

INSPIRED SUBJECTIVITY AND HERMENEUTICAL OBJECTIVITY

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Objectivity is the goal of hermeneutics so that the text of Scripture may speak for itself. For an interpreter to bring his subjective views to the text jeopardizes the authority of the Word. Two forces at work among evangelicals today tend to increase the subjective element in interpretation. The first is the principle of the analogy of faith or the harmonizing of different texts with one another. Harmonizing is desirable, but if taken too far, it can distort a text by inserting theological motifs into places where they do not belong. Doctrinal considerations should be introduced only to solve complexities of certain passages. The second force is the practices of NT authors. Sometimes the interpreter must choose between using objective methods and following the example of NT authors in their use of the OT. He must maintain objectivity rather than pattern his exegesis after the NT in matters of typology, symbolism, role models, and fulfillments. The difference between contemporary exegetes and NT writers is that the former must abide by principles of hermeneutical objectivity while the former were led to follow the pattern of inspired subjectivity. Inspired subjectivity is not an option in this day and time.

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Ever since the Reformation we have prided ourselves in our commitment to the historical-grammatical method. The science of hermeneutics has developed to give shape to that method and to affirm our commitment to the authority of the Scriptures and the importance of objectivity² in interpretation. Yet pockets of

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²By "objectivity" we do not refer to absolute objectivity that allows the interpreter to repress or subordinate culture and perspective totally. We only refer to the procedures that assume that the author is a competent communicator and capable of being understood. In recent terminology we might refer to

subjectivity have not only been retained, but have thrived. Subjective methods are healthy and prosperous in the pews of our churches, firmly entrenched in our pulpits, and are not strangers to the halls of our seminaries. We are eager to display and celebrate the bankruptcy of the disreputable allegorical method, yet continue to promote the same sort of subjectivism in our use of typology, our interpretation of symbols in prophetic literature, the identification of fulfillment, and the pervasive presence of role model interpretation of the OT, to name a few of the more prominent examples. Most of these concern the use of the OT, either by the New Testament authors or by the church. In this essay I will address the relative merits of objective and subjective approaches and the role of hermeneutics with regard to each. I will then consider the areas where subjectivism is prevalent and discuss how those areas ought to be approached. In conclusion, I will be able to respond to often asked questions such as, "Can we reproduce the hermeneutics of the NT authors?" and "Did the prophets understand what they were talking about?" The objective of this essay is that we might see clearly how the OT can be handled consistently according the principles of the historical-grammatical method.

It has long been recognized that no one is capable of being entirely objective, but that does not mean that objective methods are impractical. We can be committed to objectivity, yet at the same time realize that absolute objectivity is only an ideal that can never be fully achieved. This commitment to objectivity is built into our hermeneutics. As a science, hermeneutics espouses the value and necessity of objectivity. Such an element is theologically mandated because in the interpretation of Scripture we realize that the most important aspects of the text come with the text, rather than being brought to the table by the interpreter. The objective nature of hermeneutics is designed to allow the text to speak for itself. The extent to which we, as fallen beings, bring our own subjective views to the text is proportional to the degree in which the authority of the inspired message of the Word of God is jeopardized. We must not have the means at our disposal to make the text say what we want it to say. It must be allowed to speak for itself, address its own agenda, and establish its own set of presuppositions. We value objective methods because they offer greater assurance that the text is operating independently of the prejudices of the interpreter.

On the other hand, we must be quick to admit that an observation or interpretation is not necessarily wrong if it is subjective. In interpretation of the text, however, we always need to approach a proposed theory with the question, "Why should I believe that?" Our beliefs about the text and its purpose suggest to us that the message of the text is accessible to anyone and not subject to being given private personal interpretations that will differ from one individual to the next and from one minute to the next. For a text to have independent authority it must be shown to have some autonomy, a source independent from the reader. The extent to which the message originates with the reader is the extent to which the divine authority is

compromised. If the reader brings the message and meaning to the text, that message and meaning carry only the reader's authority. The importance of objectivity concerns not truth, but authority. Again, this is the result of our current theological convictions about the Bible. If our hermeneutics and theological convictions both lead in this direction, what forces perpetuate the inclination to subjectivity? Historically, two issues emerge: (1) the principle of "analogy of faith" and (2) the practices of the NT authors.

Analogy of Faith

We are well aware that the church has not always been committed to objectivity. The allegorical method dominated the church for many centuries. One of the results of the Enlightenment was the decline of the characteristic subjectivism of interpretation and the development of the science of hermeneutics. Such major changes in thinking, however, do not occur overnight, and it often takes some time before all of the ramifications are identified and all the adjustments made. Such is still the case as we seek to apply the historical-grammatical method to every aspect of our interpretation. The Reformers allowed for departures from a grammatical-historical interpretation on the principle called "analogy of faith." This concept was incorporated into the Scots Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Westminster Confession.¹

For the Westminster Divines, the Bible was a book that told one unified story—the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. They referred to that theme sometimes as the covenant. The proper interpretation of Scripture did not take the verses individually and plug them in as proof texts of a systematic theology. The right interpretation of Scripture allowed the analogy of faith to operate. It interpreted the individual verses as parts of the overall message. This was the interpretative model that informed the statement: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." The Scripture could be "searched and known" by understanding all the verses as parts of a whole unified biblical story.²

While harmonization of texts is desirable and necessary, the concept of analogy of faith can be taken too far such that it becomes a tool of theological anachronizing by inserting important theological motifs into places where they do not belong. Concerns for unity and coherence cannot be used to homogenize all texts. Those concerns lead us to expect harmony, but not homogeneity.³

¹Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 213-14.

²Ibid., 215-16.

³See D.A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and J. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 92-93, for some further discussion of the limitations of analogy of faith.

Analogy of faith was to be invoked where reconciliation or harmonization was necessary. No part of Scripture was to be interpreted in such a way that it would be in contradiction with another part of Scripture. But the determination of when harmonization was necessary is entirely dependent on the exegetical skills of the interpreter and the presuppositions that he holds. So, for instance, Luther believed that James' view of justification needed to be subordinated to Paul's by analogy of faith because he did not see how they could co-exist. Subsequent interpreters, however, were able to approach the two and not find their views at all mutually exclusive. Thus a sensitivity to what Paul and James were each actually saying eliminated the need to invoke analogy of faith. As a result, Luther's application of analogy of faith in this instance proved only to demonstrate exegetical weakness and ended up compromising the authority of Scripture by opening the door of subjectivity.

On the surface, the statement that "scripture interprets itself" seems to be another pillar upholding the principle of *sola scriptura*. But Luther's additional statement "passages . . . can only be understood by a rule of faith" raises the question of how anyone acquires the authority for knowing just what that rule is. As we consider how Luther and Calvin elaborated on this principle of the analogy of faith, it becomes clear that, in the final analysis, the subjective preference of the theologian himself is the only basis upon which this all-important norm for interpreting the rest of scripture is established. Consequently, the analogy-of-faith principle does not undergird but undermines the *sola scriptura* principle.⁴

There is another important distinction to be made: that is the difference between reconciling an apparent contradiction in the teachings of two biblical authors (the true function of analogy of faith) and glossing a theological concept into a context where it has no ostensible role. So, for instance, the analogy of faith concerning the doctrine of the Trinity may need to be invoked to help untangle some of the complexities of Jesus' subordination of Himself to the Father's will in Gethsemane. A Trinitarian issue is resident in the text, and we expect to depend on other Scriptures to give guidance in interpreting this one. It is an entirely different matter when the Trinity is brought into the question of why plural pronouns are used in Gen 1:26. The nature of the problem does not commend itself contextually as a Trinitarian issue and no threat to the doctrine of the Trinity is posed by the passage. Analogy of faith would not, therefore, be a legitimate basis for importing Trinitarian theology into this text. There is no contradiction, apparent or real, that needs resolution. There is no reason to expect that this passage will require harmonization to Trinitarian doctrine.

In recognition of the problems with how "analogy of faith" has been applied, recent studies in hermeneutics have preferred the alternative called "analogy

⁴Daniel P. Fuller, "Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology*, ed. R. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 196-97.

of Scripture” whereby isolated or unusual texts would not be used to compromise or call into question the more extensive, clearer teachings on the subject.⁵

New Testament Authors

Prominent among the causes of our neglect in applying the objective principles of the historical-grammatical method to every area of interpretation is the fact that there are a number of situations where it appears that the biblical authors themselves are not restricting themselves to objective criteria and are not being particularly historical-grammatical in their own approach to the Scriptures.⁶ We then find ourselves torn between following the objective methods that we espouse in theory, or following the lead of the authors of Scripture and utilizing the methods they model. How can such a dilemma be resolved?

There are four areas of tension, four major areas, that I have identified where I believe that evangelicals continue to engage in subjective methods with impunity. We will now survey each of those areas in order to seek a solution: either explaining why they should be handled differently from other hermeneutical issues, or arriving at guidelines that will help us achieve hermeneutical consistency.

Types

Typology is closest to allegory and perhaps should be treated first. Typology is the identification of a relationship of correspondence between New and Old Testament events or people, based on a conviction that there is a pattern being worked out in the plan of God. Since this correlation is not identifiable until both type and antitype exist, typology is always a function of hindsight. One thing is never identified as a type of something to come. Only after the latter has come can the correspondence be proclaimed. As a result, one will never find confirmation of the typological value of the type in its initial context. This creates a real problem for hermeneutics which maintains that achieving the results of typology depends on an analysis of the context.

How should the interpreter come to a conclusion that one thing is a type of another? Since typology involves the identification of a relationship, the interpreter must detect some similarity between the proposed type or antitype. But if we are going to accept a typological relationship as coming with the inspired authority of God’s Word, we want to have more than someone’s imagination as a basis. Before we dismiss the whole area as hopelessly subjective, however, we must admit that the

⁵E.g., Grant Osborne. *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991) 11, 273-74.

⁶All treatments of the use of the OT by the NT grapple with this issue; one example will suffice: “Does the method of interpreting Scripture that Jesus and the apostles taught us differ from the principles that contemporary interpreters regard as sound exegesis? Or, are the methods of Jesus and the apostles of the NT closer to the practices of rabbinic midrash and Qumranian pesher? And, if they are, should we also follow that Christological and apostolic lead and reproduce their kind of exegesis when we read or study the Bible?” (W. C. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* [Chicago: Moody, 1985] 17).

NT authors at times utilized typology. How did they proceed and what can be observed about their results?

The first observation we must make is a very significant one. The NT typologists did not get their typological correspondence from their exegetical analysis of the context of the OT. Hermeneutics is incapable of extracting a typological meaning from the OT context because hermeneutics operates objectively while the typological identification can only be made subjectively. A second observation that needs to be made is that the NT authors never claim to have engaged in a hermeneutical process, nor do they claim that they can support their findings from the text; instead, they claim inspiration.

Remember that our standard question concerning an interpreter's findings is "Why should I believe that?" For most of us as interpreters, we would like to be able to reply with an arsenal of objective pieces of evidence that would convince our audience that our interpretation is indeed correct in that it finds its support in the text itself rather than in a hyper-active imagination. For the NT authors, the response to the question "Why should I believe that" is that they got the information for their interpretation from God. Most of us cannot make such a claim (though some try), and it must frankly be admitted that the ability to make such a claim makes historical-grammatical hermeneutics and even objectivity moot.

We are faced then with the fact that we possess two separate and distinct methods of interpretation. One is defined by hermeneutical guidelines and is objective in nature. The other is subjective in nature but finds its authority not in the science that drives it, but in its source—inspiration from God. If you have inspiration, you do not need historical-grammatical hermeneutics. If you do not have inspiration, you must proceed by the acknowledged guidelines of hermeneutics. The credibility of any interpretation is based on the verifiability of either one's inspiration or one's hermeneutics.

Coming back to typology then, the issue is very clear. We cannot speak of reproducing the methods of the NT authors, for the subjectivity of their methods is not allowed to those of us whose interpretation does not enjoy the affirmation of inspiration. We can therefore claim a typological interpretation for an OT text only when the NT has done so. No other typology can be granted the authority of God, for that authority can be substantiated only from context (hermeneutics) or through inspiration. We do not therefore begrudge, condemn, or deny the typological interpretations of the NT authors. We merely recognize that our interpretations cannot meet that criterion (i.e., inspiration) that commends their interpretations to us.

In the history of interpretation, as mentioned earlier, the evidence that has been given to support typological interpretations has often been premised on the concept of analogy of faith. Accepting that all of Scripture is a unity (under divine authorship) and that it is Christocentric (Luke 24:44), the claim has been made that there is therefore an objective basis for reading OT passages in light of their

Christocentricity.⁷ A recent hermeneutics textbook phrases it this way:

So the “analogy of faith” for Christians dictates both that obscure texts are understandable in the light of the clear and that the NT gives the correct understanding of the OT.

But it also serves to indicate that *the meaning of any part of the Bible must be understood in the context of the Bible as a whole*. This principle is sometimes called “canonical” interpretation. Texts that might have been understood in one way if they occurred in isolation from Scripture are shown by their inclusion in Scripture to have a somewhat different meaning.⁸

Assuming some degree of Christocentricity, we must still investigate how invasive it is and what range it must be granted in interpretation. How far must we advocate cohesiveness in order to maintain a sense of unity? D. A. Carson suggests that a systematic theology requires “that the biblical books be close enough in subject matter to cohere.” He illustrates with the following analogy:

I am not saying that the Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle of five thousand pieces and that all five thousand pieces are provided, so that with time and thought the entire picture may be completed. Rather, I am suggesting that the Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle that provides five thousand pieces along with the assurance that these pieces all belong to the same puzzle, even though ninety-five thousand pieces are missing. Most of the pieces that are provided, the instructions insist, fit together rather nicely; but there are a lot of gaping holes, a lot of edges that cry out to be completed, and some clusters of pieces that seem to be on their own. Nevertheless, the assurance that all the pieces do belong to one puzzle is helpful, for that makes it possible to develop the systematic theology, even though the systematic theology is not going to be completed until we receive more pieces from the One who made it. And meanwhile, even some systematicians who believe that all the pieces belong to the same puzzle are not very adept puzzle players but sometimes force pieces into slots where they don't really belong. The picture gets distorted somewhat, but it remains basically recognizable.⁹

Even given the acceptance of the concept of Christocentricity, however, we face several alternatives concerning the nature of that Christocentricity. This was evident as early as the controversies between the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes.¹⁰ For some it bespeaks a comprehensive and intrinsic soteriology,

⁷For a brief summary of these concepts throughout Church history see G. W. Bromiley, “The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth* 212-17.

⁸Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994) 161 [emphasis original]. The authors proceed to offer the example of Song of Songs which they interpret as referring to Christ and the Church based on the fact that the NT sees “the relationship of man and woman is patterned after the relationship of God to His People.”

⁹Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology” 81-82.

¹⁰Bromiley, “The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture” 214.

resulting in “salvation history.” For others it may be messianic in nature, focusing on prophecy and fulfillment. Still a third option would be a revelatory approach where Christ is seen as the ultimate goal of God’s revelatory program throughout. All of these represent Christocentrism, but they will lead to widely divergent readings of the text when applied to OT. An example of the impact this can have on interpretation can be seen in McCartney and Clayton’s recent guide to hermeneutics.

We should ask of every passage, “How does it point to Jesus Christ?” . . . This is not an expectation that every passage will speak directly about Him, but it does mean that every passage in some way relates to his person or work. And this question is just as relevant to NT passages as to OT.¹¹

This aggressive degree of Christocentrism is not required by the text of Scripture, but it is carried in on the coattails of analogy of faith by these authors and becomes the agenda that impacts all of their interpretation. They see this relation to Christ as the most important part of any passage, yet that part has to be supplied, for the text says nothing of it. The primary authority of the passage is then connected to something entirely of the interpreter’s own design. The dangers of this approach are well addressed by Grant Osborne.

Nearly all practitioners allegorize and spiritualize Old Testament texts to fit preconceived “types of Christ” or some such. The Old Testament as the history and record of God’s salvific dealings with his covenant people Israel is lost. Subjective speculation and a reductionism reduce it to a series of prophetic acts. The intention of the text, the Old Testament as canon in its own right, and the validity of the religious experiences of the Hebrews as the chosen people of Yahweh are all sacrificed on the altar of “relevance.” There must be a better way to demonstrate the continuity between the covenants.¹²

The point is, then, that analogy of faith can also open the door to subjective imposition of merely human agendas. The principle of analogy of faith retains its importance, but must be hermeneutically regulated if its results are to be accorded the authority of God’s Word.

Symbols

Prophetic literature, especially of the apocalyptic variety, is replete with symbols. Here the problem is somewhat different from that which we just addressed. We do not have to deal with NT authors interpreting the meaning of symbols that occur in OT apocalyptic. Nevertheless, many interpreters of prophetic literature assume that it is their task and indeed, their mandate, to identify what each symbol in the text stands for. Again we must notice immediately that hermeneutics is of little use in this endeavor. If the text identifies what a symbol stands for (e.g.,

¹¹McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* 194.

¹²Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* 280.

horns = kings) then no interpretation along those lines is called for. If the text does not identify what a symbol stands for, then hermeneutics provides no basis for arriving at a conclusion unless it can be demonstrated that the symbolic reference was transparent or self-evident in the culture or literature.

The speculation that often characterizes interpretation of symbols has no place within the historical-grammatical method. Rather than assuming that interpretation requires us to identify the meaning of symbols we need to be content to focus our attention on the message of the text, itself identifiable by means of hermeneutical principles and guidelines. Some would find it unthinkable that God would include these symbols in His revelation if He did not wish us to interpret them. An alternative is to understand that the revelation God intended to convey is in the message of the prophecy rather than one found in the symbols. If the text does not reveal the meaning of the symbols, I would assume that the message can be understood without unearthing what the symbols stand for. Perhaps God is using the symbols to conceal those aspects that would distract us from the central truth. Whatever God's reasons, we would again conclude that no warrant or excuse exists for our dabbling in the subjective; and certainly God's Word furnishes no authority for such speculations.

Role Models

The OT has become a stranger to many pulpits throughout the country, but when it is entered, it is often treated as a repository of role models. The call to imitate the faith of Abraham, the zeal of Josiah, the love of God exhibited by David, the humility of Moses, or the leadership of Nehemiah reverberate through sermons and literature. After all, what else can one do with the OT? Obscure history, prophecies about other people who do not even exist anymore, endless genealogies, laws from the dark ages—in the eyes of many, trivial irrelevance! So we look to the OT for examples of godliness as a token gesture in the absence of any other redeeming value. Interpreters appeal to Hebrews 11 as offering a sound precedent for such an approach and quote 1 Cor 10:11: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” as proof that their approach is legitimate.

A moment's consideration, however, before we accept such a view. Is there ever any indication as we read through the literature of the OT that the text's intention is to offer models for imitation? Though the text is not shy to commend individuals for their righteous behavior, it is not inclined to urge the reader to “go and do likewise.” In fact the literature often passes over commendable behavior without a pause or skips past conduct that is morally bankrupt without disapproval. To put it briefly, the text rarely moralizes. This would be an inexcusable oversight if its intention was to teach lessons concerning good and bad behavior and characteristics. Certainly one could claim that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain behaviors is clear enough without necessitating explicit comment from the author. At the same time there are many situations where the behavior is not clearly right or wrong. Was Jonathan right to eat the honey? Was Elijah right

to mock the prophets of Baal? Was David justified in working for the Philistines? Was Mordecai acting appropriately when he refused to bow to Haman? (Did he also refuse to bow to Ahasueras?) The questions could go on and on.

I would contend that a historical-grammatical hermeneutical approach to the OT offers no support for role models from the text. By this I mean to say that objective criteria fail to sustain the claim that the text's intention is to teach its audience by means of the good and bad models of the characters in its narratives. The fact that Hebrews 11 uses the OT accounts as a source for its examples of faith only shows that such examples can be gleaned from the literature. The interpretations of the author of Hebrews were not a result of the application of historical-grammatical hermeneutics to the text, they rather represent his subjective judgments. Again we are quite willing to accept his subjective judgments for they are affirmed through the inspiration he enjoys. Hermeneutical principles of contextual exegesis would not always lead us to his conclusions.¹³

Fulfillments

The Gospel writers, particularly Matthew, revel in the opportunities to point out to their readers all the prophecies that find their fulfillment in Jesus. Jesus Himself spoke of the way in which the Scriptures pointed to Him (Luke 24:27). It is therefore not unexpected that the church has long valued these connections between Old and New and added considerably to the list throughout the ages. Indeed, Christ's fulfillment of prophecy has become a centerpiece of apologetics. Yet, at the same time books and articles continue to be written addressing the means by which these fulfillments have been identified. One does not have to be an experienced exegete to notice that Hosea 11:1 in its context appears to have little connection to the use Matthew puts it to when he identifies Jesus as fulfilling it. Yet many have concluded that if we fail to find Matthew's meaning in Hosea, we undermine the authority of the text. If Matthew says that is what Hosea meant, then that must be what Hosea meant.

The question we must ask, however, is whether Matthew is intending to interpret the message of Hosea. As I have written elsewhere,¹⁴ I believe that it is essential for us to see clearly the distinction between the message and the fulfillment. The message of the prophet was understood by the prophet and his audience and is accessible through the objective principles of historical-grammatical hermeneutics. Fulfillment is not the message, but is the working out of God's plan in history. There are no hermeneutical principles within the grammatical-historical model that enable one to identify a fulfillment by reading and analyzing the prophecy. Like types, symbols and role models, fulfillment is often a matter of making a subjective

¹³For more detailed discussion of this issue and its particular application to curriculum, see J. Walton, L. Bisley, and C. Williford, "Bible Based Curricula and the Crisis of Scriptural Authority," *Christian Education Journal* 13/3 (1993):83-94.

¹⁴A. Hill and J. Walton, *Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 408-13.

association.

As a result, we need not be concerned with adjusting our concept of Hosea's message so that it can accommodate Matthew's idea of fulfillment. Biblical authority is not jeopardized when the message and fulfillment are not the same. They are different issues and are arrived at through different means. One can gladly accept Jesus as the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 without seeing any more in the message of Hosea than Hosea and his audience saw. Hosea is proclaiming a message, not revealing a fulfillment. Matthew is not interpreting the message, he is identifying fulfillment. If he were interpreting message we would have just cause to question the validity of his hermeneutics; but since he is identifying fulfillment we can neither inquire of his hermeneutics nor seek to imitate them, for there are none that apply.

As with types, our reason for affirming and accepting Matthew's identification of fulfillments is not because he can offer objective data that give evidence from the text of Hosea. Rather we accept his subjective assessment because we believe him to be inspired. Hosea was concerned to proclaim the message that was revealed to him. He did so and that message was comprehensible to him and his audience and that same message can be identified today through accepted hermeneutical principles. Hosea, however, could not anticipate how, when, or in what ways his words would find fulfillment in the outworking of God's plan. His message did not include any information about fulfillment. That was to be unveiled in later revelation.

The authority of God's Word is found in the message. Fulfillments have no authority until they become part of a biblical author's message. When anyone else offers an explanation of how some prophecy was fulfilled, we have every reason to ask, "Why should I believe that?" The subjective nature of someone's identification of fulfillment does not make the fulfillment untrue, it only means that they cannot claim God's authority for it.

Conclusions

The authors of the Bible had a message to proclaim. That message constitutes God's revelation of Himself and comes with the authority of God. We must be about the task of identifying that message and submitting ourselves to God's authoritative Word. The authors of Scripture understood their message and it has not changed. There may be value in types, symbols, role models, and fulfillments, but, being subjective methods, they do not carry the authority of God's Word unless they become incorporated in the inspired message of a biblical author. When the authority of an author comes by means of inspiration, he does not need to validate his statements by appealing to hermeneutical principles.¹⁵ We do not

¹⁵This conclusion is, I believe, in line with that reached (through different approaches) by W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 125-32.

wish to reproduce the hermeneutics of NT authors because they, by virtue of inspiration, accrued authority to themselves by means unavailable to us. We seek only to proclaim what the text, in its authority, has already revealed.

The fact that God has made use of certain methods in the past with beneficial results does not justify the continuing practice of those methods. If a person is converted through the improper interpretation of a verse, we must credit God's sovereignty, but should not retain our poor hermeneutics just because God did something through them. That God revealed himself at times through what we might identify as subjective procedures should not surprise us, but likewise it should not thereby serve as commendation of the subjective procedure. God's use of allegory to inspire Paul or His use of role model by inference to inspire the author of Hebrews does not suggest we should use those methods any more than the star of the magi suggests we should practice astrology.

We have been lax in expunging these subjective approaches, because often they are being used to teach valuable, scriptural truths. Therefore we view them as innocent. Subjective interpretation is *not* a danger because it is the enemy of *truth*. It is a danger because it masquerades as having the authority of God. As evangelicals, we take the authority of God's Word very seriously—it is what defines us. Yet we sit idly by, tolerating and even propounding for expedience's sake the same tired old staples of interpretation, vestiges of the bygone days of allegory and mysticism.

It is no wonder then that the cults find ripe harvest in our pews. Our people have been so encouraged in subjective methods that the errors of the cults are no longer transparent. It is no wonder that existential interpretation and new-age-style popular deconstructionism thrive in lay Bible studies. If we cannot consistently execute our hermeneutical theories and articulate clearly how the authority of God's Word is to be recognized and appropriated, we should not be surprised when our churches fester with biblical ignorance, hermeneutical impropriety, and the resulting miserably misinformed doctrine and practice that allows the liberty of jumping on every bandwagon that passes by, for we have paved the way.

Have we eliminated the role of the Holy Spirit by being so restricted to objective data? Not at all. Certainly one of the basic hermeneutical principles of the fathers was "that only as people read the Bible in the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, with faith and a spiritual understanding, can they come to a true appreciation of its meaning."¹⁶ But we must differentiate between determining what the text is saying and what its impact should be in our lives.¹⁷ The authority of the text is linked to what it is saying. The truth of the text can only be appropriated to our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit and can only be spiritually discerned. Just as the Holy Spirit does not convey to us the semantic range of Greek or Hebrew words and does not inform us concerning the events of history, so we do not expect the Holy Spirit to inform us of the meaning and nature of Sheol in the OT or of the

¹⁶Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture" 214.

¹⁷For discussion see Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 82-85.

identity of the Angel of the Lord. These are matters of exegesis. Theological discussion, like lexical and historical discussion, must be submissive to its guiding hermeneutical principles. The Reformers were not ignorant of this.

The Reformers also distinguished between internal and external perspicuity. This distinction calls attention to objective interpretation of the words of Scripture and subjective appropriation of them to the heart of the reader. There is an external, objective meaning to Scripture that can be understood by any interpreter, pagan or Christian. There is the internal significance of personal application and love that is not discovered apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the “spiritual discernment” about which the text itself speaks.

The external-internal distinction protects two flanks. On the one hand it recognizes that there is some revelation that is not fully grasped apart from the Spirit’s work of illumination. On the other hand it speaks against the idea that the Bible can be interpreted only by mystics. What the Bible says can be interpreted accurately without the Holy Ghost. The devil himself is capable of doing sound exegesis. However, the saving power of God’s Word will never penetrate the heart without the work of the Spirit.¹⁸

We must push on in our quest to preserve the objectivity of our hermeneutics, for it provides the foundation for our commitment to biblical authority. John Calvin’s words are still true: “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”¹⁹ For an interpretation of the text to claim credibly that it represents the authoritative teaching of the text, it must depend on either hermeneutical objectivity or inspired subjectivity.

¹⁸R. C. Sproul, “Biblical Interpretation and the Analogy of Faith,” in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. R. R. Nicole and J. R. Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 132-33.

¹⁹“Preface” to the *Commentary of Romans*.