

## A RESPONSE TO CALDWELL'S TRUMPET CALL TO ETHNOHERMENEUTICS

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### 1. Caldwell's Call to Ethnohermeneutics

Recently Professor Larry Caldwell blew the trumpet in the hallowed halls of academic Zion, in the Philippines, on behalf of what he calls the new discipline of ethnohermeneutics. He did this in his paper to the AGST Annual Theological Conference. This paper was subsequently published in the maiden number of the *Journal of Asian Mission*.<sup>1</sup> The full title of his paper indicates his intention to question the relevancy of Western hermeneutical methods in the Asian context.

From a missiological perspective he raises a very important and serious issue as to the effectiveness of the present and past educational efforts of seminaries in the critical area of biblical interpretation. He states that "the overarching purpose of theological education is, at its very core, a missiological purpose: to help equip others to better understand and communicate the truths of the Bible to a lost and dying world."<sup>2</sup> Within that fundamental missiological mandate to seminary education he also notes that "training others to correctly interpret God's word, is the heart of theological education, whatever the individual discipline."<sup>3</sup>

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<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> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 22.

He therefore urges all who are involved in seminary education in the multi-cultural “stew” of Asia to be explicitly concerned with teaching effective methods of biblical interpretation in such a setting. “There is a need,” Caldwell says, “to further explore hermeneutics directed specifically towards how to interpret the Bible from one culture to the next, from one people group, or ethnic group, to another.”<sup>4</sup> In particular he states, “We no longer have the luxury to assume that *our* way is the best way or the *only* way...There may indeed be other valid interpretation methods available to us....”<sup>5</sup>

Caldwell then goes on to explore the relevance of western hermeneutical methods in non-western settings, and the need to use what he calls “receptor-oriented” hermeneutical methods. He then gives a kind of example of what he means by such a term along the way. Finally he points to the significance of the Reformation doctrines of *Sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of believers as a justification for the search for indigenous hermeneutical methods. He ends his trumpet call with suggestions to those in areas of biblical studies, systematic theology and practical theology on how to rearrange their material in light of the emergence of this new discipline of ethnohermeneutics.

## 2. A Theologian’s Response to the Call

Being a theologian-missionary in the Asian context, I was very interested in the educational and missiological issues that Caldwell raised in his paper. From the perspective of missions I am committed to changing lives, both in my teaching ministry in the seminary and in my direct ministry in the churches and other non-church settings. For me theology is taking the Bible seriously, thinking God’s thoughts after him, faith seeking understanding and doctrine that in accord with godliness.

In the Asian setting it has been a challenge for me to discover how I might effectively translate the theological reality passed on to me by my own theological mentors, to those who come from a very different intellectual, linguistic and cultural background. I found the kind of content and the methods they used began to change immediately. There

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<sup>4</sup> Caldwell, “Toward the New Discipline,” p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Caldwell, “Toward the New Discipline,” p. 25.

was also a shift from my focus on the content of my theological lectures, to methods of effective communication of that content to my students. I sought methodology that would really change them personally and allow them to bring the supra-cultural truth of God's word to those to whom they were called to minister.

Very early, I came to an inner conviction, quite similar to that which Caldwell expressed, concerning the real needs of the students. He notes, with an undercurrent of frustration, "And yes, our students will need to be aware of some of the complexities of the biblical text and consequently will need a basic familiarity with the tools that can help address those complexities. But the bottom line question comes down to this: how many and how much?"<sup>6</sup> I strongly sympathize with his answer to that question, "Yes, a small percentage of our students will need to learn a lot of this information. But not everyone; in fact, not many at all."<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to conclude, and with this I heartily agree, "What everyone really needs, and this is crucially important in our Asian context, are the tools, resources and training that will equip them to relevantly interpret the Bible in the complicated context that is Asia."<sup>8</sup> By all means we really do need, as Caldwell says, to "equip Asians to be able to discover and apply the truths of the Bible to their daily lives without having to rely upon either the interpretational dogma of Protestant scholars and/or upon a scholarly priesthood trained to interpret the Bible for them."<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The "Sour Note" in the Trumpet Call

Unfortunately, much as I appreciated the urgent concern of Caldwell's trumpet call to question the relevancy of western hermeneutical methods in non-western contexts and to begin to take ethnohermeneutics seriously in our missiological/educational task, my theological "ears" detected a "sour note." That sour note concerns Caldwell's apparent position that there can be more than one valid

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<sup>6</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 40.

method of interpreting what the biblical text “meant.” The classical position has been “Interpretation, one; applications, many!” Or, perhaps more to the point, “Interpretation, one; cultural contextualization, many!”

If Caldwell’s trumpet call to ethnohermeneutics were only a matter of communication, there would be no sour note. If he were only concerned with taking “what it meant” and using local, indigenous “hermeneutical methods” better to communicate “what it means,” he would be safely inside the boundaries of Evangelical missiological theory and practice. It is my position as a systematic theologian, that hermeneutics, as elucidating first of all “what it meant,” is governed by the nature of human thought and its literary forms of communication, not by ethnohermeneutic, indigenous, culturally conditioned methods of interpretation.

Caldwell is clearly aware of this issue. In a footnote, seeking to protect his position, he states, “...I am not advocating a pluralistic approach to interpreting the Bible...”<sup>10</sup> The bulk of the paper, however, is meant to explain why the heart of ethnohermeneutics is its search for “receptor-oriented hermeneutical methods.”<sup>11</sup> His “Figure 2” is meant exactly to represent such a pluralism. He urges members of Asia Graduate School of Theology to “re-examine their dependency upon western hermeneutical methods and look *instead* for Asian methods...”<sup>12</sup>

Before I can answer the trumpet call, I must first be satisfied on this key point. The issue before us is exactly parallel to the desire for a so-called “genuine” Asian theology -- not “Banana theology” but “Mango theology.”<sup>13</sup> Just as I must reject the notion of a pluralism of “theologies,” so I must reject the notion of a pluralism of hermeneutical methods. In both of cases, if we are only concerned with “contextualization” and cross-cultural communication, then there is only one theology (one supra-cultural truth), but many ways, culturally

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<sup>10</sup> Caldwell, “Toward the New Discipline,” p. 25 n. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, “Toward the New Discipline,” p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Caldwell, “Toward the New Discipline,” p. 4. Italics mine.

<sup>13</sup> See Amos Yong, “Review of *Kosuke Koyama: A Model for Intercultural Theology and Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2:1 (1999), pp. 153-57.

sensitive, in which to expound and communicate that one theology. In that case there is no "sour note" in either trumpet call.

Can there really be a Filipino hermeneutic, a Chinese hermeneutic, or a German hermeneutic? Is the western hermeneutic really "western" in the merely cultural sense or is it actually "human" or "universal" in the ultimate scientific sense? Is Caldwell correct when he says, "western hermeneutical methods themselves are ethnohermeneutical methods for westerners"?<sup>14</sup>

When Caldwell discusses the way in which New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament, he correctly states that "no one hermeneutical method is inspired."<sup>15</sup> Does that properly justify the fundamental assumption on which ethnohermeneutics rests? That is, "that God not only works through culture, hence the need to communicate the truths of scripture in culturally relevant forms, [with which we fully agree] but, correspondingly, that *God also works through the hermeneutical processes inherent in each culture*"?<sup>16</sup> If by "works through" Caldwell means only that contextualizing is useful in the missiological task, he is on solid ground. If he means to say that God uses ethnohermeneutics to discover "what it meant," he has established hermeneutical pluralism.

In his review of the history of hermeneutics Caldwell notes that "there were a multiplicity of hermeneutical methods used in Bible interpretation" during the last two thousand years, including the allegorical method.<sup>17</sup> He expresses the opinion that that method somehow helped "to bring gospel truth to largely illiterate cultures" and "may again prove to be an appropriate method for the non-reading masses of today."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 32. Of course no one would contend that the grammatical/historical method is inspired! That is not the issue.

<sup>16</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," p. 32. Italics are Caldwell's

<sup>17</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," pp. 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> Caldwell, "Toward the New Discipline," pp. 32-33. Anyone familiar with the way in which the allegorical method functions and who holds to the grammatical/historical method, will certainly be surprised at such a possibility. Philo used that method to read Plato out of Moses. Swedenborg used that method to read a strange

From his own assumptions and the development of his argument as we have shown, it seems clear that, in fact, though perhaps not in intention, Caldwell *is* espousing a pluralistic hermeneutic. His position seems to be that ethnohermeneutics is useful in the missiological task of properly contextualizing the supra-cultural truth of God's word, with which we might all agree. However, he also seems to suggest ethnohermeneutics is a *replacement* for the "western" hermeneutic of grammatical/historical method, which I find unacceptable for the reasons stated in this response.

#### 4. An Alternative "Note" for the Trumpet Call

Hermeneutics is usually defined as a two step process in modern times. The first step is concerned with what the writer of the text "meant" by what he wrote. The second step is concerned with what it "means," here and now in our various cultures and stages of human consciousness. We have come to describe the inter-relation between these two steps as the "hermeneutical spiral, or helix." It is a complex process of refinement, allowing human beings to grasp more and more accurately, what an ancient text meant, in its own terms and what it now means to humankind in its present state of consciousness.

The grammatical/historical method of interpretation has been a gradual development from the beginning of the church to the present. Its most explicit, early representatives are those of the "Alexandrine school," represented by Lucian of Antioch, Theodore of Mopsuestia and St. John Chrysostom.<sup>19</sup> But as Caldwell noted, the allegorical

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theosophy out of Scripture. The allegorical method is geared to discovering one's own thoughts in the text of another. It is not capable of discovering what the text meant. Allegory is an acceptable method of interpretation, if and only if, the writer of the text has given objective clues in the form and structure of the text indicating that it was to be interpreted in such a way. Modern examples of this would be Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* or, more recently, Hannah Hurnard's popular allegories such as *Hinds' Feet on High Places* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Philip Schaff describes the characteristic features of the Antiochine "school" as "attention to the revision of the text, a close adherence to the plain, natural meaning according to the use of language and the condition of the writer, and justice to the human factor." In other words, its exegesis is

method by and large dominated the writings of the teachers of the church up to the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. From that time to this, a confluence of various forces has converged to produce what we now call the grammatical/historical method of hermeneutics.

How are we to characterize this method? Is it, as Caldwell says, by a western ethnohermeneutic for westerners? Or is it really the grand result of a developmental process, under the general leading of the Spirit of truth, in which the implicit laws of proper and valid interpretation of an ancient text became explicit? If, as historical review suggests, it is the latter, it is quite clear that the grammatical/historical method is not "western" or "ethnohermeneutical," but objective and universally human.

In any proper hermeneutic the text is "king," i.e., "what it meant" is fundamental, foundational and indispensable to a proper understanding of "what it means" now. If the method used to determine "what it meant" is not valid, the normativeness of the biblical text is lost to us.<sup>20</sup>

During the history of the church, as it developed its present understanding of the text, various methods were indeed used. It can, however, be argued -- I think successfully -- that in fact the only permanently valuable understanding of "what it meant" resulted from the implicit, and sometimes explicit, use of the basic rules of the grammatical/historical method. It is these results which underlie the authoritative and permanent value of the developing Christian consciousness which we now share with our forefathers in the faith, not the invalid results of the fanciful, arbitrary allegorical method.

There is an objective, scientific reason for this. *There really is only one valid way in which "what it meant" can be discovered.* The grammatical/historical method is simply the developmental result of a process of discovering explicitly, the laws which govern the proper and

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grammatical and historical, in distinction from the allegorical method of the "Alexandrian School," *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), II, p. 816.

<sup>20</sup> In saying that the "text is king" in any valid hermeneutic, what I mean is that the text itself as object, by its very nature, is determinative of the laws necessary to discovering "what it meant." It is not culture but the object itself which determines what a valid hermeneutic is.

valid recovery of “what it meant.” The laws of human thought, though conditioned by culture and language, are actually universal. This is so because all human beings share the same basic “hardware” for thinking—the human brain. And, as *Imago Dei*, they also participate in the Logos structure of created reality through reason. *Therefore the grammatical/historical method is not “western,” but “human” and “universal.”* It is true that God sovereignly used western culture and its preferred thought processes to develop explicitly the laws of valid interpretation of “what it meant.” That does not, however, make it “western” or “ethnohermeneutical” any more than the conclusions of Nicea or Chalcedon are “western” simply because they use the most accurate and precise language available to them—Greek.

Could the application of an Asian ethnohermeneutic method produce a result that would differ substantively from Nicea or Chalcedon? Such methods may ask other questions of the text and therefore develop some new, illuminating and interesting results to enrich Christian consciousness. However, this comes from the “what it means” part of the hermeneutical helix, not the “what it meant” task.

Now there *are*, it would seem, two fundamental types of universal thinking modes available to human beings, the so-called “left brain” and “right brain” forms.<sup>21</sup> Historically, it turns out, that the development of “left brain” thinking has been most advanced in the human family from the West. The “right brain” type of thought has been more typically used in the East. Each type of thought has its use. Each is valid for its own purposes. However, concerning the laws by which it is possible to discover what ancient documents “meant”, there really is only one valid method. That method is rooted and grounded in the universal nature of human thought processes as they are committed to literary form and which can only be articulated usefully by means of “left brain” thinking.

Caldwell used the Reformation concept of the priesthood of believers in dealing with the very practical danger of taking the Bible away from Asians because of the complex grammatical/historical method and the expensive books often involved. Since, in my judgment, ethnohermeneutics cannot properly be used to *replace* the

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<sup>21</sup> For a more extensive discussion of what I call “*ruach* perception” (right brain) and “*dabar* perception” (left brain) and how they inter-relate, especially in theological understanding, see my article “Creation: Pattern, God and Man,” *Journal of the Scientific American* 21:2 (1977), pp. 58-60.

grammatical/historical method without the loss of access to the supra-cultural truth of God's word, what is to be done?

At this point the additional Reformation doctrine of the perspicuity of scripture must come to the rescue. The Westminster Confession states it clearly and classically in Chapter I, Article VII in these words:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

By "ordinary means" the Westminster Divines simply meant the basic rules of a common sense grammatical/historical method, based on the objective structure of the text, on the nature of the human thought process and the way thoughts are expressed in literary form. This author agrees that the more advanced methods of the grammatical/historical method, especially as they have been developed in the last two centuries, are not absolutely necessary to useful, Spirit-empowered ministry. This is true for all cultures. Only those called to a ministry of advanced teaching and theological thought need to interact with such materials.

## 5. Final Response

The "sour note" in Caldwell's trumpet call to ethnohermeneutics seems to result from some kind of confusion between the *missiological* task of contextualizing the supra-cultural truth to various cultures, and the *theological* task of determining the content of that supracultural truth and its significance for today. In his missiological approach to the hermeneutical task he does not seem to make a sharp distinction between the two tasks involved in the hermeneutical helix. He does not seem to be concerned sufficiently with the theological task of protecting the supra-cultural truth of Scripture from invalid methods and, therefore, invalid results.

Professor Caldwell's trumpet call to ethnohermeneutics is appreciated for its concerns about a very important issue. We look

forward to further clarification of his position in his up-coming book on the subject.