

ETHNOHERMENEUTICS: A RESPONSE

James R. Welchel

In an article in the maiden issue of the *Asian Journal of Missions*, Larry Caldwell has offered us as theologians and theological educators in Asia a significant subject to consider.¹ As he has pointed out, perhaps there is no more significant issue in theology than hermeneutics as we enter the new millennium. Guiding the development of leaders and thinkers who will influence Asia for Christ is a formidable task. Our success or failure as theologians and educators will be determined in large measure by our ability to help our students and those we minister to understand and communicate effectively the message of the scripture to Asian men and women, who, although often unaware, need Jesus Christ.

In this article I would like to respond to the challenge Caldwell has issued. I would do it first by pointing out areas in which I think he has made significant and valuable contributions, and, second, by pointing out several issues that I believe pose significant problems for ethnohermeneutics. While in general I am as convinced as he is that contextual relevance is critically important for the missionary endeavor, especially in Asia, I believe that hermeneutics is not the primary field in which contextualization should be underscored in our theological and missiological task. I hope that the following article helps to clarify the distinction that needs to be made between contextual communication of

James R. Welchel (Ph.D. cand., jimw@i-manila.com.ph), a missionary with Campus Crusade for Christ in Asia since 1981, is Assistant Director of the International School of Theology-Asia, Quezon City, Philippines, where he also teaches Theology and Ethics

¹ Larry W. Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context," *Journal of Asian Missions* 1:1 (March 1999), p. 23-43.

truth, and the attempt to see hermeneutics as a discipline which itself is contextually defined.

Caldwell should be commended for several things. First, he reminds us that theological education should serve the greater goal of helping fulfill the Great Commission of Christ.² We theological educators often get caught up in our own parochial world, enamored with novel insights of professional exegetes and impressed with our own pet research programs. Yet Caldwell rightly chides us for indulging in irrelevant scholarship when the heart of our ministry is to help those we instruct become effective instruments of reconciliation in a continent where very few have even heard a clear presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He also reminds us that our task involves a deep grasp of the receptor culture.³ As educators, it is easy to forget that the seminary is very different from the world we are called to reach for Christ. We should be students not only of the scripture, but also of the culture we and our students minister in. This involves not only understanding the culture in a generic sense, but specifically understanding the way a culture understands and makes sense of its own texts and stories.

Caldwell also points out that our own hermeneutic is not presuppositionless.⁴ We as theologians have been steeped in a tradition emerging for the most part out of the West which assumes that a scientific approach to knowledge guarantees the discovery of truth in every discipline, including the study of the scripture. This has developed into a hermeneutic orientation (Caldwell calls this "historical criticism") that has come to be regarded by many as the only true way to interpret texts. Whether this generalization is true in its entirety, or whether Caldwell recognizes the range of views concerning biblical interpretation that have emerged from the West, I will leave for later. What is certainly true is that most of us never stop to consider whether our hermeneutic approach is beyond critique. We have come to assume that *our* hermeneutic is true, and should be followed universally.

Most of all, I heartily endorse Caldwell's return to the study of the Bible itself in teaching hermeneutics.⁵ While we all benefit from good

² Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," p. 22.

³ Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," p. 28 et al. While Caldwell does not say this in so many words, the many illustrations he uses of the lack of understanding traditional missionaries have had of the culture of those they minister to point quite clearly to this need.

⁴ Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," pp. 23, 24.

⁵ Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," p. 29.

scholarship, the best scholarship is no match for knowing and studying the word of God itself. Would that all of us taught more from the Bible and less from secondary sources.

While in many respects I applaud Caldwell's article, there are a few points of concern that should be raised as well. First, Caldwell appears to lump together all hermeneutic approaches that make use of historical and grammatical tools under the rubric of "historical criticism."⁶ A significant difference can be found, however, between the attitude of enlightenment rationalism which assumes the *cogito* is the judge of all, and that of Evangelical grammatico-historical hermeneutics which actively seeks the illumination of the Holy Spirit as the ultimate determiner of scriptural meaning. Historically Evangelicals have been highly skeptical (and rightly so) of the rationalistic attitude of the Enlightenment which elevated human reason above the authority of the scripture as interpreted to us through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. We must grant that at times scholars have backslidden into a purely rationalistic approach toward biblical interpretation because of the intellectual respectability of historical-critical (as opposed to grammatico-historical) studies. Yet Evangelical theologians have for the most part resisted a purely rationalistic hermeneutic which does not take into account the personal involvement of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation. While making use of some (not all) critical tools, the grammatico-historical approach does not deify reason, but, we would hope, recognizes God's intimate role in the process of discovering the meaning of his word.

Beyond this, the broad critique of "western hermeneutical methods," while seeking to direct us to a new and more fruitful path, may also be unnecessarily harsh. Even the concept of "western" versus "Asian" is an increasingly suspect concept, setting up a counterproductive dichotomy that cannot be sustained in real life, particularly with regard to hermeneutics. When I read an article in a magazine or newspaper in Manila, do I apply a different "hermeneutic" than if I read the same article in Los Angeles? As I will allude to later, it is doubtful that Caldwell expects the readers of his own article to have widely different methods of discovering the meaning of his text whether it is being read in Korea, the Philippines or North America. The meaning he intends he fully expects to be understood by all who read it according to commonly accepted processes of interpreting texts, although there may in fact be various

⁶ Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," p. 27. In a footnote, Caldwell explicitly identifies historical criticism and grammatico-historical method as different aspects of one basic approach: historical criticism.

potential reactions to or applications of his text. I suspect that hermeneutics is not the area of greatest divergence when contextualization is concerned.

While I risk being misunderstood as a “western” missionary defending “western” theology (heaven forbid), may I also point out that Asian Christians are every bit as capable as “western” missionaries to determine what constitutes appropriate hermeneutics. It is rather chauvinistic to assume that Asian theologians have been somehow forced to accept “western” hermeneutical methods against their wills and against their better judgments. Could it be that many Asian theologians have recognized that the process of understanding a text may be guided by principles that are neither “western” nor “Asian?” My Asian colleagues have the theological savvy to reject “western” approaches that do not apply in the Asian context, and to utilize those methods and approaches that are most suited to their own context.

I believe it is significant that the exemplar of Caldwell’s ethnohermeneutics is a tribal missionary setting among the Manobo of Cotabato in the Philippines⁷ (specifically, a conversation between older adults in a very remote mission outpost). Here there is clearly a different way of thinking and understanding. In such a situation the gospel needs to be contextualized, by which I mean that we must understand the Manobo way of life and way of thinking so the truth of the scripture is communicated in a way that connects best with the receptor culture. If we are helping the Manobo discover the truth of the scripture for themselves, this contextualization may also mean understanding the way they interpret stories and texts.

In the case described, I could as easily argue that the Manobos hold to a “literal” hermeneutic. Our problem as cultural outsiders, and the problem of contextualization in general, is to understand the meaning of symbolic language which is understood implicitly by the Manobos themselves because of their experiences and upbringing. For example, I as a “western Evangelical” utilizing a “literal” hermeneutic, understand Isa 40:31 (“They will mount up with wings like eagles”) not as a promise to sprout physical wings when I wait on the Lord, but as a metaphorical expression of renewed vitality. Hermeneutics – even literal biblical hermeneutics – engages us in the process of understanding the meaning of symbolic language. Thought of in this way, it is not a question of understanding the *hermeneutics* of the Manobos, but understanding their linguistic symbols.

It is clear from his example, and certainly to those who have experienced tribal ministry, that to influence a tribal culture, one must

⁷ Caldwell, “Towards the New Discipline,” pp. 34-37.

understand the thinking, the cultural traditions, the way of life – the whole ethos of the culture – and hopefully become immersed enough in it that a relevant presentation of the gospel can be made. Yet the need for such a widely divergent hermeneutic approach would seem to be proportional to the level of isolation of that people group from modern education and communication.

My brother-in-law lives in Cotabato, and is certainly not an exceptionally westernized person. He did not finish college, and works for National Power Company there. But were I to attempt to teach him the Bible using Monobo ethnohermeneutics, he would surely be confused. He, like the vast majority of Filipinos today, has been exposed to, if not saturated with, in Caldwell's terms, a very "western" orientation to knowledge. I suppose a better term would be "modern," or perhaps "linear." This is increasingly true throughout Asia. Such an indigenous approach to hermeneutics may be helpful in tribal situations, but would it be for the majority of Asians today?⁸

This illustration highlights two important issues. First, at a practical level, we should be careful that we do not see ourselves as the conservators of culture. We should respect culture; we should understand our audience and their way of life and style of communication. And we should seek to bridge between the scripture and the world of the receptor culture in such a way that those who hear the gospel can respond without unnecessary cultural preconditions. Yet we should also be aware that the Asian context is increasingly influenced at a popular level by the globalization of knowledge. Teens today are far more influenced, even in the province, by M-TV than by traditional ethnic music. They may also go to the *manghuhula* (fortuneteller) for fun, but no longer is the spirit world, or even the Catholic Church syncretized with folk religion, the dominant force in the worldview of most Filipino youth. It would be less than useless to "indigenize" the message – utilize traditional cultural forms – in order to communicate the gospel with them. We may be surprised how popular the

⁸ Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline," p. 38 alludes to this in a footnote. However, he does not seem to acknowledge that apart from those living in remote areas the vast majority of people in Asia are able to understand texts and verbal communication using the same rationality that he characterizes as "western." My own experience of teaching Bible study methods in a number of Asian cultures and contexts leads me to think that basic principles of biblical study are in fact understandable and helpful to almost all who apply them. The need for critical tools is another question. I would tend to agree with Caldwell that they seem to be more a hindrance than a help.

global media culture has changed the way the future generation of Asians think.

Second, and perhaps more substantially, is the question of truth. I believe, and I am sure that Caldwell agrees, that it is possible to “get it wrong” in interpreting a passage. Manalo interpreted the promises of Christ’s return and their connection with the islands of the east allegorically, using a procedure with precedent both in church history and in Filipino culture. He concluded that the Philippines would be the site of Christ’s return. Now we have the Iglesia ni Kristo misleading millions. As Caldwell himself notes, not all hermeneutic approaches are created equal. Yet how do we determine what approach leads to the truth and what doesn’t? Certainly, some approaches might communicate more effectively and are shared more closely by particular cultures. But how do we know if the result of applying a given technique helps the people arrive at the truth?

Caldwell points out in the Manobo example that the fact that the *peligad* approach essentially came to the same conclusion as the traditional “western” approach lends credibility to the assertion that alternative hermeneutical methods can work. Yet by what standard does he judge the “correctness” of the Manobo interpretation of Mark 4:30-32? Without explicitly stating it, the standard applied was its consistency with the results of “western” hermeneutics, the only standard available to Caldwell.⁹ Now if every hermeneutic approach has an equal claim to validity in a given cultural context, how can one insist that one hermeneutic approach can be applied as a standard by which to test any other?

What if the “hermeneutic” approach of a certain tribe when understanding their own folklore included a particular cultural value in direct opposition to the gospel message – say, for instance, Don Richardson’s famous experience recorded in the book *Peace Child*. In his story, the tribe believed that fooling your enemy was of great value, and interpreted the message presented to them accordingly. In that case, in applying their “hermeneutic” to the scripture, they concluded initially that the real hero in the story of the death of Jesus was Judas. If our hermeneutical approach is to be “contextually relevant,” would we not be forced to admit that their conclusion that Judas was the hero in the passion narrative would be correct *for them*? By what standard would we seek to correct such an “erroneous” view? It is only erroneous if it contradicts some universal standard which all interpreters ultimately must agree to. Yet if we accept alternative ethnohermeneutic approaches, it seems

⁹ Caldwell, “Towards the New Discipline,” p. 36.

difficult to conceive of how to validate the interpretation of a passage, or to evaluate the effectiveness of a given approach to biblical hermeneutics.

The possibility of a multiplicity of hermeneutic approaches opens the door to a pluralistic view of truth, in spite of Caldwell's statement that this is not his intention. If a given Christian community adopted an allegorical approach to biblical interpretation which corresponded to the community's tradition of storytelling, by what standard would that hermeneutic be judged as better or worse? Who would be in a position to critique that approach, or the result? We can appreciate his intention to make us more sensitive to the cultural context of our audience. Yet Caldwell has not offered any tangible evidence that ethnohermeneutics can avoid epistemological relativism.

The contemporary philosophical debate on "meta-narratives" and ethical communities might help us see the issue more clearly. In some forms of postmodernism, the intractability of philosophical and ethical conflicts both theoretically and over concrete issues has given rise to a more general questioning about the nature of ethical argumentation and the possibility of resolution of such disagreements. Postmodernism for the most part rejects the possibility that there can be a meta-narrative, or some objective standpoint from which to adjudicate all ethical questions.

For example, contemporary philosopher and ethicist Alisdair MacIntyre has written that every ethical community [culture] has a particular rationality that has been developed through the practices of that community.¹⁰ From MacIntyre's perspective, we need to enter the ethical community in order to appreciate its rationality, for the way of life and ethical practices of the community are what make it possible to make sense of the behavior of those within a given society. But there is no objective "meta-narrative" by which to assess all other ethical rationalities. We are all bounded by the cultural and linguistic environment we happen to be immersed in.

Each tradition can at each stage of its development provide rational justification for its central theses in its own terms, employing the concepts and standards by which it defines itself, but there is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided.¹¹

¹⁰ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 191.

¹¹ Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 351.

In short, there is no objective standard of truth – every culture [or ethical rationality] has its own rules and its own rationale that is valid within its own sphere of reference.

This seems to track with Caldwell's view that there are numerous potential hermeneutic principles [rationalities] for various cultures. Yet the accounts offered to describe the existence of a multiplicity of mutually untranslatable ethical rationalities are themselves part of a trans-cultural narrative: MacIntyre and Caldwell both attempt to transcend their own cultural limitations and outline a comprehensive theory of ethical rationality. In the case of MacIntyre, either his theory is just another [20th century, western] ethical rationality with local applicability within his particular cultural context, or communitarian ethics is self-defeating. Likewise, Caldwell speaks of various methods of interpretation as being contextually dependent and specific to a given culture. Every culture's way of interpreting could be said to be "true for that culture." Yet at the level of theory, Caldwell hopes that he can describe hermeneutics in general in a way that all persons who read it would agree that his theory of ethnohermeneutics is true. He, like MacIntyre and others who insist on the essential plurality of linguistic communities, rationalities and hermeneutic approaches, still assumes that all interpreters will understand him. In short, he assumes that there is some standard of validity in interpretation that allows everyone who reads his article to understand what he means, and hopefully agree with him.

I will defer on trying to solve this dilemma, but merely point out that Caldwell finds himself in much the same quandary as postmodern hermeneutic theory. If one believes that there can be no objective, transcultural hermeneutic (or ethical rationality or foundation for truth), one cannot say so without contradicting oneself.

My admonition for those involved in theological education and ministry training is to heed one of Caldwell's exhortations: we must find ways of communicating the gospel that effectively bridge between the biblical world and the world of those we minister to. Yet we must also hold fast to the universal, timeless and unchanging message of the gospel. It is my belief that ethnohermeneutics as Caldwell has described it is rightly intended to help us build bridges of communication. Yet in the process, it seems to me that it tends to relativize truth and in so doing relativize the message of the gospel. We need to seek to understand and communicate the truth effectively within various cultural contexts. We certainly do not need to load all interpreters with the weighty tools of higher criticism. But we also do not want to open the door to ways of interpreting the Bible that

will lead to a wrong understanding of the scripture in the attempt to be culturally relevant.