

A RESPONSE TO THE RESPONSES OF  
TAPPEINER AND WHELCHER TO ETHNOHERMENEUTICS

Larry W. Caldwell

1. Introduction

I am grateful for the feedback received thus far to my recent article on the new discipline of ethnohermeneutics found in the maiden issue of the *Journal of Asian Mission*.<sup>1</sup> Daniel A. Tappeiner gave a detailed response in the second issue of that journal.<sup>2</sup> And James Whelchel has given yet another response in the present issue of the journal. Since I first began presenting papers on this new discipline, starting back in 1986, the reaction has seldom been neutral.<sup>3</sup> The general topic of hermeneutics always

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Larry W. CALDWELL (Ph.D., 76353.2052@compuserve.com) is Professor of Missions and Hermeneutics at Asian Theological Seminary, Manila, Philippines, and also Director of the Doctor of Missiology program of Asia Graduate School of Theology – Philippines.

<sup>1</sup> “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1:1 (1999), pp. 21-43.

<sup>2</sup> “A Response to Caldwell’s Trumpet Call to Ethnohermeneutics,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1:2 (1999), pp. 223-32.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see my “Third Horizon Ethnohermeneutics: Re-Evaluating New Testament Hermeneutical Models for Intercultural Bible Interpreters Today,” presented at the Consultation of Theologians and Anthropologists on April, 1986 at Biola University and later published in the *Asian Journal of Theology* 1:2 (1987), pp. 314-33; or my “Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field” presented at the 1994 Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting and later published in the ATS journal, *Phronesis* 3:1 (1996), pp. 13-35. See also Walter Kaiser’s critique of my understanding of ethnohermeneutics in Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 178-81.

engenders much discussion and oftentimes considerable debate among Bible scholars. It seems that no scholar is neutral when it comes to hermeneutics; everyone has an opinion. It goes with the territory, therefore, that when the topic of ethnohermeneutics is broached it always tends to raise the temperature in any roomful of scholars. But it is always good to get feedback, especially from veteran missionaries in the Asian context such as Tappeiner and Whelchel. I especially appreciate their sensitivity to the missiological issues relevant to our Asian context, as well as what they consider to be the many positive benefits of ethnohermeneutics and related issues.

In their responses Tappeiner and Whelchel have pointed out several criticisms of ethnohermeneutics. Their criticisms are not unlike others that I have received over the years, criticisms that can be answered in three general areas of response: 1) the relationship between ethnohermeneutics and contextualization; 2) the relationship between historical criticism and worldview; and 3) the sticky question of hermeneutical relativity in relationship to the one meaning/many applications theory of Bible interpretation. I will address each of these three general areas in turn. Please note that because of space considerations my response cannot go into the detail necessary for a comprehensive response. Please also note that all areas of my response assume that the Bible is God's authoritative, inerrant word, and that it is the final authority for all matters of faith and practice. I firmly believe that to carry out any hermeneutical approach to the Bible without this assumption—including ethnohermeneutics—may result in interpretations that are unhelpful at best, heretical at worst.

Before my response, however, let me briefly reiterate some of the major points of ethnohermeneutics. Ethnohermeneutics is Bible interpretation done in multi-cultural and cross-cultural contexts that, whenever possible, seeks to use culturally appropriate dynamic hermeneutical methods. Ethnohermeneutics seeks to interpret the word of God in ways that will be best understood from within the worldview of the receptor culture. The one doing ethnohermeneutics, therefore, will ask the following questions:

1. What are the hermeneutical method, or methods, found within the culture of the people among whom I am ministering; and
2. How can I possibly use this method(s) when I attempt to communicate the truths of the Bible to individuals in or from this culture?

With this brief overview in mind let us now proceed to my response.

## 2. Ethnohermeneutics and Contextualization: Confusion over the Total Contextualization Process

Critics of ethnohermeneutics, including Tappeiner and Whelchel, are usually quite positive towards the need to contextualize the biblical message. They applaud the attempts of ethnohermeneutics to help communicate the truths of the Bible in more culturally receptive ways. They are indeed concerned for relevant application and therefore appreciate the insights that ethnohermeneutics brings to this task. These same critics, however, oftentimes fail to see that ethnohermeneutics is foundational to good contextualization. Why is this? I believe that one of the reasons is that many of these critics have an incomplete understanding of what contextualization is all about. Many define contextualization in much the same way as evangelical theologian Millard J. Erickson does: "The attempt to adapt the expression of theology to a given time, place, culture, or audience."<sup>4</sup> While Erickson's definition is good as far as it goes, it seems to imply that the "attempt to adapt" occurs *after* the "expression of theology" has already been done, rather than at the very beginning of the theologizing process. In other words, missionaries, when attempting to contextualize, have typically adapted an already created expression of theology (usually western) into specific cultures.

Most of these past contextualizers have been content with doing what I refer to as "surface level contextualization." Such surface level contextualization typically looks for culturally sensitive ways to present the truths of the Bible, with an emphasis upon trying to make the gospel message receptor-oriented. Languages have been learned, cultures have been studied, and contextualization—oftentimes very good contextualization—has been done. In most cases, however, this sensitivity to the receptor's culture has not extended to exploring the hermeneutical methods found within the culture and attempting to ascertain if the contextualizer needs to move beyond the worldview of his or her own hermeneutical methods and use ones already at work in the culture. As a result, even good contextualizers have assumed that western hermeneutical

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<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), p. 36.

methods, typically using the tools of historical criticism, are sufficient for any culture.

Ethnohermeneutics questions this assumption. Ethnohermeneutics requires what I call “deep level contextualization” that results in a receptor-oriented Gospel message that is deeply rooted in the receptor’s culture, including the receptor’s hermeneutical methods. Deep level contextualization is not just concerned with a culturally appropriate final product. Deep level contextualization is equally concerned with arriving at that final product in culturally appropriate ways. Good contextualization is a total package. Good contextualization is sensitive to all aspects of a culture, including that culture’s hermeneutical methods.<sup>5</sup>

Here again is where we all need to do our homework. Unfortunately, most contextualizers have not taken the time and effort necessary to really understand the prevalent hermeneutical methods at use in their target cultures, despite the fact that many of these cultures contain vast oral or written scriptures. Instead, for whatever reasons, most contextualizers have been content with using the hermeneutical methods (predominantly western historical criticism) that they were already familiar with when interpreting the Bible and making it relevant for their various cultures. Consequently, this surface level contextualization has been an incomplete contextualization.

Let us take the Muslim world as just one example of this incomplete contextualization. What kinds of hermeneutical methods do Muslims use when they interpret the Koran? Before ethnohermeneutics I had never really thought about this question. As a result, in the past when teaching my students who were heading for ministry in Muslim contexts I dealt strictly with surface level contextualization issues in relationship to the Koran and Islam. How incomplete my teaching was! I know this now because just recently I have taken up my own research on the topic of Muslim hermeneutics. To my amazement, I have discovered an abundance of sources that refer to the many different hermeneutical methods used by Muslims in various Islamic contexts.<sup>6</sup> As I equip missionaries for work in

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<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of what contextualization is all about see Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us. Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas: Word, 1989); see esp. Gilliland’s Appendix, “Contextualization Models,” pp. 313-17.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians. An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Ahmad Von Denffer, *‘Ulum Al-Qur’an. An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an*, rev. ed. (Leicester: Islamic

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Muslim contexts, therefore, it behooves me to do my homework and explore the hermeneutics of Islam to better help my students dig deeper into the particular Islamic context that they will be entering or are already working in. And what is true of Islam is true as well for the other major religions of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Deep level contextualization, including ethnohermeneutics, compels us to attempt to understanding a particular culture at a level beyond language and culture learning (though these are of immense importance!) to the very thought processes of the people themselves. It will not be an easy task. It will take much time and effort. And ultimately, deep level contextualization will be done best by Christians from within the culture itself. Assisting local Christians in developing deep level contextualization for their own cultures should be one of the ultimate goals of every missionary involved in working in cross-cultural situations.

### 3. Historical Criticism and Worldview

A second general area of response to Tappeiner and Whelchel concerns the place of historical criticism. Ethnohermeneutics takes as a given that historical criticism is a method of Bible interpretation that is rooted in a western worldview. The fact is that the hermeneutical presuppositions of historical criticism have only a fairly recent history (200 years or so as a fully developed system) and arises out of the philosophy and worldview of the West in the 18th and 19th centuries. Not only is it fairly recent, it is not universally considered in Christendom even today. The Orthodox groups (both Greek and Russian) have not opted for it, and the Catholic church only fairly recently—particularly in the 1960s and beyond with the writings of Ray Brown and others<sup>7</sup>—and even then primarily in the United States and among some of the more “progressive” sectors in the remainder of the Catholic world. However, with the dominance of the western church in worldwide missionary endeavors over the past two centuries came the dominance of this western hermeneutical method. So it was that Bible schools established by western missionaries had curriculums that resembled curriculums in the West, complete with an emphasis upon Greek and Hebrew, etc., in a nutshell, historical criticism. It was just *assumed* that it was the proper approach. And the nationals who

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Foundation, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (New York: Paulist, 1985).

were trained by westerners, or who were trained in the West, simply learned this same western system. It was seldom, if ever, questioned.

Ethnohermeneutics demands that we question the underlying assumptions concerning the supposed universality of historical criticism. Is it the only way, or the best way, for doing hermeneutics as Tappeiner and Whelchel suggest? Here I must heartily disagree. We must see that historical criticism is but one way. It is a good way, to be sure, but not the only way. Evangelicals in the West have redeemed historical criticism for good use but not without controversy even in the West.<sup>8</sup> But does even a redeemed use mean that it is the only use? In my article I went to great length to show that both westerners and non-westerners have assumed the universality of the historical critical method with little reflection as to why such an assumption is valid. Whelchel points out that "Asian Christians are every bit as capable as 'western' missionaries to determine what constitutes appropriate hermeneutics." To this I heartily agree. However, it is not a question of capability; rather it is a question of awareness. For I still believe that most westerners and non-westerners have never even thought about whether their hermeneutical methods are culturally conditioned or not. Why do I say this? I have taught a class on ethnohermeneutics both in Manila and in Los Angeles for the past several years. And in every one of these classes I have had many western and non-western students approach me and say something to the effect, "I have never thought about these things before." One of the goals of ethnohermeneutics is to make everyone aware of their culturally conditioned hermeneutical methods so that they may freely choose those methods that will be most applicable and understood by their audiences.

This also relates to the applicability of ethnohermeneutics to modern culture today. Whelchel quite rightly asks about the appropriateness of the ethnohermeneutical example from the Cotobato Manobo outside of a tribal context. While we cannot discount the globalization of knowledge through M-TV, CNN, the Internet, etc., we would do well not to assume that this globalization of commonly held knowledge means that the world is now even more ready for historical-critical hermeneutical methods. To the contrary, this globalization shows us that the younger generation, especially, is moving away from a textbook-dominated way of thinking to

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. with intro. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); and especially Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible. Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. and intro. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

a video-dominated way of thinking. How will the textbook-dominated historical-critical method fare in light of this seismic shift to non-textbook media? What are the underlying hermeneutical methods at work in the M-TV culture and how can we use these for gospel presentation and teaching the truths of the Bible?

Every year for the last few years I have been teaching the basics of ethnohermeneutics to a new batch of campus pastors of a ministry in the United States whose primary motivation is planting churches through university campus outreach. Why have I been asked to teach ethnohermeneutics to campus pastors? Because the leaders of this ministry believe that ethnohermeneutics holds one of the keys to making the Bible relevant for this new generation of university students who come out of the M-TV culture. I truly believe that this globalization of knowledge through video-dominated ways of thinking demands radical evaluations of older "tried but true methods" of hermeneutics in order that the Bible be made relevant to this new generation. May not a renewed emphasis upon ethnohermeneutics assist us in this gigantic task?

#### 4. Hermeneutical Relativity and the One Meaning/Many Applications Theory of Bible Interpretation

The question of hermeneutical relativity concerns the third general area of response to Tappeiner and Whelchel. Critics of ethnohermeneutics contend that looking for and using culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods may result in culturally relative interpretations or hermeneutical pluralism. In other words, if Culture A, Culture B and Culture C all use their own culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods in interpreting a biblical text, the result may be three different interpretations of that text. These critics place a high value on historical criticism and its supposed ability to arrive at one universal supracultural meaning for every biblical text. They—like Tappeiner—contend that there is one meaning ("what it meant") for every text with many applications ("what it means") that can be derived from that one meaning.<sup>9</sup> They assume that with proper hermeneutical methods, (i.e., historical criticism), this one meaning can be discovered. Tappeiner sums up this view very well when he says, "There is really only one valid way in which 'what it meant' can be discovered. The grammatical/historical method is simply the developmental result of a

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<sup>9</sup> Tappeiner, "A Response to Caldwell's Trumpet Call," p. 229, refers to the one meaning/many application approach as the "classical position."

process of discovering explicitly, the laws which govern the proper and valid recovery of ‘what it meant.’”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it is time to point out that the emperor is not wearing any clothes. This is why I call the above viewpoint the “one meaning/many applications *theory* of Bible interpretation” because that is what it is, merely theory. It is not biblical. It is man-made. Although this theory has almost reached the level of doctrinal importance among many evangelicals, in truth it is a rather recent development in the overall history of Bible interpretation. For a thousand years the three and four meaning theories of interpretation held by Bible interpreters of the early and later Middle Ages ruled hermeneutics. Was the Church wrong for a thousand years?<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the hermeneutical excesses of the latter Middle Ages called for drastic reformation. But do these latter excesses invalidate the culturally appropriate hermeneutics of a millennium? Even Luther occasionally continued to use allegory to good effect in the midst of his harsh criticism of it.

Is it really true that through historical criticism we are better able to arrive at a single universal meaning for every Bible passage? In the staid classroom, this will perhaps work in many cases. In actual practice, however, it is oftentimes a different matter. For example, why are there so many Protestant denominations in the world today? While there are many reasons, at root is it not because these denominations differ concerning the interpretation of the one, eternal, supracultural meaning of some key passages of the scripture? This is a very obvious example of how hermeneutical theory and practice oftentimes conflict. Let’s look at another

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<sup>10</sup> Tappeiner, “A Response to Caldwell’s Trumpet Call,” pp. 229-30. In these sentences is Tappeiner implying that historical criticism [his “grammatical/historical method”] is really the culmination of hermeneutical techniques through the ages, a sort of evolutionary approach to hermeneutical theory?

<sup>11</sup> There are many who see positive benefits of the pre-critical approach of the Middle Ages, among them David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37:1 (1980), pp. 27-38. Steinmetz ends his article with some provocative words for evangelicals who hold to the one meaning/many applications theory of Bible interpretation: “The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred.”

more hypothetical example. Put ten evangelical scholars in a room, assign each of them the same passage from the Bible, and then ask each of them, without consulting with the others, to discover the one, eternal, supracultural meaning of that passage. I daresay that they will not independently arrive at this same meaning! Why not? It is because the Bible, as God's Word for every culture and every generation, is great enough to handle different interpretations. This is what makes the Bible both above every culture as well as relevant to every culture. The variety that we observe in God's created world, the multiplicity of all of the different cultures and languages, the diversity found in many interpretations and myriad applications of God's word—these are all consistent with an understanding of God as a diverse and wonderful Creator, Who, along with his Word, is great enough to handle lots of diversity.

As I stated many times in my original article, historical criticism, when rightly handled, is of value to both mono-cultural and cross-cultural Bible interpreters. But as I have also pointed out, the underlying theoretical assumptions—namely, that through historical criticism we can discover the one, eternal, supracultural meaning of a biblical text—must be questioned. As a result, rather than holding solely to the one meaning/many applications theory of Bible interpretation, evangelical scholars today would do well to explore other hermeneutical possibilities, one being what I call the "many meanings/many applications theory" of Bible interpretation which allows for the ethnohermeneutical position.<sup>12</sup> Hopefully a new openness to some of these different hermeneutical possibilities will help take Bible interpretation out of the academy and make it again relevant and understandable to average Christians without the need for advanced theological training.

Be very clear on this: what I am arguing for here should in no way be construed as an openness to hermeneutical relativity, as some would be quick to say. I am against any hint of relativity in relationship to any aspect of the contextualization or hermeneutical or ethnohermeneutical process. But, at the same time, let us not allow the one meaning/many applications theory of Bible interpretation blind us to those ethnohermeneutical possibilities that may be found in other cultures. Cultures A, B and C may very well give us new meanings of a biblical text through their own

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<sup>12</sup> Space considerations limit an explanation of the "many meanings/many applications theory" of hermeneutics and its relationship to ethnohermeneutics. Please see my forthcoming book, *The Bible in Culture. Toward Ethnohermeneutics: Interpreting God's Word in Today's Multi-cultural World*.

hermeneutical methods; there is indeed more than one valid method of interpreting what the biblical text meant. On that there can be no compromise.

The ethnohermeneutical alternative possibility that I am advocating, however, does not mean that each and every interpretation is necessarily valid. There indeed needs to be controls and limits. And in the case of questions arising from a particular meaning—whether arrived at through historical criticism or through another cultural hermeneutical method—the final authority will not be the individual culture’s particular hermeneutical method but the Bible itself and how each new meaning is consistent with the overall thrust of Scripture. The Bible must always take precedence over any culture and that culture’s particular interpretation, no matter how relevant or receptor-oriented it may be. And when there is doubt as to the truth of a particular meaning, it is at this time that the local, regional, national and international Body of Christ—in turn and as necessary—will need to carefully decide on whether or not the new meaning is allowable or not.

### 5. Conclusion

The above response highlights just three of the many issues that are raised by the new discipline of ethnohermeneutics. There are many more. An article, or even a book, cannot begin to cover everything. In the final analysis, as with any hermeneutical approach to the Bible, ethnohermeneutics needs to be done with care and with a commitment to the final authority that is God’s word. With these constraints ethnohermeneutics has much to offer to not only cross-cultural missionaries but to pastors and church planters, as well, who are ministering in the increasingly multi-cultural urban areas of our world. We must always keep in mind that the primary motivation behind ethnohermeneutics is missiological: to help a new generation of missionaries, pastors and church planters make the Gospel message as relevant as possible to their audiences so that more unreached people groups will be reached and more individuals will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. To that end, let the helpful dialog concerning ethnohermeneutics continue!