

***Major Tasks of an
Evangelical Hermeneutic:
Some Observations on Commonalities,
Interrelations, and Differences***

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An evangelical hermeneutic is involved in three major tasks: an interpretive or descriptive task, a transformational task, and a contextualization task. At the heart of all three is the Good News of God's redemptive activity in human history on behalf of all people. So there are interrelations between these tasks. There are, however, also distinctive differences. This article seeks to sensitize Christians to the commonalities, interrelations, and differences inherent in these three hermeneutical tasks and to offer an overview as to how these tasks should function in an evangelical theology.

Key Words: hermeneutics, interpretive, transformational, contextualization, normative, trans-cultural, cultural, exegetical procedures

Hermeneutics—the theory, method and practice of how to read, understand, and use biblical texts—is at the heart of Christian identity, has profound effects on the formulation of Christian theology, informs every aspect of Christian living, and gives guidance to the church's proclamation and mission. It is, in fact, foundational for every reading of Scripture, every expression of Christian conviction, and all Christian living, whether personal or corporate.

Hermeneutics is a vast and extensive subject. It can hardly be treated adequately in such a short presentation as this. Nonetheless, the three major tasks of an evangelical hermeneutic may here profitably be highlighted, with some observations made with respect to their commonalities, interrelations, and differences. Elsewhere I have written in some detail about the NT's use of the OT and its normativeness for us today in our reception and contextualization of the

Christian gospel.¹ All I want to do here is to offer something of a position paper that sets out an overview of my own understanding of a proper evangelical hermeneutic—suggesting in the process what I believe to be a viable set of answers to the question I posed long ago in my 1969 Tyndale lecture, which appeared as the lead article in the 1970 issue of *Tyndale Bulletin*: "Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament?"²

THE INTERPRETIVE / DESCRIPTIVE TASK

The first task in the hermeneutical enterprise is to understand the words, thoughts, and intentions of the biblical writers in their particular contexts. This is the vitally important *interpretive* or *descriptive* task, which must be undertaken by all interpreters, whatever their theological commitments.

Evangelicals, however, go beyond many other interpreters in asserting that all truly Christian thought and all truly Christian living must begin with and be based on the revelation of God as (1) given in the experience of the nation Israel in the OT, (2) uniquely expressed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, (3) interpreted and proclaimed by the apostolic witness of the early church, and (4) illuminated and applied by the Holy Spirit. The Christian faith, evangelicals insist, is a religion of revelation, with that revelation being primarily concerned with the "Good News" (εὐαγγέλιον, "the gospel") regarding Jesus of Nazareth, who is Israel's promised Messiah, humanity's accredited Lord, and the Word of God incarnate—and, just as importantly, who by his obedient life and sacrificial death made possible for all people redemption from sin and death and reconciliation to God. It is a gospel message (1) witnessed to by "the Law and the Prophets" in the OT and (2) explicated by the apostolic writers in the NT, which together constitute "the word of

1. See esp. my *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975; 2nd ed., 1999); and my *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999); also *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984; repr. Vancouver: Regent College Bookstore, 1993); *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990); and such articles as "Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament?" *TynBul* 21 (1970): 3-38; "Three Ways of Understanding Relations between the Testaments: Historically and Today," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis for His 60th Birthday* (ed. G. E. Hawthorne with O. Betz; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck] / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 22-30; "Who Is the Prophet Talking About?" Some Reflections on the New Testament's Use of the Old," *Themelios* 24 (1987): 3-16; "Prolegomena to Paul's Use of Scripture in Romans," *BBR* 7 (1997): 145-68; and "The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5:1-8:39 in the Argument of the Letter," in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 49-69.

2. "Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament?"

God" inscripturated, and that is also (3) illuminated and applied by God's Spirit, who has always been active by way of revelation, interpretation, application, and enabling.

But while the Christian faith is a religion of revelation, it is also a historical religion. For it is based on what God has done redemptively in history, how the early church was led by God to understand his redemptive working in Jesus the Christ, and how that gospel message was proclaimed during the apostolic period—laying emphasis on the essential content of that proclamation but also noting the various forms and methods that were used to convey and spell out the nuances of that proclamation to diverse audiences of that day. So in seeking to understand the words, thoughts, and intentions of the biblical writers, attention must not only be directed to the revelatory and transcultural features of their message but also to the cultural contexts, specific situations, particular concerns, and distinctive exegetical conventions of their day that influenced and /or were used by them in declaring, explicating, and nuancing that message when addressing their various audiences.

Further, in seeking to explicate the revelation of God as given and interpreted in the NT, we must consider not only "innerbiblical" exegesis—that is, so-called "intertextuality" or "interpreted intertextuality" (which, however, all-too-often means "intratextuality"; that is, focusing exclusively on the parallels and echoes that exist between the OT and the NT)—but also "extrabiblical" exegesis, which involves comparative analyses of the themes and practices of the NT writers vis-à-vis the conventions, themes, and practices found in the Greco-Roman world generally and the writings and traditions of Second Temple Judaism in particular. Despite protests from some evangelical scholars, I believe it is impossible to give a fair hearing to the interpretations of the NT writers without also interacting with the exegetical presuppositions, procedures, and practices found in the writings of Second Temple Judaism or Early Judaism—that is, in the Jewish apocryphal, pseudepigraphical, and apocalyptic writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the later rabbinic codifications of earlier Pharisaic teaching. For, as Geza Vermes has aptly pointed out:

In inter-testamental Judaism there existed a fundamental unity of exegetical tradition. This tradition, the basis of religious faith and life, was adopted and modified by its constituent groups, the Pharisees, the Qumran sectaries, and the Judeo-Christians. We have, as a result, three cognate schools of exegesis of the message recorded in the Bible, and it is the duty of the historian to emphasize that none of them can properly be understood independently of the others.³

3. G. Vermes, "The Qumran Interpretation of Scripture in Its Historical Setting," *Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 6 (1966-68): 95.

All this means that, in undertaking this first interpretive or descriptive task of the hermeneutical enterprise, I want always to try to understand better (1) the content and thrust of the NT writers' interpretations of Scripture *and* (2) the exegetical methods they used in arriving at those interpretations and/or conveying them to their respective audiences by reference to both an "innerbiblical" exegesis and an "extrabiblical" exegesis. Further, in direct response to the question "Can we reproduce the exegesis of the NT?" I find it necessary to make a distinction between (1) that which was divinely (also often humanly) intended to be the essential, transcultural message of the various NT writers, and (2) the cultural, circumstantial, time-bound methods they used to convey and support that message in their day. Together with all evangelical and most constructive scholars, I consider the content and thrust of the NT proclamation to be normative for Christian faith and doctrine. Departing from some of my evangelical colleagues, however, I view the exegetical conventions, procedures, and methods used by the writers of the NT to convey and support that message to be culturally and circumstantially conditioned—particularly when they worked from certain exegetical conventions of their day and engaged in what I define as "midrash," "peshet," "allegorical," or *ad hominem* exegesis—and so not formative for my own exegetical practice.

In effect, by means of today's literary-critical-historical tools—which, admittedly, are themselves culturally conditioned, since exegesis is always a human endeavor—I seek to understand the content and thrust of the biblical writers' proclamation, recognizing always that such matters are presented in the garb of the cultural, temporal, societal, and circumstantial forms of the day. It is the Good News of God's redemptive activity in human history on behalf of all people—which is set out in preliminary and promissory fashion in the OT, uniquely expressed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, interpreted and proclaimed by the apostolic witness of the NT, and illuminated and applied by the Holy Spirit—that I want to highlight and set forth as clearly as possible in my descriptive treatment of the Scriptures. For it is "the truth of the gospel" (to use the expression Paul used in Gal 1:5, 14 for what he saw to be central and most important in Christian proclamation) that is the essential matter, and thus the normative feature, of Scripture. At the same time, however, I also want to understand, as best I am able, the exegetical principles and procedures, together with the then-current rhetorical and epistolary conventions, that the NT writers used—in various contexts and as they developed certain themes—to convey and support that central proclamation. For an understanding of their exegetical methods, together with an appreciation of their rhetorical modes of persuasion and epis-

tolary practices, enables me better to grasp, appropriate, and contextualize for my own situation and society what is being presented.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL TASK

The second major task of an evangelical hermeneutic has to do with appropriating the biblical message for personal and corporate living. This is the *transformational* task, which involves commitment to the message of the biblical writers and openness to God's Spirit to make operative in one's life what was meant to be normative in the gospel proclamation. For all evangelicals and most constructive biblical scholars—though there may be differences among them as to exactly what should be seen as normative and how the essentials of that gospel are to be expressed—the transformational task in the hermeneutical enterprise is no less important than the descriptive.

The major commonality between the first, the interpretive or descriptive task, and this second, the transformational task, is that both are concerned with what is perceived to be the heart and core of the biblical message—that is, amidst all the various presentations of the biblical writers and all their differing styles, conventions, procedures, and methods in presenting their materials, both tasks are concerned primarily with the central content and thrust of the biblical proclamation. A major difference between the two tasks, however, is that, whereas the first is based on one's own research and reflection, the second involves a personal response of faith and commitment and comes about principally, if not entirely, through the mediation of the Christian church. We may think of ourselves solely in individualistic terms, and so flaunt our supposed individualism. But as Miroslav Volf has rightly pointed out: "It is from the church that one receives the content of faith, and it is in the church that one learns how faith is to be understood and lived."⁴

As we mature in our Christian faith, we tend to forget how *communal* was the context for our original awareness of the message of the gospel, how *elemental* were many of our earliest reasons for believing that gospel, and how *functional* was our turning to Christ for salvation. As we think back to those earlier days, we cannot help but recall that for all practical purposes the mediation of faith in our own lives proceeded less (if at all) by way of personal research and reflection and more (if not entirely) by way of the mediation of the community of faith, the Christian church as broadly defined, and our response of faith and commitment to what was given us. Usually that

4. M. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 163.

mediation came by way of various Christian "significant others," such as family members or friends. And often our response became "saving faith," not only in a very elemental, functional fashion, but also on the basis of a minimum of knowledge content--sometimes, in fact, a body of knowledge that was exceedingly superficial or even erroneous, though with even that being used by God in unexpected ways to bring us to himself.⁵

Down through the centuries the Christian church has used various external aids to bring about transformation in the lives of its parishioners. Liturgy, music, hymnody, and architecture have often been used effectively for such a purpose—though, admittedly, without always being able to accomplish fully that purpose. Less worthy attempts to engender faith and devotion have been by means of supposed relics of the saints, embellished stories about Christian martyrs, and/or objects associated with the historical Jesus (e.g., the Shroud of Turin or, of late, the James Ossuary)—sometimes, in certain circles, by means of various contemporary forms of atomistic exegesis (as in ancient midrashic treatments), revelatory identifications (as in ancient pesher treatments), and/or allegorical parallels (as in ancient allegorical treatments), which all-too-often depend more on the ingenuity of the preacher or commentator than on the text being expounded.

The focus of the transformational task in Christian theology, however, is (1) the work and teaching of Christ, as portrayed and contextualized in the NT, and (2) the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who makes operative in the lives of individual believers and society today Christ's work and teaching. Thus the principal exhortations in the NT regarding transformation are to be found in such passages as:

5. Calvin's comment on Isa 7:10-12 (where God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz, king of Judah: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights") provides an apt insight into one of the ways in which God works: "As the Lord knew that King Ahaz was so wicked as not to believe the promise, so he enjoins Isaiah to confirm him by adding a sign. For when God sees that his promises do not satisfy us, he makes additions to them suitable to our weakness, so that we not only hear him speak, but likewise behold his hand displayed, and thus are confirmed by an evident proof of the faith" (*Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* [trans. W. Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850], 239). Ahaz, of course, did not want a sign, for he had no desire to respond positively to any message from God. So in pseudo-piety he replied: "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." But the amazing thing is that God offered to give Ahaz any sign that would convince him of God's working and God's ways.

The main point of Calvin's comment is that miraculous signs are only given in support of God's promises and so should not be viewed as superior to God's word. But Calvin also makes the point that God speaks to us in ways "suitable to our weakness." And as people of faith, looking back in hindsight, we all must confess that God has often done just that in our own religious experiences.

Phil 2:5 "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (which introduces the early church's Christ-hymn of vv. 6-11);

1 Pet 2:21—"Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (which introduces the early Christian confessional material of vv. 22-23, with phraseology and allusions drawn from Isaiah 53).

And so, when speaking about how believers in Christ are to live their new lives "in Christ," the NT writers refer not only to (1) *the example of Jesus* but also to (2) *the teaching of Jesus* as the material content for such living (cf., e.g., the parallels to Jesus' teaching in such passages as Rom 12:1-15:13; 1 Thess 4:1-12; James; and 1 Peter) and to (3) *the work of the Holy Spirit* in recalling, illuminating, and bringing to effect Jesus' teaching in the lives of his followers (cf., e.g., John 14:26; Gal 5:16-26).

The common feature in both the descriptive and the transformational tasks of an evangelical hermeneutic is, therefore, the centrality of the gospel, which is rooted in a preparatory and promissory fashion in the OT and interpreted and proclaimed in the NT. Likewise, interrelations between the descriptive and the transformational are viewed as important in an evangelical hermeneutic, for what is understood to be normative must also be appropriated for Christian thought truly to be formed and Christian living truly to take place. There is, however, usually no endeavor on the part of evangelicals to reproduce the exact forms by which that gospel proclamation was originally presented or supported, whether as expressed in the OT or reflected in the NT—particularly, as is our present concern, to try to reproduce the exact exegetical conventions, procedures, practices, or methods of the NT writers so as to enhance the transformational process.

As Christians, we need to remember that our original positive response to the gospel did not include any correlative acceptance of such cultural forms or exegetical conventions. We may have come later to understand something about how that gospel was clothed in its NT portrayals in somewhat diverse cultural garb for differing first-century audiences--and, hopefully, to appreciate something of the appropriateness of the NT writers' contextualizations of that message in their day. Our original perception, however, while probably more intuitive than reasoned, was entirely proper: that there is an essential distinction between the normative, transcultural nature of the gospel message and the cultural, circumstantial, time-bound methods that the NT writers used to convey and support that proclamation. It was the Holy Spirit who taught us this truth at the time of our conversion. And like Paul's converts in the Roman province of Galatia who became confused regarding a somewhat similar matter, we need always—

even as we grow older in the Christian faith and become more knowledgeable about the Scriptures—"keep in step with the Spirit" (cf. Gal 5:25).

THE CONTEXTUALIZATION TASK

The third major task of an evangelical hermeneutic has to do with the expression of the Christian gospel in the various cultural contexts and specific situations of today. This is the contemporary *contextualization* task, which is a vitally important concern for all missiologists, whatever their theological persuasion—and should be, as well, for all evangelicals. For the central mandate of the Christian church is that given by Jesus himself as recorded in the final verses of Matthew's Gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:18-20)

In my book *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions*, I have set out and attempted to explicate three theses: (1) that the "new wine" of the gospel has been encapsulated in the early Christian confessional materials that were incorporated by the writers of the NT into their writings--that is, broadly speaking, encapsulated in "hymns" (poetic portions), *homologiai* (formulaic prose passages), and single-statement affirmations—and that many of these confessional materials can be identified today by means of form-critical analyses developed during the past century; (2) that the NT writers often used these confessional materials as a basis for and to structure and support their presentations in addressing their respective audiences and speaking to particular issues, thereby contextualizing that "new wine" of the gospel into the "fresh wineskins" of differing cultures and circumstances; and (3) that in their contextualizations of those early Christian confessions the NT writers not only highlight for their readers the central features of the Christian gospel—that is, the "new wine" of the early proclamation—but also give guidance as to how we should contextualize that gospel in the differing cultural contexts and circumstances of our day—that is, the "fresh wineskins" of today. I will not attempt here to spell out, justify, or deal with the implications of those three theses. This is what my little 1999 monograph is all about. All I want to do in this presentation is (1) to point out that the contextualization of the gospel in the various cultural contexts, situations, and circumstances of today is also of

great importance for an evangelical hermeneutic, and (2) to speak to the issue of how this third task, that of contemporary contextualization, relates to the previous two mentioned above, which we have called the descriptive and the transformational tasks.

For the sake of brevity, perhaps the issues can most easily be brought to the fore by asking three rather elemental, yet profound, questions—questions that have perennially perplexed Christians down through the centuries and to which various answers have been given: Why in the NT do we have four canonical Gospels and not just one written Gospel, since, after all, there is only one gospel? Why in the NT do we have seven, ten, or thirteen (as I believe) letters of Paul to various Gentile churches and leaders in the Gentile churches, when he was the "apostle to the Gentiles" and had only one message? And why in the NT do we have such other writings as not only the so-called "Acts of the Apostles" (the second part of Luke's composition) but also the homily or sermon to the Hebrews, the epistles or tractates of James, Peter, John, and Jude, and the Johannine apocalypse, when we already have the four Gospels and Paul's letters—which twofold collection of writings seems to have sufficiently nourished most believers in Christ during the first three or four Christian centuries, and has been taken by many since to be sufficient for their own spiritual health?

There are those who have treated, and often continue to treat, the Bible generally and the NT in particular as a textbook on Christian theology and a compendium of Christian ethics—if not always in theory, at least in practice. So they have all-too-often tried to harmonize the four Gospels into one literary presentation; to view Paul's letters as all saying the same thing, only on different occasions; and to interpret Acts and the "hinder parts" of the NT (Hebrews through Revelation) almost exclusively in terms of the norms found in the canonical Gospels and Paul. Such an approach, of course, rightly seeks to highlight the features of revelation and unity that can legitimately be claimed for the Bible generally and the NT in particular. But it fails to take into account the factors of contextualization, development, and diversity also present in those writings.

My thesis is that what we have in the NT are (1) *declarations* of the gospel and the ethical principles that derive from the gospel, as principally contained in the early Christian confessions, and (2) *descriptions*—whether in the form of Gospels, letters, accounts of representative exploits, sermons, tractates, or an apocalypse—of how that gospel proclamation and its inherent principles were contextualized in diverse cultural contexts, circumstances, and situations during the apostolic period. The proclamation and principles, because expressive of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus and highlighted in the early

Christian confessions, are to be viewed as normative for Christian thought and life. The ways in which that proclamation and those principles were put into practice in the first century, however, should be understood as contextualizations for a particular time, culture, and circumstance.

In effect, the four Gospels, Paul's letters, the Acts of the Apostles, and the other writings of the NT—all of which we as evangelicals believe were written under the Spirit's direction, and so will not lead us into error when rightly understood—function (1) to highlight the central and essential features of the Christian gospel *and* (2) to reflect the contextualizations and usages appropriate for the conveyance of that gospel in various circumstances and situations of the first century. What is *declared* in the early Christian confessions, based on the apostolic proclamation of the Good News in Christ Jesus and its implied principles, is normative for Christian thought and living. What is *described* with regard to the various contextualizations of that gospel for diverse situations and cultures can, indeed, be appreciated on their own merits, but need not be viewed as normative for Christian faith and doctrine today. Nonetheless, though not normative, those descriptions of how the gospel was contextualized in the apostolic period of the Christian church give us guidance today by way of examples as to how we should contextualize that same gospel for our own particular times, cultures, and circumstances.

If all of this be true—or, at least, only approximately true—then questions about relationships between this third task of an evangelical hermeneutic, that of contextualizing the gospel today, and those of the first two, the descriptive and the transformational, seem rather obvious. Common to all three is an emphasis on the centrality and normativity of the gospel as presented by the writers of the NT, with the Good News that was discovered in the first task (the descriptive) and appropriated for personal and corporate living in the second task (the transformational) being always the starting point for and content of what is to be contextualized in this third task of the hermeneutical enterprise. But, as with the transformational task, the task of contextualizing the gospel today does not call on Christians to reproduce the specific exegetical conventions, procedures, or practices of the NT writers—whether viewed as something intrinsic to the gospel proclamation, as something traditional that one hesitates to set aside, or as something that in some way would enhance contextualization. In fact, the question "Shouldn't we (or, 'Ought not we attempt to') reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament?" while often pious in its motivation and perhaps holistic in its desires, only serves to add something extraneous to the normativity of the gospel proclamation, and so by its addition may very well divert attention from what is truly cen-

tral and essential. And the question "Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament?" actually sets up an impossibility. For, while many of the exegetical conventions, procedures, and methods of the NT may be viewed as having been understandable and significant in their day—particularly when addressed to a certain distinctive situation or a certain audience with a particular mind-set—they lack the power to convince in the different cultures, circumstances, and situations of today.

The NT portrays how the "new wine" of the gospel of Christ was poured into the "fresh wineskins" of first-century Jewish and Gentile circumstances. In so doing, it not only highlights the gospel and its principles but also gives guidance by way of example as to how to contextualize that self-same gospel in different situations and circumstances—even among people of different cultures and at later times. Our task in contextualizing the Christian gospel today, however, is to pour that "new wine" into the "fresh wineskins" of the cultures and circumstances of our day. For, when either the "newness" of Jesus' work and teaching or the "freshness" of new situations or different cultures (whether those of the first century or today) is ignored, the result is, as Matthew's Gospel puts it, the perversion of the gospel or the spoiling of the situations in which the gospel is proclaimed, or both. But when both the "new wine" and the "fresh wineskins" are honored—allowing them to interact with one another in a proper fermentation process (in what I have called in my 1999 monograph a "Synergistic-Developmental Model" of contextualization)—"both are preserved" (Matt 9:17).

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

I find it absolutely, necessary to make a distinction between (1) the central, transcultural message of the NT writers, and (2) the circumstantial, cultural, and time-bound methods they used to convey and support that message. Together with most evangelical and constructive scholars, I consider the content and thrust of the gospel proclamation in the NT to be normative. Departing from some of my evangelical colleagues, however, I view the conventions, procedures, and methods used by the writers of the NT to convey and support that proclamation of Good News in their day to be often culturally and circumstantially conditioned--particularly when they work from certain exegetical conventions of their day and engage in what I define as "midrash," "peshet," "allegorical," or *ad hominem* exegesis—and therefore not formative for my own Christian life, thought, or exegetical practice.

In effect, by means of today's literary-critical-historical tools—which, admittedly, because exegesis is always a human endeavor, are themselves culturally conditioned—I seek to understand the content and thrust of the biblical writers' proclamation, recognizing always that such matters are presented in the garb of the cultural, circumstantial, and temporal expressions of their day. It is the Good News of God's redemptive activity in human history on behalf of all people—which is set out in preliminary and promissory fashion in the OT, uniquely expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, interpreted and proclaimed by the apostolic witness of the NT, and illuminated and applied by the Holy Spirit—that I want to highlight and set forth as clearly as possible in my descriptive treatment of the Scriptures, for it is "the truth of the gospel" that is the essential matter and normative feature of Scripture. At the same time, however, I also want to understand, as best I am able, the exegetical principles, procedures, and practices that the writers used to convey and support that central proclamation—in various contexts and as they developed certain themes—for such an understanding (1) enables me better to grasp, appropriate, and proclaim the content and thrust of what is presented, and (2) aids me by way of example to recontextualize that message in conventions and forms more suited to the cultural contexts and circumstances of today.

Scripture itself evidences a number of places where theological statements and ethical exhortations are supported by cultural means and methods that were considered at the time both legitimate and meaningful but could be thought suspect at a later time. In the OT, for example, among the various ways to interpret God's will and convey God's message were such things as dreams, visions, ecstatic prophecies, the fleece of a sheep, necromancy, the Urim and Thummim in the breastplate of the high priest, the braying of a donkey, and some rather rude and crude symbolic actions of various prophets. All these were significant in their day and served to explicate God's message. But though acknowledged in Heb 1:1 as having been appropriate vehicles for the divine message ("In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets in many and various ways"), they are nowhere in the biblical records set out as normative procedures to be followed.

Likewise in the NT, after considering who might be qualified and after praying to God for direction, the early apostles cast lots in order to determine a successor for Judas (Acts 1:15-26). Some earnest Christians, such as the early Moravians, the Amish, and Old Order Mennonites, have continued this practice in determining God's will for leadership in their respective communities and for many matters having to do with Christian living. But most Christians view this method as culturally conditioned and not normative for believers today.

And this same distinction between (1) the transcultural, essential message of the NT, together with its inherent theological and ethical principles, and (2) the culturally conditioned methods used in the support and expression of that message, which are described in the NT but not set out as being normative, has been accepted by most Christians today with respect to a number of other features in the NT as well—unless, of course, some form of "restorationism" or "primitivism" is espoused. For example, Christians desire to be in continuity with the theologies of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper as set out in the NT, but they differ widely as to how those sacraments should be practiced—with most feeling no need to reproduce exactly the specific forms or practices of the earliest believers as described in the NT. Likewise, Christians today commonly make a distinction in their ecclesiology between the NT principles of church government ("church order" or "community formation") and the explicit NT practices, and so build their denominational policies and ecclesial structures on what they consider to be biblical principles *and* effective organization patterns of the day, without attempting to reproduce the exact structures of church organization as reflected in the NT.⁶

Further, this distinction between the normative and the described can be found in abundance in the area of ethics, whether personal or social. In personal ethics, for example, Christians are challenged and feel themselves bound by their Lord's teaching on humility and mutual acceptance (though, sadly, not always sufficiently so), but usually feel no similar compulsion to continue his practice of foot washing; while in social ethics they look to the principles of Jesus' teaching and the gospel proclamation for guidance, but usually feel no need to reproduce the precise social circumstances or specific communal relations of the earliest believers in Jesus.

It is often either assumed or argued that "apostolic faith and doctrine" *and* "apostolic exegesis" are, in some way, both normative for the faith, proclamation, and practice of Christians today—and so both, in some manner, should be expressed in any contemporary contextualization of the gospel. It is a stance often motivated by reverence and piety; an assertion that claims to be biblical and holistic; and a challenge for biblical exegetes to be both traditional and creative. All of this may be considered, at least to an extent and in proper ways, highly laudable. But a truer evangelical hermeneutic, I make bold to suggest, is one that (1) distinguishes between the central, transcultural, normative proclamation of the gospel in the NT and the circumstantial,

6. For an explication of such matters, see our recently released *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today* (ed. R. N. Longenecker; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

cultural, time-bound methods used by the NT writers to convey and support that message; (2) views its major tasks as having to do not only with an interpretation or description of apostolic history, theology, and exegesis but also with personal transformation and contemporary contextualization; and (3) understands the commonalities, interrelations, and differences between these three tasks along the lines we have sketched out above.