

## INTRODUCTION: CAN HERMENEUTICS BE SAVED?

In this book I aim to achieve three main goals. In Part I, I consider the foundations and presuppositions of evangelical belief, particularly as it applies to the interpretation of the biblical text. In Part II, I take a selective overview of important hermeneutical developments from the sub-apostolic age to the present. This is not intended to be a comprehensive history of hermeneutics or an exhaustive exposition of hermeneutical theory, but rather a means of identifying some key influences that are alien to the gospel in hermeneutic thought. In Part III, my goal is to evaluate ways and means of reconstructing a truly evangelical, gospel-centred hermeneutics. This section will build on the foundations that I seek to lay in Part I. It will do this with an eye to the kind of alien influences on hermeneutics exposed in Part II. If there is a fourth main aim, it is this: I want to commend the much neglected role of biblical theology in hermeneutical practice. To that end I try to show how the method of biblical theology provides a basic tool in any biblical research, and how it functions as the matrix for understanding the relatedness of the whole Bible to the person and work of Jesus. In all these aims, the pastoral concerns remain uppermost.

For the ordinary reader who has some acquaintance with the seemingly endless production of books and articles on hermeneutics, the answer to the question in the title above may well be a sceptical shake of the head. The evangelical Christian in particular could be excused for thinking that theorizing

about hermeneutics has long since lost its way. After all, well before names like Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Troeltsch, Ricoeur, Gadamer and Derrida were heard of, Christians had read the Bible with real comprehension, if not with impeccable understanding, and had lived, as they continue to live, lives of dedicated service to Christ and his gospel. For evangelicals, the main purpose of reading and understanding the Bible is to know God and his will for our lives. We believe that only as we know God can we really know ourselves and the true meaning of life. Evangelical Christianity stands firmly on the conviction that we know God through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom, in turn, we know only through Scripture. Our knowing God centres on Jesus, the Word of God who has come in the flesh, and on the Bible, the Spirit-inspired, written word of God that is the true testimony to this incarnate Word. God has spoken his word into a world darkened by human rebellion against him. It is a word of grace as well as a word of judgment. If to know God is to know him through his Word/word, then we must read, hear and understand that word in the Bible. Faith must rest on the reality of God's true word and, thus, on a reliable understanding of that word.

This is where the study of hermeneutics comes in. From an evangelical point of view, the goal of hermeneutics is, or should be, a right understanding of what God says to us in his word. We want preachers and teachers to become better at communicating the word of God, and Christians to live more godly lives. I would add that any sense of individual understanding must go hand in hand with the understanding of our Christian existence within the church as a communal experience. What God says to me individually and what he says to all his people may at times be distinguishable, but they are never separable. Hermeneutics focuses on the gospel as it has its outworking in the realm of our understanding of the Scriptures. Thus it is an aspect of our ongoing sanctification. We need to be reminded of this central fact in view of the proliferation over the last few decades of publications relating to hermeneutics. But if hermeneutics is an aspect of our sanctification, it must rest on and be driven by our justification in Christ. Theologically, the priority of justification to sanctification means that the action of God in Christ, the grace of God acting *for* us, is prior to, and is the source of, the action of God *in* us. In simple terms this means that God puts us into a right relationship with himself as the prerequisite for the ongoing change in our lives. This theological perspective also applies to hermeneutics. Our ability to interpret Scripture must be saved, justified and sanctified through the gospel.

One could easily gain the impression from the recent developments in hermeneutical research and discussion that, once again, it is only the skilled specialist who can venture into the minefields of the biblical text to propose

an interpretation of its meaning. Yet it is one of the givens of Protestant and Reformed Christianity – of evangelicalism – that the Scriptures are essentially clear. This means that, despite the many and varied interpretations of certain details, and despite the many difficult texts, the humble believer will not be led astray in the reading of the Bible's essential message, and spiritual sustenance will be delivered to young and old, to the uneducated and the sophisticated alike.

All of our cognition involves interpretation of what is seen, heard or felt. In reading the Bible we are interpreting the words and sentences according to our whole life's experience of learning what such words can mean and how their meaning can be altered or qualified by the wider context of sentence, paragraph and corpus in which they occur. The complexity of this process is usually in the background of our thinking and almost totally unreflected upon by most readers or hearers. Only when an apparent obscurity or a clash of ideas emerges does the concept of *interpretation* surface. Thus, as Nicholas Wolterstorff reminds us, we can distinguish interpretation, which we all practise all the time, from the theory of interpretation, or hermeneutical theory.<sup>1</sup> However, for the purposes of this study I shall use the term *hermeneutics* to cover both the theory and practice of interpretation.

Hermeneutics, then, is an aspect of the renewing of the mind or its sanctification. Paul refers to it in Romans 12:1–2 thus:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Here he ties Christian transformation to the radical change in mindset that the Christian undergoes. Evangelical hermeneutics will often overlap with non-evangelical, even non-Christian, hermeneutics in something the same way that evangelical ethics, as an aspect of our sanctification, overlaps with general ethics. There is a theological reason for this that we refer to as *common grace*. In other words, non-Christians have an understanding of meaning and a sense of right and wrong which is the result of the goodness of God and of

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1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Importance of Hermeneutics for a Christian Worldview', in Roger Lundin (ed.), *Disciplining Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), p. 27.

being created in his image. The fact that the non-Christian repudiates such a notion is not the point. But evangelical ethics and hermeneutics need careful delineation so that we do not allow the common ground we share with the non-Christian to lure us into the mindset of the world. Paul urges believers not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. To that end I endeavour in this study to tease out the implications of evangelical faith for the renewal of our minds and their application to the interpretation of the Bible. At the same time I try to identify those alien elements that occur in hermeneutical theory to which we should not conform.

If hermeneutics is an aspect of our minds being conformed to the mind of Christ, it must be engaged through the gospel. Any aspect of sanctification, or growth in holiness, is clouded by our ongoing sinfulness and ignorance of the truth, yet we remain secure in the knowledge of our free justification on the grounds of Christ's righteousness for us. This justification does not, as it is sometimes represented, relieve us of the motive or responsibility to strive for holiness. Indeed, our free justification provides the only legitimate grounds and the most powerful motive for such striving. Likewise, the gospel presents us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who, in his earthly life, perfectly interpreted the word of his Father. In so doing he justified the fallible attempts of his people to interpret the word. The justification of our hermeneutics by the perfect hermeneutics of Christ is the motivation for us to strive for hermeneutical sanctification. We are not saved by good works, but we will not be saved without good works (Eph. 2:8–10). In the same way, we are not saved by the purity of our hermeneutics, but we will not be saved without some measure of hermeneutical sanctification taking place. The ordinary Bible-reader may be completely unreflective about this, but every effort to understand the Bible aright is a striving for hermeneutical sanctification. At the grass roots, hermeneutical conversion takes place when one becomes a believer. The Bible will never be the same again to us because we, as believers, have made a quantum shift from unbelief and rejection of God's word to faith and trust in that word, and submission to it. There are clear biblical grounds for the importance of exposing false teachings and behaviour patterns that are inconsistent with the gospel. That fact alone is reason enough for devoting the second section of this book to the study of the ways in which the gospel has been eclipsed in biblical interpretation.

Nevertheless, my main concern is to set out in a positive fashion the foundational principles of evangelical Christianity, and the outworking of these in the matter of biblical interpretation. The need to specify a gospel-centred, evangelical approach to hermeneutics arises from the distinctive beliefs of

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evangelicalism. As difficult as these may be to pin down, we must endeavour to understand them and to test them for their consistency and validity. If Christ truly is our Lord and Saviour, then he is the Lord and Saviour of our hermeneutics.