scope of general revelation relates to how that revelation is accessed. Knowledge of general revelation is a common possession of all people. It is not something they must seek to discover. It is not hidden truth such as the mysteries of special revelation revealed to the apostles and prophets. It is information that is common knowledge to all. As Bookman has written,

[G]eneral revelation is truth that is manifestly set forth before all humanity (Rom. 1:17-19; 2:14,15); it is truth so clear and irrefutable as to be known intuitively by all rational beings (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19); it is truth so authoritative and manifest that when people, by reason of willful rebellion, reject that truth, they do so at the cost of their own eternal damnation (Rom. 1:20; 2:1, 15).²³

If man's discovery of information comes at any time late in history, it cannot be general revelation. If it comes as a result of human ingenuity, it cannot be general

²¹I differ with Demarest and Harpel who state that "the meaning of the exchanged peace child [i.e., in Don Richardson's redemptive analogies] is a non redemptive content mediated by general revelation" ("Don Richardson's 'Redemptive Analogies'" 337). That practice was rather an integral part of the tribe's religion in their rebellion against God.

²²John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," *International Review of Missions* 59 (October 1970):432-38.

²³Douglas Bookman, "The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling," *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: A Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling*, John F. MacArthur, Jr., and Wayne A. Mack, eds. (Dallas: Word, 1994) 77.

revelation. General revelation is the common possession of all people of all time and in all places. It is divinely generated revelation imposed on the whole human race and impossible for mankind to avoid.

Common grace and God's providential acts. If human discoveries in medicine, science, and the like through the centuries are not part of God's general revelation, how does one account for them? Another look at God's common grace and His providential acts may explain their origin. Someone might ask, "Are not these synonymous with general revelation?"²⁴ Yes, common grace and providence do overlap with general revelation to some extent, but the latter in particular also operates beyond the boundaries of general revelation. God causes His sun to shine on the evil and the good and brings rain on the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45), but He does not do so in equal amounts at all times. Some benefit more and some less from His common grace exhibited in various places according to His providential wisdom, not as a part of general revelation. God's providence has allowed many Americans to grow up in a land where His Word is freely proclaimed, but not so with those who grew up in the U.S.S.R. earlier in the twentieth century. God's providence provided for the healing of Epaphroditus in Phil 2:27, 30, but it did not provide for the healing of Paul in 2 Cor 12:7-10. His providential actions are not the same toward all people at all times and in all places. Though God's providential acts can be a part of His general revelation, they also can differ in their effects from His general revelation. God's providential acts allow for a much larger span of interpretive variation than general revelation.

The content of general revelation is quite restricted. The discerning recipient of general revelation must observe its boundaries carefully in whatever use he makes of it. General revelation is the vestibule for special revelation, but it can never override special revelation. Before general revelation can be meaningful, a providential act of God is necessary to remove a person's blindness to the truth of general revelation. That is the act of regeneration,²⁵ which untethers a person's

²⁴Demarest attributes man's attainments in math, logic, and ethics to God's common grace (*General Revelation* 27), but he does not distinguish common grace from general revelation.

²⁵The Wesleyan tradition prefers to refer to prevenient grace that enables a person to believe rather

ability to reason as God reasons and thereby receive the truth of special revelation, which in turn enables a person to view general revelation in its proper light. General revelation alone cannot produce a natural theology as Thomas Aquinas proposed that it could. Blindness of the unregenerate prohibits it.²⁶

Biblical Hermeneutics

than to regeneration itself.

²⁶In commenting on current efforts to integrate general and special revelation, Deinhardt writes, “The way the task of integrating the ‘truths’ of science and nature with Scripture is typically stated in contemporary Christian counselling literature is more in keeping with the Thomistic conception of general revelation with its Greek seeking after ‘truth’ than with the Reformed tradition and its pessimism regarding the fallen nature’s ability to perceive truth adequately from general revelation without special checkpoints in place” (“General Revelation” 51).

In a 1996 *JETS* article, I expressed my dismay over the confusion generated by current hermeneutical trends.²⁷ Confusion of definitions is a significant part of that problem. I will not revisit that issue in this essay, but will simply state what has been a longstanding definition of the term “hermeneutics,” that it is the discipline that deals with the principles of biblical interpretation.²⁸ In light of this definition, the present essay purposes to discuss the relationship of general revelation to the rules of interpretation that guide the exegete in his analysis of the biblical text. Before that discussion, however, an examination of the proposed integration of general and special revelation is necessary.

INTEGRATION OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

“All truth is God’s truth” is a maxim that has frequently echoed through the ranks of evangelicalism in recent decades.²⁹ That refers to truth whether its source is special revelation or general revelation. As one has put it, “[T]here is but one knowledge of God.”³⁰ In the eyes of some, that unchallengeable proverb has created an absolute necessity that evangelicals be about the business of integrating general revelation with special revelation or, in other words, “one’s Christian faith [based on the Bible] with academic and professional pursuits.”³¹

As a result, academicians on evangelical campuses across the United States are currently expending enormous amounts of energy in attempts to harmonize discoveries in whatever their secular disciplines may be with the teachings of Scripture, or, probably more properly stated, in attempts to harmonize the interpretation of Scripture with discoveries derived from their own secular disciplines. Before advancing to probe that movement’s impact on hermeneutics, I want to suggest several flaws in such an integrative enterprise.

²⁷Robert L. Thomas, “Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?,” *JETS* 39/2 (June 1996):241-46.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 243-44, 247-49.

²⁹E.g., Gangel, “Integrating Faith” 102, and John D. Carter and Bruce Narramore, *Integration of Psychology and Theology* 13-14. D. A. Carson has written, “[A]ll truth is God’s truth, and what he has disclosed of himself in the Word (theology) or in nature is all of a piece” (“The SBJT Forum: How Does One Integrate Faith and Learning?,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology [SBJT]* 1/3 [1997]:76. Scott Hafemann adds, “The mantra chanted on all these campuses is the fundamental maxim, ‘All truth is God’s truth’ (the ‘*sola scripture*’ of Christian education) and its corollary in regard to practice, ‘The Integration of Faith and Learning’” (*Ibid.*, 79). An exception to the seemingly almost universal embracing of “all truth is God’s truth” as incontrovertible is Deinhardt, who writes, “The prevalence of this maxim among Christian writers could make one think it is a quotation from Scripture, with very likely a long history of theological treatises about it and biblical exegeses supporting its use in justifying ‘truth’ being drawn from science, nature, psychology, etc. But I have yet to find the text in the Bible” (“General Revelation” 51).

³⁰Demarest, *General Revelation* 251.

³¹Carter and Narramore, *Integration of Psychology* 14.

(1) First, though all truth is God's truth, truth exists in varying degrees of certitude. The absence of objective proof for a proposition that medical science, for example, may advance leaves that proposition open to question. Though it may be quite true, acceptance of that truth must be only tentative. Time and further developments in medicine may show that the proposition was only partially correct or perhaps even totally inaccurate. An article in a recent issue of the *Los Angeles Times* illustrates the tentative nature of scientific theories and discoveries. The article began,

In a major confirmation of Einstein's theory of gravity, astrophysicists have seen evidence that space gets dragged around by spinning objects like the train of a wedding dress circling a twirling bride. *If correct*, the findings—announced Thursday at a meeting in Colorado—pin down one of the final predictions of Einstein's theory, which forms the bedrock of physicists' understanding of all large-scale events in the universe.³²

Note the tentative nature of this major discovery: "if correct." In contrast, a statement of propositional truth in the Bible has the highest degree of certitude for anyone convinced of the inerrancy of Scripture.

In elaborating on the nineteenth-century conflict between Darwinism and theology, John D. Hannah has written, "The error of that century of clergyman was not that science and Scripture are not contradictory, but that the 19th-century form of scientific theory (i.e., developmentalism) was as infallible as Scripture. It warns us that, however impressive are the theories of our brilliant men of science, Scripture, not the former, is forever true."³³ He points out "the qualitative gulf between special and general revelation."³⁴ In the words of scientist Taylor Jones, "[T]he Word of God is inherently more reliable than science," and "[I]t is easier to interpret the meaning of Scripture than it is to interpret the meaning of nature."³⁵

(2) Second, though all truth is God's truth, all truth does not rest on the same authority. Diehl makes a special case to prove the objective authority of general revelation, but in his admission that propositional revelation has "a certain advantage" over nonpropositional revelation, he in essence concedes the point that

³²K. C. Cole, "Study Backs Einstein's Theory of Gravity," *Los Angeles Times* (November 7, 1997):A3 [emphasis added].

³³John D. Hannah, "*Bibliotheca Sacra* and Darwinism: An Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Conflict Between Science and Theology," *Grace Theological Journal* 4/1 [1983]:58.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Taylor Jones, "Science and the Bible: Guidelines for Harmonization," *The Master's Current* 4/2 [Fall 1997]:2. David W. Diehl compares the changing views of science to the progressive nature of special revelation in Scripture, until the canon became fixed, and contends that general revelation "continues to be progressive throughout the whole of human history" ("Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda," *JETS* 30/4 [December 1987]:453). That is another way of stating the absence of absolute authority in matters of general revelation.

general revelation falls short of special revelation in authority.³⁶ Researchers in various secular disciplines have proven themselves absolutely brilliant in many of their remarkable findings. We marvel at the unbelievable advances in the field of electronics as the twentieth century draws to a close, with such conveniences as computer technology, television transmission, internet services, e-mail communications, and the like. Their conclusions deserve to be called truth. But truth about electronics is still unfolding because an expert who knows everything there is to know has not emerged. No final authority—living or dead—exists in that field, not even Bill Gates. On the other side, when it comes to Scripture, propositional truth about God and every other subject covered therein is absolutely authoritative.

³⁶Diehl, "Evangelicalism and General Revelation" 448.

(3) Third, though all truth is God's truth, all truth does not fall on receptive ears. Truth from general revelation retains its truthful status only when received by nonexistent infallible humans. Sin has distorted man's ability to receive truth. If the vessel for receiving truth has a depraved mind, whatever it does by way of processing and reproducing that truth will be lacking. It may lack more in some instances than in others, but a blinding by sin will always exist.³⁷

Theological authorities have varied among themselves regarding what areas that blindness affects. Kantzer has put it this way:

The noëtic effect of sin is not uniform through the entire range of human knowledge. In some areas the unbeliever may think as clearly or even more cogently than the believer (Luke 16:8). From this variableness there is evident a law of proportional rationality: *the nearer a man gets to the vital core of his obedience to God, the greater is the corruption of his thinking due to sin.*³⁸

Erickson speaks of the partial removal of that blindness in certain areas: "Thus, sin produces relatively little obscuring effect upon the understanding of matters of physics, but a great deal with respect to matters of psychology and sociology."³⁹ Demarest recognizes a distinction between common grace and special grace in the matter of enlightenment when he writes, "Whereas Scripture indicates that the human mind is enabled by common grace to intuit eternal, changeless principles, including fundamental truths about God, only special grace enables the sinner to perceive redemptive verities."⁴⁰ Though these authorities may disagree over how sin blinds the minds of the unregenerate, they all agree that it does so.

In response, some may argue that sin blinds the mind of the exegete of Scripture too, but at least two factors distinguish biblical interpretation from interpretation of general revelation. One is the propositional nature of the truth of Scripture, a property that general revelation cannot claim. The other is the promise to the believer of the Spirit's illumination of Scripture (cf. John 16:13; Rom 8:14;

³⁷Deinhardt observes that Christian-counseling writers prescribe no special qualifications, spiritual or otherwise, for those who garner truth from science, psychology, and human experience ("General Revelation" 51).

³⁸Kantzer, "Communication of Revelation" 67 [emphasis in the original].

³⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology* 1:173.

⁴⁰Demarest, *General Revelation* 194.

1 Cor 2:15).

(4) Fourth, probably the major flaw in an integrative watchword that all truth is God's truth derives from wrong assumptions about the range of general revelation, however. As proposed in discussion under the previous heading of "General Revelation," information and discoveries originating in secular fields do not belong in the category of God's revealed truth. They therefore have no basis for a ranking alongside God's special revelation. They may appear to be beneficial to one or another generation and thereby earn at least temporarily the designation of truth, but they must always be tentative because they lack the certitude and authority of God's revealed truth. They are not on a plane with the body of truth in the Bible and are therefore unworthy of being integrated with it.

INTEGRATION AND HERMENEUTICS

Though integration of Scripture with almost every field of secular studies has been proposed, probably among evangelicals the field of Christian psychology has in recent years pursued that process more vigorously than others. At a point in the not-too-distant past, Christians viewed psychology as Christianity's enemy, largely due to the anti-God stances of outstanding secular psychologists. Since about 1960 and especially since the 1980s, the relationship between the two has changed radically.⁴¹ Evangelical Christians have turned *en masse* to psychology as evidenced by such things as radio talk shows, Christian literature, and new graduate and undergraduate programs in Christian institutions of higher learning. The popularity of James Dobson and his Focus on the Family organization is a conspicuous illustration of the radical change that has come about in evangelical attitudes toward psychology.

Interestingly, a radical shift in evangelical perspectives on biblical hermeneutics has occurred during that same time period. The roots of the change go back to the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant.⁴² Liberal theologians and exegetes have shown the effects of Kant's dualistic philosophy for many generations, but in the last thirty to forty years, evangelicals have begun to manifest the same characteristics in the principles of hermeneutics they apply. A landmark work that helped set the tone for the change was Anthony C. Thiselton's *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, released in 1980. By giving an evangelical slant to Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others, Thiselton served as a catalyst

⁴¹D. G. Benner, "Psychology and Christianity," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 892-93.

⁴²Cf. Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (coauthored with W. C. Kaiser, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 234-35; D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994) 99.

for a change in the whole complexion of the evangelical interpretive enterprise.⁴³

Was it coincidental that two such significant changes in evangelicalism, one in the integrative emphasis and the other in biblical hermeneutics, occurred almost simultaneously, or is there some connection between the two? The following discussion will provide a probable answer to that question.

Connections between Integration and Recent Hermeneutics

⁴³Cf. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* 30-31.

Several links between evangelical integration and hermeneutics will show a kinship between the two trends.⁴⁴

Tendencies toward tentativeness in biblical interpretation. One affinity between the two fields in recent developments is of a more indirect nature. In defense of their integrative enterprise, Carter and Narramore have written,

All conflicts between theology must, therefore, be conflicts between either the *facts* of Scripture and the *theories* of psychology, the *facts* of psychology and our (mis)interpretation of Scripture, or between the *theories* of psychology and our (mis)interpretations of Scripture.⁴⁵

Note how their analysis places what they would refer to as general revelation on the same plane as special revelation and their expressed openness to correct a human misunderstanding of either one with a proper understanding of the other.

That raises the issue of how certain an interpreter of Scripture can be about his conclusions. Guy raises the same issue of uncertainty. Acknowledging that the Bible reveals ultimate truth about man and his existence, he warns that humans are prone to the same errors and inaccuracies in their interpretation of Scripture as they are in their observation and interpretation of the data of general revelation.⁴⁶ He goes on to note that assumptions about truth revealed in the Bible need not take precedence over assumptions about science since both are plagued by error and

⁴⁴James DeYoung and Sarah Hurty welcome the impact of secular discoveries on hermeneutics: "The veritable explosion of understanding in such diverse fields as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology has had a major impact on our understanding of hermeneutics. New texts on the topic are necessary as we enter the dialogue in such fields, learn the good things from them, and revise our approach to understanding the Bible" (*Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* [Gresham, Ore.: Vision House, 1995] 22).

⁴⁵Carter and Narramore, *Integration of Psychology* 22 [emphasis in the original].

⁴⁶James D. Guy, Jr., "The Search for Truth in the Task of Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 8/1 (Spring 1980):29.

inaccuracy.⁴⁷ In essence, those writing from an integrationist perspective question the reliability of grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible in yielding certainty about the meaning of propositional revelation.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

That same tentativeness about biblical interpretation has emerged in recent hermeneutical discussions among evangelical biblical scholars. For instance, McCartney and Clayton have written, “An individual interpreter must, in humility, always hold as tentative his or her perceptions of the divine meaning, subject to the Holy Spirit’s directing of the church.”⁴⁸ That principle stands in an interesting contrast to Luther who held that it was possible to be certain about the meaning of Scripture.⁴⁹

Another example of recent tendencies toward uncertainty comes from Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard who advocate treating all predictive prophecy tentatively. Their reason for this is their view that readers do not know whether it will be fulfilled literally.⁵⁰

Osborne demonstrates a further proclivity toward tentativeness among hermeneuticians: “To this extent theological constructions tend to be tentative and provisional. . . .”⁵¹ He explains,

We do not simply move from Bible to theological assertions, and those assertions are not automatic reproductions of biblical truths. Rather, all decisions are filtered through a network of tradition and preunderstanding, which itself exerts tremendous influence upon our interpretations and choices. To this extent each decision we make is provisional and we must establish a continual dialogue between tradition and biblical text in the spiral upward to truth.⁵²

Further, he states, “Since neutral exegesis is impossible, no necessarily ‘true’ or final

⁴⁸McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* 164.

⁴⁹Cited by *ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁰William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 306.

⁵¹Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral, A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 307.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 308.

interpretation is possible.”⁵³

Silva, in beginning a chapter on “Determining Meaning,” states, “The truth of the matter is that, at least in some cases, our discussion will lead to *greater* uncertainty; I take comfort, however, in the fact that such a development could be interpreted, if we may trust Socrates, as the clearest proof of progress.”⁵⁴

⁵³Ibid., 412.

⁵⁴Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 137 [emphasis in the original].

One might even venture to say recent trends in hermeneutics focus on how much an interpreter cannot know with certainty more than on how much he can learn with confidence from the text. Contemporary hermeneutical authorities tend to open the door to seemingly endless possibilities of meaning for a single text. Yet traditional grammatical-historical interpretation seeks the one meaning that is correct and settles on that meaning with conviction and certainty. Terry has said, “Its [i.e., the grammatico-historical method’s] fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey.”⁵⁵ Later in the same work, he adds, “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that words and sentences can have but one signification in one and the same connection.”⁵⁶ His explanation of the traditional method does not anticipate the uncertainties that have become the theme of current hermeneutical theorists.

Parallel developments among evangelical integrationists and hermeneutical authorities are obvious. Both emphasize the possibility of errors in Bible interpretation, thereby opening the door for interpretive corrections originating in a secular field of investigation. With so much attention to the subjective inclinations of the interpreter, current hermeneutical trends have in effect invited secular fields to reinterpret the Bible in terms that they dictate. That is exactly the invitation that integrationists welcome. Beyond the chronological parallels between the emerging of integrational emphases and changes in evangelical hermeneutics, therefore, the two phenomena show an indirect relationship to each other that must be more than coincidental.

Direct impact of integration on hermeneutics. The relationship between integration and hermeneutics is not only indirect. A most direct correlation exists between the emergence of integrative efforts and the change in evangelical hermeneutics. Earlier discussion called attention to the significant influence of Anthony Thiselton’s volume on hermeneutics. The subtitle of that work—“New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description”—reflects an attempt to merge the secular field of philosophy with biblical hermeneutics. In his persuasive arguments that hermeneutics properly pursued must incorporate *self*-understanding as the starting point for NT interpretation, Thiselton cites many philosophers and NT scholars affected by secular philosophy who are by no means friendly toward evangelical Christianity. That is exactly what philosophy does—focus on man’s reasoning capacity as its principal object rather than on the Scripture to be

⁵⁵Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2d ed. (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 173.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 205.

interpreted.

Throughout his book Thiselton is critical of anyone who practices a “pre-Kantian” type of interpretation. At one point he concludes, “We cannot put the clock back to the era before Kant. Objectivity is not the same as objectivism, and the relevance to hermeneutics of the Cartesian model of knowledge must not be assumed without question and accorded a privileged position.”⁵⁷ He makes Kant’s dualistic philosophy a part of the hermeneutical task whereby an interpreter must first of all cope with his own subjective realm of reality before tackling the realm of meaning attached to the biblical text. He endorses Gadamer’s observation that “[t]raditional hermeneutics . . . limits the horizon to which understanding belongs, and pays insufficient attention to human facticity.”⁵⁸ It amounts to “naive objectivity”⁵⁹ to think that one can escape his own prejudgments and arrive at a final conclusion regarding the meaning of a text.

Thiselton ridicules the Reformers on this point, since they did not have the “benefit” of Kant’s philosophy.⁶⁰ One wonders how the church’s interpretation of Scripture accomplished anything worthwhile prior to the time of Kant. The integrationist must entertain a sort of camouflaged disdain for meaning extracted from the Bible prior to the “enlightenment” and its provisions of techniques for synthesizing the Bible with discoveries of modern philosophy.

Another indication of integration’s direct influence on evangelical hermeneutics appears in Erickson’s analysis of the traditional “single-meaning” or “single-intention” view of hermeneutics. His second problem with that view relates to an understanding of authorial intention. He advocates the existence of a significant reservoir of unconscious material in every human personality, including the writers of Scripture. He criticizes Hirsch and Kaiser for defending the single intention of each author as being based on “a pre-twentieth-century understanding of

⁵⁷Anthony C. Thiselton, *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 441.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 304.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 304, 315.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 316-17.

psychology,” an understanding that “proceeds as if Freud had never written.”⁶¹ Erickson proposes that evangelical hermeneutics must incorporate elements of psychology discovered by a non-Christian psychologist if it is to yield an adequate understanding of the biblical text. That is integration of the first order, a process that produces profound differences in biblical hermeneutics and amounts to significant deviations from a grammatical-historical approach to the Bible. An exegesis that probes a biblical author’s subconscious meaning—i.e., “depth psychology”—is a recent addition to evangelical hermeneutics. The traditional method had no provision for discovering an author’s unintentional intention.

⁶¹Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 21-22.

In another connection, Erickson supports using an integrative motif in formulating theology.⁶² His choice of an integrative motif is the magnificence of God.⁶³ He cautions against letting that central interpretive motif affect the interpretation of passages where it is not relevant, resulting in eisegesis rather than exegesis. Yet, in spite of Erickson's cautionary words, any time one comes to a passage with a preconceived meaning in mind, he cannot help but impose an eisegesis on that text, even when that motif is allegedly irrelevant. Though he does not make the connection, Erickson's integrative motive in handling the biblical account of creation imposes the results of science onto the biblical text, with substantial weight being given to geological evidence.⁶⁴ In connection with the conflict between the Bible and geology, he also mentions the conflict between the Bible and the behavioral sciences, noting that the prime area of tension between general revelation and Christianity today relates to the doctrine of man.⁶⁵ He suggests that psychology is useful in supplementing biblical revelation and enhancing our understanding of what conversion, regeneration, and sanctification involve and of what the image of God in man consists of.⁶⁶ One can only conclude that, consciously or unconsciously, Erickson's integrative motif must also include geology and psychology.

The Effect of Integration on Hermeneutics—An Illustration

The effect of integration on hermeneutics has been widespread. Many illustrations present themselves, but one that has received perhaps the greatest

⁶²Erickson, *Christian Theology* 1:77.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 1:78.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 1:72, 378-82.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 1:378.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 1:72.

notoriety is psychology's insistence on trying to promote self-love, self-esteem, and self-worth from Scripture. Some view Lev 19:18—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"—as though it were a command to love yourself,⁶⁷ and others view it as setting forth a desirable and necessary part of the emotional health of every person.⁶⁸ How does that integrationist preunderstanding of the verse compare with its grammatical-historical interpretation?

⁶⁷E.g., C. W. Ellison, "Self-Esteem," *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, David G. Benner, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 1047; James Dobson, *Hide or Seek*, rev. ed. (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1979) 185-86.

⁶⁸E.g., Tim Stafford, "Don't Buy the Lie," *Campus Life* (September 1992):38; Paul D. Meiker et al., eds., *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 143; Bruce Narramore, *You're Someone Special* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 37-38; David Seamands, *Healing Grace* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1988) 141-42.

A simple reading of Lev 19:18—cited by Jesus Christ as the second greatest commandment (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33)—divulges that the command pertained to loving others, not oneself.⁶⁹ The “as yourself” part of the command only furnishes a comparison of how Jesus’ disciples are to love others. The psychological rejoinder to that straightforward meaning is that a person should love himself; otherwise, he cannot love others.⁷⁰ That, however, reads an integrative motif into the verse once again. The “as yourself” phrase says that a person *does* love himself, not that he *should* love himself. Furthermore, the psychologist errs when saying that the inevitable self-love is “appropriate self-love, self-care, and self-appreciation.”⁷¹ On the contrary, it is rather a person’s natural compulsion for his own welfare in every facet of life.⁷² That compulsion does not have to be learned and may have to be dispensed with as a requirement of Christian discipleship (Matt 10:37-39; 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24; 14:26-27; John 12:25).⁷³

Yet the integrationists will not give up. Narramore, even though he admits that psychologists have wrongly used Lev 19:18 to support self-love,⁷⁴ undertakes a word study of *agapa* (“I love”) in the verse to prove biblical support for loving oneself.⁷⁵ He concludes, “Agape love is a deep attitude of esteem and respect. This is the basic meaning of biblical self-love.”⁷⁶ He arrives at his conclusion by assigning two of the secondary meanings of *agapa* to its use in Lev 19:18, meanings that are totally inappropriate to any context where “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” appears.⁷⁷ That practice is hermeneutically unjustifiable.

He and other integrationists also choose to bypass NT evidence that specifically repudiates self-love as an indicator of the arrival of the last days and their accompanying grievous times (2 Tim 3:1-2). So intent on integrating Scripture with secular psychological dogma that self-esteem is vital for mental and emotional health are they that they leave no stone unturned to find some Scripture they can force into supporting that teaching.⁷⁸ Narramore cites “the entire fabric of divine

⁶⁹Cf. Seamonds, *Healing Grace* 141-42.

⁷⁰E.g., *ibid.*, 142.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²John Makujina, “The Second Greatest Commandment and Self-Esteem,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 8/2 (Fall 1997):222.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 223.

⁷⁴Narramore, *You're Someone Special* 21-22.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁷Cf. Makujina, “Second Greatest Commandment” 24-25.

⁷⁸E.g., Narramore, *You're Someone Special* 22. Narramore states the driving motivation behind his efforts to find biblical support for self-love: “[U]nder the influence of humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, many of us Christians have begun to see our need for self-love and self-

revelation” as supporting self-love.⁷⁹ In particular, he uses man’s creation in the image of God for that purpose, citing 1 Cor 11:7 and James 3:8-10. But he never notices that those verses relate to how a person views others, not how he views himself. The approach that purposes to find a predetermined meaning is devastating to grammatical-historical hermeneutics.⁸⁰

Such will be the case in every integrative effort. Psychology’s insistence on promoting self-esteem is only one example. Fallacious hermeneutics will be the avenue to corrupting the accurate meaning of the text every time someone tries to impose the conclusions of secular studies on the Bible.

GENERAL REVELATION AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS SUMMARIZED

This study commenced with definitions of general revelation and biblical hermeneutics. It has devoted primary attention to general revelation because of the common error of classifying discoveries of man in secular fields as part of God’s general revelation. The biblical guidelines to general revelation limited its scope to revelation about God that is available to all men in all places and at all times, and therefore to extend its scope to encompass discoveries in various fields of secular investigation is unwarranted. The conclusion about hermeneutics was that it is the discipline that deals with the principles of biblical interpretation.

The next part dealt with the proposed integration of general and special revelation based on the maxim “all truth is God’s truth.” Four flaws in the theoretical

esteem” (ibid., 22). In doing so, he commits the error commented upon by Deinhardt: “There is a lack of attention given to the need to evaluate specific claims of psychology and psychotherapy regarding their validity, reliability and empirical soundness as ‘science’” (“General Revelation” 51).

⁷⁹Narramore, *You’re Someone Special* 22-24.

⁸⁰About two decades ago, J. Robertson McQuilkin predicted the following: “My thesis is that in the next two decades the greatest threat to Biblical authority is the behavioral scientist who would in all good conscience man the barricades to defend the front door against any theologian who would attack the inspiration and authority of Scripture while all the while himself smuggling the content of Scripture out the back door through cultural or psychological interpretation” (“The Behavioral Sciences under the Authority of Scripture,” *JETS* 20 [1977]:37). His prediction has proven to be quite accurate.

foundation for such integration showed the questionable nature of the proposal: truth exists in varying degrees of certitude, all truth does not possess the same authority, all truth does not fall on receptive ears, and all truth does not fall into the range of general revelation.

The final section of the above discussion developed several relationships between integration and hermeneutics. First was the tentativeness in biblical interpretation that has paralleled the development of the integrative movement and the recent changes in evangelical hermeneutics, departures from a traditional understanding in both areas that came at the same time. The next section showed the direct impact of integrating biblical hermeneutics with philosophy and psychology in producing recent changes in evangelical hermeneutics. Changes in biblical hermeneutics actually resulted from an integrative process. Then followed a specific example to show how integration has resulted in drastic alterations to traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

In other words, general revelation and hermeneutics are unhappy bedfellows for anyone who wants to maintain strict consistency in applying grammatical-historical hermeneutics to the text of the Bible. Milton Terry anticipated this unhappy alliance many years ago when he wrote,

Others have attempted various methods of 'reconciling' science and the Bible, and these have generally acted on the supposition that the results of scientific discovery necessitate a new interpretation of the Scripture records, or call for new principles of interpretation. The new discoveries, they say, do not conflict with the ancient revelation; they only conflict with the old interpretation of the revelation. We must change our hermeneutical methods, and adapt them to the revelations of science. How for the thousandth time have we heard the story of Galileo and the Inquisition.⁸¹

Terry continues,

Hasty natures, however, indulging in pride of intellect, or given to following the dictum of honoured masters, may fall into grievous error in either of two ways: They may shut their eyes to facts, and hold to a delusion in spite of evidence; or they may become the obsequious victims of 'science falsely so called.' That certainly is a false science which is built upon inferences, assumptions, and theories, and yet presumes to dogmatize as if its hypotheses were facts. And that is a system of hermeneutics equally false and misleading which is so flexible, under the pressure of new discoveries as to yield to the putting of any number of new meanings upon an old and common word.⁸²

In following Terry's advice, this study concludes that what is or what is alleged to be general revelation should have no effect on rules for interpreting the

⁸¹Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 533.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 534.

Bible, because the moment it does so, it distorts those rules and hinders a quest for true meaning through grammatical-historical principles. The reasons it does so are three in number: too broad a definition assigned to general revelation, an oversimplified view of truth, and attempts to integrate disciplines whose natures are wholly incompatible because one has views of truth that are suspect and the other does not.