

Cultural Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: Definition, Origins, Benefits, and Challenges

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Over the past 30 years, methods of hermeneutics in the context of biblical studies have diversified impressively. Even for the specialist it is often challenging to stay up-to-date in the labyrinth of new methodologies and proposals for biblical interpretation. Over the past decade, cultural criticism has become an important critical tool and has gained significant recognition. In the present study I seek, first, to define this hermeneutical phenomenon and describe its origins in the larger context of humanities. This is followed, second, by a summary of the methods, hermeneutical presuppositions and applications of cultural criticism by some of its more important practitioners. Third, I seek to evaluate how evangelical scholarship has reacted to and interacted with cultural criticism. Finally, some of the possible challenges of and benefits to a Bible-based hermeneutic are presented, including its missiological repercussions.

Key Words: hermeneutics, cultural criticism, social sciences, evangelicalism, biblical interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Cultural criticism is a beast of none too certain characteristics. It is referred to in an up-to-date review article by William Telford focusing upon Biblical Interpretation and its methodologies, although without a detailed discussion.¹ It appears in Werner Jeanrond's review article on

1. William R. Telford, "Modern Biblical Interpretation," in *The Biblical World* (ed. John Barton; 2 vols.; London: Routledge, 2002), 2:427–49. The publisher Routledge has positioned this major work as a standard introduction to biblical studies and all its subdisciplines.

the “History of Interpretation” in the prestigious *Anchor Bible Dictionary* under the heading of “Current Developments in Biblical Hermeneutics” in a brief paragraph.² However, no major discussion is provided. William Baird does not include it in his treatment of “Biblical Criticism” in the same work;³ neither does Rudolf Smend or Jürgen Roloff in their discussions of “Biblical Exegesis (OT)” and “Biblical Exegesis (NT),” respectively, in the newly published *Encyclopedia of Christianity*.⁴ In the fairly up-to-date (1999) introductory volume on Biblical Criticism, edited by McKenzie and Heynes and published by Westminster John Knox, it does not appear either.⁵

While there is no universal agreement about the methodology and focus of cultural criticism (including the terminology used), it pops up more and more in recent hermeneutical discussions and thus warrants a closer look.⁶ In this study I will first seek to define *cultural criticism*

2. Werner G. Jeanrond, “Interpretation, History of,” *ABD* 3:442–43.

3. William Baird, “Biblical Criticism: New Testament Criticism,” *ABD* 1:730–36.

4. Rudolf Smend, “Exegesis, Biblical (OT),” *EC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2:237–40; Jürgen Roloff, “Exegesis, Biblical (NT),” *EC* 2:240–43.

5. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Heynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning. An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (rev. and expand. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999). The volume includes, however, chapters on Poststructuralist Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Feminist Criticism, and Socioeconomic Criticism.

6. Publications that touch upon the subject of cultural criticism include, for example, Vincent L. Wimbush, “Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 47 (1989): 43–55; Harvie M. Conn, “Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas,” *WTJ* 52 (1990): 51–63; Christoph Schwobel, “Glaube und Kultur: Gedanken zur Idee einer Theologie der Kultur,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38 (1996): 137–54; A. K. M. Adam, “Reading Matthew as Cultural Criticism,” in *Society of Biblical Literature: 1997 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP; ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 253–72; Halvor Moxnes, “The Historical Jesus: From Master Narrative to Cultural Context,” *BTB* 28 (1998): 135–49; David J. Hesselgrave, “Third Millennium Missiology and the Use of Egyptian Gold,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 577–89; Stanley J. Grenz, “Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection,” *ATJ* 55 (2000): 37–51. On the beginning dialogue between religious studies, theology, and cultural criticism, see the articles in Delwin Brown et al., eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (The American Academy of Religion Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Other important studies are included in the edited volume of the *Third Sheffield Colloquium* (J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* [JSOTSup/ Gender, Culture, Theory 266/7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998]). Often, terminology is a problem. For example, in a recent book published by Eerdmans, the title indicates contextual hermeneutics, which has definite links to cultural criticism. See here Elsa Tamez, “Reading the Bible under a Sky without Stars,” in *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 3–15; and Justin Ukpong, “Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz; Grand Rapids, Mich.:

based upon the understanding perceivable in the publications of some of its proponents. In this section I will also have a closer look at the origin of the method. The next section will focus upon how contemporary evangelical (= conservative) scholarship has interacted with emerging cultural criticism. This will be followed by a closer look at the precursors and hermeneutical presuppositions of cultural criticism. Finally, I will discuss possible benefits and challenges to conservative hermeneutics, followed by a brief conclusion. It should be noted that I do not (and cannot) claim comprehensiveness. This would be a monographic task and even so might prove to be a huge enterprise in view of the multiplicity of sources and strands. Therefore, this article should be understood as a study in trends and emerging perspectives and not as the final word on the subject matter.

WHAT IS CULTURAL CRITICISM? DEFINITION AND ORIGINS

Jeanronod has defined *cultural criticism* as focusing upon

the cultural role of the Bible . . . calling it a “classic” text which bears an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resists definitive interpretations. As such, it can function as a means of “interruption” in the cultural process, provided its interpreters are open to disclosing the instances of truth contained in it. Paul Knitter and Hans Küng have advocated the perspective of the interreligious dialogue as a necessary complement to any inner-religious approach to understanding these texts. Such a wider approach to the Scriptures moved by questions of the history and the comparative study of religions will also be able to point out such ideological dimensions within the biblical texts as, for instance, anti-feminist and anti-semitic attitudes.⁷

While this definition leaves some specific methodological issues and questions unanswered, it provides an interesting point of departure for

Eerdmans, 2002), 17–32. A similar focus can be found in Heikki Räisänen et al., eds., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Interpreting beyond Borders* (The Bible and Postcolonialism 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Charles Mabee, *Reading Sacred Texts through American Eyes: Biblical Interpretation as Cultural Critique* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991); Justin S. Ukpong et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Dennis E. Johnson, “Between Two Wor(l)ds: Worldview and Observation in the Use of General Revelation to Interpret Scripture, and Vice Versa,” *JETS* 41 (1998): 69–84; and M. Daniel Carroll R., “Perspectives on Teaching the Old Testament from the Two-Thirds World,” in *Make the Old Testament Live: From Curriculum to Classroom* (ed. Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 144–57, focusing upon theological education.

7. Jeanronod, “Interpretation, History of,” 442–43.

a definition of cultural criticism. Several aspects should be noted. First, cultural criticism has a historical focus; that is, it seeks to describe the cultural role of the Bible throughout its existence and—obviously—also in contemporary society and culture. This historical focus coincides with Telford’s categorization of this specific hermeneutical approach, classifying it in his taxonomy of methods and approaches in the field of biblical studies with methods predominantly concerned with historical aspects.⁸ Second, meaning is determined by cultural realities and there exists no *definitive* interpretation. Third, cultural criticism provides a starting point for interreligious dialogue but at the same time supplies needed innerreligious feedback to understand Scripture better. Fourth, it supposedly can function as a means to profile ideological dimensions within the biblical text.

Unfortunately, a closer look at the budding field of cultural criticism reveals often-opposing positions. Clearly, this is an emerging methodology that has not yet solidified into some type of orthodoxy. Even on the level of *nomenclature*, one encounters the lack of unity.

A growing number of journals focusing upon cultural issues and Scripture are being published, including *Holy Land Studies: A Multi-disciplinary Journal* (ISSN 1474–9475 and published by Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum), *Biblicon: Bible, Media and Culture* (Sheffield Academic Press), *Semeia* (ISSN 0095–571X and published by the Society of Biblical Literature, although it has ceased publication as a journal recently and will only continue as a series), and *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* (ISSN 0927–2569 and published by Brill Academic Publisher).

Additionally, a bewildering number of specific monograph series are dedicated to studies involving culture and Scripture and thus, could be seen as part of the general trend toward cultural criticism. Some of these series include *Bible and Postcolonialism*; *Bible in the 21st Century*; *Controversies in the Study of Religion*; *Gender, Culture, Theory*; *Issues in Contemporary Religion*; *Religion and the Arts*; *Themes in Religious Studies*; and *Writing Past Colonialism*, all published by Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum. The Society of Biblical Literature also includes several sections, groups, seminars, or consultations that involve cultural criticism, such as “African-American Biblical Hermeneutics,” “Bible and Cultural Studies,” “Bible and Ancient and Modern Media,” “Ideological Criti-

8. Telford, “Modern Biblical Interpretation,” 438. Other approaches focusing predominantly upon the historical aspect of Scripture—according to Telford—include: textual criticism, historical criticism, tradition criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, history of religions approach, history of ideas, history of interpretation, history of reception, social-scientific approaches, anthropological approaches, sociocultural approaches, sociological approaches, sociohistorical approaches, sociopolitical approaches, and psychological approaches.

cism, John's Apocalypse and Cultural Contexts Ancient and Modern," "Ancient Fiction and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative," "Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics," "African Biblical Hermeneutics," "Bakhtin and Biblical Imagination Consultation," and "Bible and Visual Arts."

Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore have published an insightful introduction to the interaction of cultural studies with biblical studies, presented during the *Third Sheffield Colloquium* in April 1997, which focused upon the same general topic.⁹ After providing a concise review of the British roots of cultural studies beginning in the 1950s, they appraise the main concerns during the following 40 years¹⁰ and then focus upon the intersection with biblical studies. They suggest that cultural studies (or criticism) are first of all an interdisciplinary approach that is "concerned with the Bible as culture and the Bible in culture, ancient and modern."¹¹ In more detail, they state that

Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies is not just the Bible influencing culture or culture reappropriating the Bible, but a process of unceasing mutual redefinition in which cultural appropriations constantly reinvent the Bible, which in turn constantly impels new appropriations, and biblical scholars find themselves, in their professional capacity, haunting video stores, museums, and other sites of cultural production.¹²

There are some new elements in this definition that provide further illumination in the quest to describe and understand the emerging phenomenon of cultural criticism. According to this view, culture and Bible both are constantly interacting, and cultural developments "reinvent" the Bible. A similar train of thought is present in Robert P. Carroll's discussion of the Bible as a commodity, in which he focuses upon the new Bible "versions" that contemporary culture has spawned, such as Children's Bible, the Bible as Bestseller, the Family Bible, the Gideon

9. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, "Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies. The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore; JSOTSup/Gender, Culture, Theory 266/7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 19–45.

10. They suggest that the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by the founding of the important *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham. Generally, the 1960s were seen as the "golden age" of cultural studies, whereas the 1970s introduced the Marxist phase of the movement (which was in unison with other academic programs at that time). This period, reaching the 1980s, also involved the growing interest in feminist, race, and ideological research in connection with cultural studies. The interest in race and ethnicity continued into the 1990s, which were also characterized by a vigorous internationalization of the movement, including major curriculum advances in the U.S. academic system during the past 10 years. See here *ibid.*, 19–32.

11. *Ibid.*, 34.

12. *Ibid.*, 35.

Bible, the Marriage Bible, The Woman's Bible, The Personal Growth Study Bible, and more.¹³

As an example of the impact of cultural criticism upon the practicalities of biblical interpretation I will look at Philip F. Esler's essay of a cultural reading of 1 Sam 8–31,¹⁴ in which he focuses upon the cross-cultural study of health and disease and more specifically the madness of Saul. For him, "to become intercultural means both to have sought to penetrate the strangeness of the foreign culture in the first place, to have set indigenous [. . .] meanings within more generalized [. . .] conceptual frameworks and then to have brought the understanding so garnered into active relationship and tension with one's own cultural context."¹⁵ This is followed by a close reading of the text and a focus upon cross-cultural health care as well. Esler suggests a threefold exploratory strategy: (1) look at the narrative itself in the general context of Mediterranean culture; (2) try to understand the health condition of Saul in terms of a cross-cultural process of indigenous and the generalized frameworks of health, illness, and disease. What does sickness mean in a specific culture? (3) Try to find an interpretive position that can mediate between both the indigenous and the generalized frameworks and that results in a more experiential understanding of Saul's problem.¹⁶

Fernando F. Segovia, professor of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, is another important contributor to the growing body of literature and hermeneutical strategies focusing upon cultural (or rather intercultural) criticism. In a paper published in 2000¹⁷ in a collection of studies focusing upon cultural criticism, Segovia looks at the cultural critic's relationship to the biblical text itself. He does so by comparing what he terms "scientific criticism" with "intercultural criticism."¹⁸ The scientific reading of the text was focusing upon objective data, which could be empirically verified with a strong hierarchical bias—that is, requiring a highly informed and well-

13. Robert P. Carroll, "Lower Case Bibles: Commodity Culture and the Bible," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore; JSOTSup/Gender, Culture, Theory 266/7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 46–69.

14. Philip F. Esler, "The Madness of Saul: A Cultural Reading of 1 Samuel 8–31," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore; JSOTSup/Gender, Culture, Theory 266/7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 220–62.

15. *Ibid.*, 224.

16. *Ibid.*, 252–53.

17. Fernando F. Segovia, "Reading-Across: Intercultural Criticism and Textual Posture," in *Interpreting beyond Borders* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; The Bible and Postcolonial-ism 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 59–83.

18. *Ibid.*, 60–67.

educated reader. Often, practitioners of scientific criticism (= traditional historical criticism) could not allow for partial solutions or even defective or incomplete analysis. In a modernist world view, all the details needed to be adequately explained and accounted for. The ancient text or data had to be recuperated and interpreted, but there was no space for dialogue or engagement with that data. To be more explicit: traditional scientific criticism would not engage in a cultural evaluation of the role of men and women in the biblical text or in the relationship of feudal landowners to their slaves in the context of OT or NT cultural realities. Segovia marks especially this lack of engagement as the principal characteristic of traditional readings of the biblical text. Cultural criticism, on the other hand, would describe these realities as a biased description of an interested participant of society, exhibiting ideological strategies, which consequently required contemporary and reader judgment. It also introduces, according to Segovia, the “real reader,” that is, the one who would seek to question critically not only results (like his more scientifically minded colleagues) but also presuppositions, methods, and strategies. Segovia labels his proposal “intercultural criticism” (which is solidly grounded in cultural criticism) and emphasizes (1) the importance of the reader in the process of finding meaning in a text;¹⁹ (2) the fact that there is no objective and disinterested process of interpretation;²⁰ (3) support for any type of reading (both by professionals and “laymen”); and (4) “the attempt to secure a final and definitive meaning in the face of incomplete or defective approximations emerges as pointless.”²¹ For Segovia, intercultural criticism (or “reading across”) is characterized by dialogue and reflects “postcolonialist postmodernism.”²²

SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ABOUT THE HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL CRITICISM

These examples should suffice to draw some general, albeit preliminary, conclusions about the hermeneutics of cultural criticism. First, cultural criticism is not (yet) a fully developed hermeneutical method. It is fragmented and lacks a unified definition. However, this fragmentation needs to be understood against the backdrop of postmodernism and its lack of (and even antipathy toward) absolutes. As a matter of fact, the diversity of methods and the lack of hermeneutical unity of cultural criticism is part and parcel of the ideological substructure.

19. Thus, a text in itself has no meaning. *Ibid.*, 65.

20. This means: we all have agendas, including the text itself.

21. *Ibid.*, 65.

22. *Ibid.*, 81.

Second, cultural criticism is characterized by a fascination with and reaction to culture. Actually, culture is the most important point of reference for both theorists and practitioners of cultural criticism, which seems to be based upon a renewed interest in and understanding of underlying world views. Third, cultural criticism is not necessarily interested in establishing the meaning of the text in its original historical context. As a matter of fact, ancient history (as opposed to recent history) is not of great interest for the practitioners of this method. Fourth, cultural criticism is focusing upon meanings in specific contexts, not on meaning (in the singular). Thus, the interpretation of a biblical text read in post-Soviet Russia will differ significantly from a text read in poverty-stricken Guatemala or in war-torn Chechnya. Cultural criticism seeks to respond to societal/cultural needs (as other hermeneutical endeavors, such as feminist criticism or liberation theology criticism, or poststructuralist criticism also seek to do).

CULTURAL CRITICISM AND CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

Academic evangelical publications provide a good barometer for measuring how evangelicalism as a whole is dealing with cultural criticism. The following section represents only a quick probe in this area although I do not claim that it is comprehensive; and it does provide a general direction.

Bibliotheca Sacra, a prominent conservative academic journal published by Dallas Theological Seminary and one of the premier and longest-running U.S. Evangelical publications, has not devoted a single article to the theoretical questions of hermeneutics over the past ten years. Its focus seems to be more upon specific issues in biblical interpretation (both OT and NT) and biblical theology and less upon theoretical reflections.

The *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* is the official journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) in the U.S., and thus its publication agenda should reflect evangelicalism's most pressing concerns. Moisés Silva in his 1997 presidential address to the Evangelical Theological Society²³ tackled the issue of compatibility between mainstream and evangelical scholarship. While his remarks were lucid and intriguing, no mention of hermeneutics outside of traditional critical scholarship was mentioned or discussed. In the same issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Dennis F. Johnson published an important study of world views and their influence on "word views"

23. Moisés Silva, "'Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?'" *Evangelical Theology and Biblical Scholarship*, *JETS* 41 (1998): 3–16.

in the context of the modernism-postmodernism debate.²⁴ His point of departure was the fact that the modern reader and his or her modernist (or postmodernist) world view is living in the context of an entirely different paradigm from the one in which the biblical authors produced their documents.²⁵ However, Johnson does not mention cultural criticism per se, nor does he consider its methodological foundations.

In 1999, Grant R. Osborne published an article discussing the relationship between historical criticism and evangelicalism.²⁶ He is clearly concerned about the increasing penetration of historical criticism as a method in evangelical scholarship and the methodological variety of evangelical scholars. However, his focus is narrowly limited to traditional historical criticism, covering source criticism, chronology, form and tradition criticism, and redaction criticism. In his final paragraph he suggests that evangelicals should seek to remove or “neutralize” critical presuppositions without necessarily rejecting the actual tools.²⁷ However, he does not equip the evangelical scholar to evaluate newer hermeneutical approaches such as cultural criticism.

E. Earle Ellis²⁸ published a review article about the important two-volume *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*²⁹ in which he also briefly mentions recent hermeneutical approaches (feminist interpretation, liberation theology; gay/lesbian interpretation; Afrocentric biblical interpretation, etc.) that focus more upon the contemporary reader and his/her position toward the biblical text than upon the inherent historical, literary, and theological value of Scripture. While all these methods could be classified as involving an important focus upon culture, they are not specifically a representation of cultural criticism.

Darrell L. Bock’s 2001 presidential address of the 53rd annual meeting of the ETS on November 14, 2001, in Colorado Springs reviews the position of the ETS in theology and the public.³⁰ He suggests

24. Johnson, “Between Two Wor(l)ds,” 69–84.

25. The main world view difference between ancient biblical times and the 21st century involves a theistic a versus an anthropocentric world view.

26. Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 193–210.

27. “However, we must also be careful not to reject methods that can become very useful when false presuppositions are removed. FC [form criticism], TC [tradition criticism], and RC [redaction criticism] become enemies of the veracity of Scripture only when imbibed with the radical skepticism of negative criticism. When utilized under the aegis of an inerrant Scripture, they become positive, helpful tools.” *Ibid.*, 210.

28. E. Earle Ellis, “Perspectives on Biblical Interpretation: A Review Article,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 473–95.

29. John H. Hayes, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

30. Darrell L. Bock, “The Purpose-Driven ETS: Where Should We Go? A Look at Jesus Studies and Other Example Cases,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 3–33.

that the ETS should be a “public square institution” that is purpose driven³¹ and focuses upon mission and the globalization of interpretation, keeping always in mind that U.S. evangelicalism is not Evangelicalism (with capital E), but only part of it.³² Bock calls for a better mixture (including gender, race, and origin) in the program structure of the annual ETS meetings.³³ This clearly reflects cultural concerns and some of the points of the agenda of cultural criticism. Bock also calls for an open discussion (and not mere apologetics of presuppositions of different hermeneutical methods) with the proponents of the methods themselves. Clearly, he envisions an open, purpose-driven society in the public square that can and will listen and discuss also that which is traditionally considered to be outside the limits of evangelicalism.³⁴

Craig Blomberg, a NT scholar and leader of evangelical thinking, suggested in his 1999 address to the annual meeting of the Institute of Biblical Research in Boston several areas of renewed focus of evangelical scholarship in the coming years.³⁵ One of the areas mentioned (although Blomberg does not refer specifically to cultural criticism) involves contextualized studies in the light of international realities and the confrontation of evangelical scholarship with crucial social, ethical, and economic dilemmas of our age. Blomberg clearly advocates more dialogue and active evangelical metacritical thinking—that is, research that is looking at the larger picture, incorporating the fruits of specific biblical research in a wider multidisciplinary context, and thus becoming a trendsetter, rather than being mere apologists or disconnected island-scholars.³⁶

31. Ibid., 10.

32. Ibid., 11–13.

33. Ibid., 13.

34. Ibid., 30–32.

35. Craig L. Blomberg, “Where Should Twenty-First-Century Evangelical Biblical Scholarship Be Heading?” *BBR* 11 (2001): 161–72. Blomberg mentions specifically *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the study of the continuities and discontinuities between biblical texts and their environments, larger-scale theological projects, interaction with new hermeneutical methods (feminist, sociological and narrative-critical studies, reader-response, deconstructionalist studies, and cultural studies), old-fashioned historical studies, contextualized studies in the light of international realities, confrontation of crucial social, ethical, and economic dilemmas of our age (a concern shared with cultural criticism), biblical ethics, intertextuality, etc.

36. This term has been coined by Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 186–88. I have argued elsewhere for the increased necessity for conservative biblical scholarship to look again at the larger picture, using insights and questions from other disciplines. Compare Gerald A. Klingbeil and Martin G. Klingbeil, “La lectura de la Biblia desde una perspectiva hermenéutica multidisciplinaria (I): Consideraciones teóricas preliminares,” in *Entender la Palabra: Hermenéutica Adventista para el Nuevo Siglo* (ed. Merling Alomía, Gerald A.

Robert H. Stein, another NT scholar, published an important study on the benefits of an author-oriented approach to hermeneutics in 2001.³⁷ While he does not focus upon cultural criticism as such, the appearance of his study documents a shift in evangelical hermeneutical focus, away from the purely historically informed interpretation, and signaling a recognition that communication is a three-component enterprise.³⁸

In the same year, Glen A. Scorgie published an enlightening essay on the meditative use of Scripture in which he challenges to a certain degree the sole use of the historical-grammatical method at the expense of other complementary methodologies:

Despite its laudable achievements this well-intentioned approach [i.e., the historical-grammatical method], which has generally been marketed as *the* approach to Scripture, has not served the church as well as one might hope. It is not failing because there is anything intrinsically wrong with either the methodological principles it advocates or the central importance it attaches to discerning the Biblical writers' original intentions. Rather, this prevailing evangelical approach to hermeneutics may be damaging the vitality of the church because of what it either completely ignores, deliberately underestimates, or cavalierly dismisses as of peripheral concern.³⁹

Clearly, U.S. evangelical scholarship is not immune to or unconcerned about new hermeneutical approaches that focus more upon the way of communicating Scripture or on the reader's receiving Scripture. However, up to this point, I could not find any in-depth discussion of cultural criticism as a whole (not just some aspects of it) in recent evangelical publications from the U.S.A.

The situation changes somewhat when one reviews the state of European evangelical publications. Two journals are of special importance, and both are published by Paternoster Press in England: *The Evangelical Quarterly* and the *Evangelical Review of Theology*. Especially the latter one has provided a rich array of studies that take cultural questions and biblical hermeneutics into consideration. I will only briefly introduce the most important contributions made over the past five years.

In 1998 the *Evangelical Review of Theology* dedicated an entire issue to the question of "The Church in Nation Building." Several of the

Klingbeil, Martin G. Klingbeil, and Jorge Torreblanca; Cochabamba: Universidad Adventista de Bolivia, 2000), 147–73.

37. Robert H. Stein, "The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics," *JETS* 44 (2001): 451–66.

38. Namely author-message-receiver.

39. Glen A. Scorgie, "Hermeneutics and the Meditative Use of Scripture: The Case for a Baptized Imagination," *JETS* 44 (2001): 271–84.

articles show concerns that are also raised by proponents of cultural criticism, such as ideology and interpretation, political interaction and the church, solidarity, etc.⁴⁰ Similarly, half a year later, *ERT* focused upon “Christ and Modern Culture,” including studies that focus upon “The Biblical Shape of Modern Culture” (arguing that contemporary ways of thinking and patterns of behavior are more dependent on and congruent with the biblical understanding of the world than generally accepted);⁴¹ “Culture and Revelation” (studying culture, contextualization, cultural relativism and its connection to biblical revelation);⁴² “Christ and Culture” (calling for a conscious ambivalent relationship of Christians to the world that surrounds them);⁴³ “Christian Morality in a Pluralistic Society” (distinguishing between plurality and pluralism and challenging the church to be more pro-active by influencing on the world view level);⁴⁴ and “Indian Spirituality: In Search of Truth and Reality” (counterpositioning Hindu and Christian spirituality and their possible missiological interaction).⁴⁵ The entire issue shows the important interaction between culture (i.e., the “world”) and European evangelical scholarship both on a pragmatic as well as on a methodological level.

In 1999 another issue was dedicated to the main topic of “The Renewal of Theology.” Several articles raise important issues concerning cultural criticism, although none exclusively deals with it on a methodological level. Stanley J. Grenz focuses upon “Revisioning the Theological Task” and suggests that true theological thinking needs to be integrative, Christ-centered (and not model-centered), and a transforming power in the theologian’s life (ethics and life-style).⁴⁶ Andrea M. Ng’weshemi focuses upon cultural context when she looks at the African context of doing theology.⁴⁷ She argues that theological cate-

40. See here, for example, N. T. Wright, “The New Testament and the ‘State,’” *ERT* 22 (1998): 101–18; Valson Tjampu, “The Church and the Nation,” pp. 119–23; Valdir Steuernagel, “The Lordship of Christ and Political Ideologies,” pp. 126–36; Pietro Bolognesi, “The State from an Evangelical Perspective,” pp. 137–75; and Michael Duncan, “Spiritual Gifts for Community Building in Urban Slums,” pp. 176–81.

41. Edwin A. Judge, “The Biblical Shape of Modern Culture,” pp. 292–306.

42. Allan Harman, “Culture and Revelation,” pp. 307–15.

43. Paul G. Schrottenboer, “Christ and Culture,” pp. 316–36.

44. Darrell Cosden, “Christian Morality in a Pluralistic Society,” pp. 337–45.

45. Kathleen Nicholls, “Indian Spirituality: In Search of Truth and Reality,” pp. 362–74.

46. Stanley J. Grenz, “Revisioning the Theological Task,” *ERT* 23 (1999): 120–40.

47. Andrea M. Ng’weshemi, “Doing Justice to Context in Theology: The Quest for a Christian Answer to the African Condition,” *ERT* 23 (1999): 163–73. She writes: “The question about what it means to be human as it is posed by Africans provides the kernel of the condition which methodologically is the context which theology ought to be aware of as it seeks to make itself relevant to African people. Given the experience of poverty and other forms of injustice, Africans need to hear what the gospel says about them.

gories need to be contextualized to local reality (economics, education, language, etc.).

Two years later a separate volume was dedicated to “Intercultural Theology.” Three articles are of relevance to the present discussion: Yung Han Kim focuses in “The Idea of Transformed Hermeneutics” upon the formulation of a new hermeneutic, which he characterizes as a “dynamic relationship” between text-centered and reader-response hermeneutics.⁴⁸ Bruce Nicholls looks at “The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission”⁴⁹ and challenges the church to relocate itself in its mission theology with a wider opening toward distinct cross-cultural realities and thus readings of Scripture. Although his article is by no means a coherent hermeneutical treatise, his call for relevant intercultural hermeneutics should be seen in the context of the larger issues at stake in cultural criticism. Finally, J. Julius Scott Jr., juxtaposes “Biblical Theology and Non-Western Theology.”⁵⁰

In 2002 an entire issue of studies focusing upon “Global Trends” was produced with two relevant studies. David Parker studies “The Dynamics and Directions of World Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century,”⁵¹ in which he suggests as his first point that evangelical hermeneutics should continue to base itself on the *Sola Scriptura* principle, without denying the “globalization of hermeneutics” that is taking place in theology due to the realization of the importance of world views.⁵² Robert Lang’at contributed the study entitled “The Church’s Responsibility within the East African Context” in the same issue. His call is to a more holistic mission approach of evangelicals in Africa that addresses the specific physical, educational, and social needs of the specific people group.⁵³

The October 2002 issue of *ERT* focuses upon “Boundaries and Identity” and contains two articles relevant for this study. Lok M. Bhandari from Nepal has written on “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries

Indeed they want to hear the gospel, the message of which is centred on the human person whom the various types of affiliations render less human” (173). See here also from a non-evangelical perspective and focusing upon African women and the Bible Musimbi Kanyoro, “Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature/WCC Publications, 2001), 101–13.

48. Yung Han Kim, “The Idea of Transformed Hermeneutics,” *ERT* 25 (2001): 196–209.

49. Bruce Nicholls, “The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission,” pp. 231–41.

50. J. Julius Scott Jr., “Biblical Theology and Non-Western Theology,” pp. 242–57.

51. David Parker, “The Dynamics and Directions of World Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century,” *ERT* 26 (2002): 100–118.

52. *Ibid.*, 106–7.

53. Robert Lang’at, “The Church’s Responsibility within the East African Context,” pp. 136–52.

Biblically, Historically, Theologically, Culturally, and in Ministry in the 21st Century.”⁵⁴ He calls on biblical perspectives to show that there are no simplistic answers and that the search for identity in a changing world is likely to be a painful dialogical process. Darrell Cosden contributed “Coming of Age: The Future of a Post-Soviet Evangelical Theology,” in which he stresses the coming of age of a post-Soviet evangelicalism that demonstrates a critical awareness of and healthy distance from the Western evangelical theological method that has dominated it thus far.⁵⁵

Finally in this brief review of the current state of evangelical theology’s attempt to come to grips with cultural issues in hermeneutics, Christopher Partridge’s article entitled “The Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of the West: The Religio-Cultural Context of Contemporary Western Christianity” and published in *Evangelical Quarterly* should not be overlooked. After a lengthy discussion of the secularization thesis commonly accepted in the discussion of Western spirituality, he argues that the West is currently witnessing a “re-enchantment” with new religions and alternative forms of spirituality. This in turn has immense implications for theology, missiology, and apologetics.⁵⁶

AN EVALUATION OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF CULTURAL CRITICISM

Clearly, cultural criticism is here to stay. The increasing number of publications (both in monographic series and in journals) that focus either partially or entirely on the major concerns of the method as well as the numerous sections, groups, or consultations of the annual SBL congress demonstrate this truism. The philosophical presupposition underlying this approach, the need to be relevant and provide tangible answers without having to opt for *the* answer, is a heritage of post-modernism. Supposed objectivity is not aimed for, and, as a matter of fact, cannot be attained, since it is a relict of a modernist positivistic world view. Cultural criticism also emphasizes dialogue, because no absolutes exist, and can allow for partial readings or solutions. Cultural criticism wants to empower those who are seldom heard and give them a voice (although it must be said that even the *avant-garde* sections, groups, and consultations at the SBL annual meetings generally

54. Lok M. Bhandari, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries Biblically, Historically, Theologically, Culturally, and in Ministry in the 21st Century,” pp. 292–309.

55. Darrell Cosden, “Coming of Age: The Future of a Post-soviet Evangelical Theology,” pp. 319–36.

56. Christopher Partridge, “The Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of the West: The Religio-Cultural Context of Contemporary Western Christianity,” *EQ* 74 (2002): 235–56.

are dominated by established scholars, working mostly at U.S. Universities). Thus, it aims to be an “interpretation from below,” in which academic hierarchy or existing power structures should be challenged.

It is quite obvious from the outset of this summary that cultural criticism has shed most of the basic principles of mainstream traditional biblical hermeneutics.⁵⁷ One does not find discussions about classical issues in hermeneutics, such as inspiration or revelation of Scripture. Equally, the authority, unity, and even limits of Scripture (= canon) are not of great concern to practitioners of cultural criticism. While reading studies focusing upon or employing cultural criticism, one often has the impression that a new vocabulary is being created with a very limited connection to earlier hermeneutical discussions (or none at all!). There seems to be method in this, since it underlines the diametrically opposed philosophical presuppositions so important to hermeneutics. Cultural criticism is open for dialogue, but it is mostly a dialogue among equals. I have found very few examples of a fruitful (and not just one-sided) interaction between cultural criticism and traditional hermeneutics (be it the historical-critical or the historical-grammatical approach).⁵⁸

Cultural criticism grew out of concerns connected with the history of religion and comparative religion paradigms. Since it does not aim for “truth” or “exclusivity,” it is very interested in comparative cross-pollination with other world religions, although it still focuses upon the Bible. In conclusion of this section: cultural criticism has moved the point of reference from the text toward the reader and his/her culture. In this, it follows other modern hermeneutical paradigms, such as reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and so on.

57. Including concepts such as revelation, inspiration, *sola Scriptura*, *tota Scriptura*, the Bible as its own interpreter, the canon of Scripture, the unity of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, etc. See here, for example, Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (trans. R. W. Yarbrough; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994); or Gerhard F. Hasel, “General Principles of Interpretation,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (ed. Gordon M. Hyde; Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of SDA, 1974), 163–93.

58. The only exceptions being perhaps Segovia (“Reading-Across: Intercultural Criticism and Textual Posture”) although he is mainly interested in juxtapositioning the different approaches. See here also my comments in my review of Heikki Räisänen et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, in *JNES* 63 (2004): 140, where I wrote: “The present volume provides an important diagnostic of where biblical hermeneutics and theology stand and which questions, issues and perspectives need to inform the 21st century interpreter. However, it is not a dialogue. The general tone is one of a manifesto or apologetic document (the exception being Stendahl’s short contribution) and one wonders if biblical scholars will ever be able to listen to one another with the readiness to change. It appears that our own stories, paths, and presuppositions are just so strong that they dim the story, path, and presupposition of the biblical text.”

POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF
CULTURAL CRITICISM FOR AN EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTIC
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Can an evangelical hermeneutic that is deeply rooted in the scriptural concept of revelation and inspiration dialogue, interact, and even learn from studies employing cultural criticism? Is it possible to find some positive aspects of the methodology? And if yes, how could these positive aspects be implanted in a biblical hermeneutic that is genuinely faithful to Scripture's own claims as well as the mission and the projection of conservative Christianity? In the following I will try to synthesize some possible benefits of cultural criticism that could help to strengthen conservative hermeneutics at the beginning of the 21st century: First, cultural criticism reminds us that Scripture was not designed to be read in ethereal cathedrals but was produced because of a real need (just think of the ministries of the classical prophets or Ezra or Nehemiah, to mention just a few). Second, cultural criticism challenges us not to mistake our predominantly Western world view and underlying cultural paradigms with the world view or reality of the authors in ancient times. Thus, it enriches our understanding of the Bible and functions as some type of early warning system against a hermeneutic of Western Christianity. Third, it focuses upon the incarnational quality of the Word. Christ did not come to this planet in the clean room of an ultra-modern CPU factory without any contact or contamination with his world and culture. To the contrary: he became a baby, born into a family of the lower ranks of society, poor, powerless, but bringing salvation. Fourth, cultural criticism underlines the fact that the Word can (and must) speak meaningfully and powerfully to people in distinct cultural contexts who would not understand a Western-style evangelistic effort. Understood in this way, it actually uplifts our concept of revelation and the communication of that revelation by God. Fifth, cultural criticism is important for missions and missiological strategies, since it calls the attention of the church, its theologians and pastors, its administrators to the diversity and immense distance of modern culture. In the final instance, hermeneutics is not an end in itself. Our reading of the Word serves a purpose, since it communicates the plan of salvation to us. Hermeneutics is not a purely academic exercise but should enable us to communicate more authentically and powerfully the gospel of Christ, his soon return, and our desperate need for transformation.

However, besides the many positive aspects of cultural criticism, some possibly devastating challenges should be considered as well. Foremost in this regard, cultural criticism has a problem with authority. There is no final "correct" reading; there exists no ultimate answer.

Clearly, this negates the inherent nature of Scripture as being the Word of God, which carries authority. Second, cultural criticism seems to have a blind spot (as we all do) concerning history. The reality of the past is of the utmost importance for our understanding of Scripture now, since the Word was revealed in time and in specific circumstances. Questioning or ignoring that historical moment will ultimately lead to theological relativism. Third (and related to the earlier point), if there is only one way, one truth, and one life (John 14:6), relativism cannot be part and parcel of our hermeneutical philosophical presuppositions. There are definite answers, and Scripture is full of them. Finally, cultural criticism seems to be stuck to its a priori presuppositions, which in turn does not allow it to enter into a “real” discussion with traditional hermeneutics. It speaks another language and perhaps does not even want to interact. In this sense it is contradictory to its own premises, which emphasize dialogue and interaction.

CONCLUSION

The mere fact that cultural criticism has had such a positive and loud response should indicate a specific need. Scripture needs to be relevant, not just historically correct. It also points to an important development in missiology, away from a Western-centric understanding of the gospel toward a more holistic, international reading. Conservative evangelical scholarship has not yet entered into an interaction on the theoretical level with cultural criticism. Most interaction has come from missiologists or church-growth specialists who have emphasized cultural context in our mission strategies. The 10/40 window with its billions of people that have not yet been in contact with Christianity is challenging us to think internationally in our interpretation of Scripture. We are also beginning to understand that culture is not an enemy of Christianity but, rather, the mold and paradigm in which we live, which we need to recognize and understand, and which needs to be transformed by the power of the Spirit of God.⁵⁹

59. See here, for example, the important contributions of Chantal J. Klingbeil, “Iglesia y cultura: ¿Amigas o enemigas?” in *Pensar la iglesia hoy: Hacia una eclesiología adventista. Estudios teológicos presentados durante el IV Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano en honor a Raoul Dederen* (ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil et al.; Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002), 351–67; and Carlos A. Steger, “Cristianismo y cultura: El dilema de las instituciones educativas adventistas,” in *Pensar la iglesia hoy*, 369–76.