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This article explores the question: What kind of biblical hermeneutics ought evangelical Christians to embrace for themselves and to advocate to others? It takes as its starting point the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982) and subjects this document to an extended critical reflection. The Statement, it is concluded, is in various ways an unsatisfactory articulation of evangelical hermeneutics, if hermeneutics is about helping people to perceive “what the biblical revelation means and how it bears on our lives” (Chicago Statement, Article IX). In the second part of the article, an alternative articulation is then attempted.

Key Words: Evangelicals, Bible, hermeneutics, Chicago Statements

And Philip replied, “WE AFFIRM that a person is not dependent for understanding of Scripture on the expertise of biblical scholars. . . . WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. . . . WE AFFIRM that the Bible’s own interpretation of itself is always correct, never deviating from, but rather elucidating, the single meaning of the inspired text. The single meaning of a prophet’s words includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding of those words by the prophet and necessarily involves the intention of God evidenced in the fulfilment of those words.”¹

And the Ethiopian rode on, none the wiser because, unfortunately, he was dependent on a biblical scholar for his grasp of the scriptural passage in question; he didn’t himself understand its grammatical-historical sense—that is, the meaning that the writer had expressed. Moreover, he had an uneasy feeling that there was something wrong somewhere when it was claimed that the Bible ought to be interpreted in terms of the meaning that the writer expressed and yet at

the same time that “the single meaning of a prophet’s words includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding of those words by the prophet and necessarily involves the intention of God evidenced in the fulfilment of those words.” The more he thought about this last point, in fact, the more confused and troubled he became; and he was glad when at last the voice of the apostle, affirming still, faded into the distance, and he found himself alone once more in the desert, with only his mute charioteer and his puzzling text for company, his horizons still confused.

INTRODUCTION

“Do you understand what you are reading?” The question has pressed itself upon the Christian Church throughout the centuries, perhaps especially in the case of Christians of the Protestant persuasion with their emphasis on the importance of Scripture in the life of the believer and the believing community. For “conservative Protestantism . . . looks on the Bible as sola fidei regula and not as just prima fidei regula. . . . In that conservative Protestantism takes only the Bible as authoritative, there is no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible.”2 It has been of the greatest importance for Christians of this persuasion, then, to be sure that they truly do understand what they are reading in the Bible—the individual sentences and paragraphs and chapters; the various whole books as whole books; the various parts of the Bible taken together. It has been particularly important that readers ensure that, rather than simply reading out of it what they have first brought to it, they are giving the biblical text its own voice so that the Bible does indeed have authority over the reader rather than vice versa. So it is that over the course of time various rules of Bible reading have emerged that are designed to guide the reader in respect to proper and improper ways of reading the Bible, in the hope that true rather than false interpretations of it will emerge; and a particular term has come to be widely employed as an “umbrella term” to refer to this rule-governed biblical interpretation. It is the term “hermeneutics,” from the Greek verb hermeneuein, “to interpret, translate or explain.” Bernard Ramm writes of the matter in these terms: “Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation. As such it forms one of the most important members of the theological sciences.”3 For Ramm, hermeneutics is, as a theological discipline, “the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible.”4 The word has, in fact, often been used interchangeably with “interpretation” or indeed with “exegesis,” with the emphasis falling upon how one’s understanding of the biblical text could be achieved by the ob-

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 11.
servance of the proper hermeneutical rules. In more recent times, however, it has sometimes been used more broadly of the entire process by which a biblical text comes to be understood, with the emphasis sometimes falling on the only partial adequacy of the application of "rules," as such, in the pursuit of understanding. The authors of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics reflect this more recent shift in emphasis, while not approving of certain aspects of it, when they affirm “that the term hermeneutics, which historically signified the rules of exegesis, may properly be extended to cover all that is involved in the process of perceiving what the biblical revelation means and how it bears on our lives.”

In the background here lie philosophical questions about the interpretation of texts in general (not only biblical texts), most notably the question as to what the circumstances are that make the understanding of any text possible. In this discussion, the role of the interpreter in creating or at least participating in the creation of meaning has tended to come to the fore, and it has become customary to speak of the “two horizons” that must be merged if an act of understanding is to take place—the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. Understanding occurs when subject and object move into appropriate relationship with each other.

What kind of biblical hermeneutics ought evangelical Christians to embrace for themselves and to advocate to others? This is the question at the heart of this article. In asking it, I take the term “hermeneutics” in the broader sense expressed in the Chicago Statement to refer to “all that is involved in the process of perceiving what the biblical revelation means and how it bears on our lives.” I take the term “evangelical Christian” to mean much the same as the terms “Protestant” or “conservative Protestant” in the earlier parts of this article. I recognize that it is a slippery term that has been used historically of various religious groups from a variety of Christian traditions and that the diversity of the people and the institutions to which it has been applied, both theological and ecclesiastical, has led some commentators to argue that the label is in fact meaningless.

5. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, Article IX.
7. See further K. J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 15–35. Vanhoozer distinguishes three “ages” of criticism, which he labels “the age of the author” (characterized by interest in the author’s intention); “the age of the text” (where the focus shifts to the question what methods enable us to gain knowledge of the text?); and “the age of the reader” (where the role of reader in construing or creating meaning is at the forefront).
of “evangelical” concern, nonetheless, and in the midst of much diversity of thought and practice, has been the preservation and promotion of what are regarded as foundational aspects of historic Christian faith, especially as these came to fresh expression in the Reformation. Fundamental here is the place of the Bible as God’s inspired Word and as the final authority in all matters of Christian faith and life—the norm that cannot be corrected by other sources (norma normans, non normata, as the Reformers put it). It is not the teaching of the Church but the teaching of the Bible that is paramount in the end, although evangelicals have no argument with much of the teaching of the Church throughout the ages and indeed would claim to stand firmly for orthodox, historic Christian faith (properly understood) in the face of misunderstandings and perversions of it both ancient and modern and both within and without the Church. Particular evangelical emphases in response to misunderstandings and perversions (although this is not an exhaustive list) have been: “eternal salvation only through faith in Christ, a serious commitment to evangelism and missions, the necessity of personal conversion and a spiritually transformed life.” What manner of biblical hermeneutics should people with this kind of view of things embrace and advocate?

THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

I take as my starting point the Chicago Statement, for it remains to this day the only quasi-“official” statement that exists on evangelical hermeneutics. Norman Geisler indeed describes it, along with the earlier Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), as representing “a consensus of evangelical scholarship on these fundamental topics.” The Chicago Statement on


11. Radmacher and Preus (eds.), Hermeneutics, ix. I do not myself believe this bold statement to be true. Perusal of the papers presented at the conference itself gives rise to doubts, because these papers not only disagree with each other in significant ways but also because they often cite other evangelical scholars with whom they disagree. Geisler also provides a commentary on the Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (“Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” in Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II [ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 889–904), which is written in such a way as to suggest that it is the interpretation of the Statement rather than simply Geisler’s own. For the sake of clarity in respect to what follows, I need to declare that I see no reason to concede this—not least because, again, the contributors to the conference do not give the impression of unanimity on various points, whether in their conference papers or in their other writings. I have not depended on Geisler’s exegesis of the Statement, therefore, in seeking to understand what it is saying. I have remained focused on what the words of the Statement themselves appear to imply,
Biblical Hermeneutics consists of 25 articles, each of which contains an affirmation and a denial. These articles of affirmation and denial I wish to subject to critical scrutiny, as a way of clearing the ground for further reflection. I shall not comment directly and at length on every article, for reasons of space. I shall comment sufficiently on the whole, however, that an impression of the strengths and weakness of the whole emerges, along with some suggestions about the way ahead. This preliminary work will then provide the platform for a proposal as to which kind of biblical hermeneutic evangelicals should embrace and advocate to others.

Article I of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (hereafter, simply the Statement) affirms “that the normative authority of Holy Scripture is the authority of God Himself, and is attested by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.” It denies “the legitimacy of separating the authority of Christ from the authority of Scripture, or of opposing the one to the other.” The concern here is to identify what Scripture says with what God says and to invest it with the very authority of God. The correct approach to the interpretation of the Bible begins with the recognition, gained from reflection upon biblical texts themselves, that we are dealing here with a book—a single book, albeit possessing many parts—in which and through which God speaks; and since it is God who speaks, the words carry authority with respect to the mortal and contingent reader. It is an uncontroversial beginning, from the point of view of historic Christian faith.

Article II affirms “that as Christ is God and Man in one Person, so Scripture is, indivisibly, God’s Word in human language.” It denies “that the humble, human form of Scripture entails errancy any more than the humanity of Christ, even in His humiliation, entails sin.” This article requires more careful scrutiny. It proceeds by analogy, paralleling the dual aspects of divinity and humanity in Christ and in Scripture. The question is, however, whether the precise use made of the analogy is very convincing. Sin, after all, is ever and always moral fault; but errors in texts are not ever and always a matter of moral fault. It is certainly possible that they might arise from an intention to deceive (which would involve moral fault); but it is also possible that they might arise for some other reason, such as limitation of knowledge on the part of the writer (and this would not involve moral fault). What is it, then, about the biblical text in particular that inevitably leads to the equation of an error with a sin (for it appears to be an inevitable equation in the minds of the framers of the articles at this point)? Is it that there is no other explanation for error in a God-inspired text than that God has lied? Perhaps the thinking is that God, being God, is not limited in knowledge, and therefore any “errors” in the Bible could not be explicable otherwise than by divine deceit. Yet, as plausible as this sounds when only logic is invoked, the fact of the matter

taken in their grammatical-historical sense. I shall also occasionally refer, however, to Geisler’s own views.
is that the Bible presents to us a Christ who Himself, although without sin, was certainly not without limitation of knowledge (Mark 13:32).

It seems unwise to assume, therefore—if the analogy between Christ and Scripture is indeed to be pursued—that Scripture should be as unlettered as God by limitation of knowledge. Indeed, the evidence is everywhere to be found in the Bible that the individual biblical authors were, like God-as-He-enters-the-world-in-Christ, limited in knowledge. It could hardly be otherwise, if they were (as they were) people of time and culture. And this limitation of knowledge is revealed in statements that, when measured by fuller knowledge gained from Scripture itself and from elsewhere, are surely not correct. The prophet Haggai tells his contemporary Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, that God will shake the heavens and the earth, overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms, and make him the messianic king (Hag 2:22–23), yet this did not happen. Jesus describes the mustard seed as the smallest of all the seeds, but his statement does not correspond to scientific reality (Mark 4:30–31). All this is not very important. The reason it is not important is precisely

12. The framers of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (available in W. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine [Leicester: InterVarsity / Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 1203–7) explicitly state that divine inspiration does not confer omniscience on the biblical authors (Article IX). Yet at least some of those who argue the inerrantist position appear to believe that this does not mean that a lack of omniscience is reflected in their words. Witness J. S. Feinberg’s opposition to scholars who argue that the biblical writers, being time-bound in their statements, made some statements that are formally inaccurate, in his essay “Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics,” in Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II (ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 1–50, on p. 15: “the Holy Spirit is also the author of Scripture. The Holy Spirit as omniscient is not time-bounded in His knowledge. Moreover, He obviously will not willfully deceive us. . . . If the Holy Spirit refuses to deceive us in regard to whatever he knows, and if He knows everything. . . . then His participation in the production of Scripture as co-author eliminates both willful deception, factual error, and doctrinal error of any kind.” This view of things amounts to an extraordinary refusal to take seriously in practice, if not in theory, the genuine historicality of divine revelation. Note further the unconvincing nature of the same author’s argument in “A Response to Adequacy of Language and Accommodation,” in ibid., 377–90. Here he appears to argue that, while God does necessarily accommodate himself to human ignorance in communicating with us, in order that we may understand what is said (e.g., “the realm of nature is spoken of in terms of physical properties and human emotions,” 388), yet the writers of Scripture were able to transcend the ignorance of their day in inscripturating God’s revelation. It is very difficult to understand how this could possibly be so; and indeed, a reading of the Bible itself does not encourage one in the belief that it is so. The words that our biblical authors use arise out of the world in which they live and they reflect what these authors understand at that point in time and culture—about God, about the world, and about human beings. For a similar problematic formulation of the matter, see Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics,” 895, where he concedes that “God adapted Himself through human language so that his eternal truth could be understood by man in a temporal world” yet affirms that “while there is a divine adaptation (via language) to human finitude there is no accommodation to human error;” failing to understand that the human understanding, expressed in human language, of one era may turn out to be inadequate when considered in relation to the human understanding, expressed in language, of a later one.
because, first, it does not follow (as Article II implies) that biblical statements such as these somehow inevitably reflect negatively on the character or indeed the divinity of God; and second, it does not follow (which is the implication of following Article I with Article II) that biblical statements such as these inevitably undermine the normative authority of Scripture. On the contrary, it is the very wonder of the biblical understanding of God that God enters ever-changing history, accommodating Himself to its limitations, and indeed to our sinfulness in order not only to communicate with us but also to act on our behalf. If some so-called “errors” in regard to the full truth of things are the result, it is not a matter for concern, and certainly not a reason for overall distrust of the Bible.

It does, however, press upon us the question of hermeneutics, for clearly any proposed hermeneutic for the Bible, if it is to be regarded as the best and the truest, will need to be able convincingly to deal with the question of how we are to move from individual biblical statements, conditioned as they are by time and culture, to an overall understanding of the Bible as God’s Word to us today. It will need to be able to help us to move from partial and limited individual texts—even some texts in which “error” might be alleged—to a reading of the whole. This may be relatively easy (it is not difficult to understand what Jesus meant by his parable in connection with the mustard seed, and how that fits into Jesus’ and biblical teaching overall; and the precise size of the mustard seed in relation to all other seeds is, of course, irrelevant to the point at issue). It may be more difficult (the process by which Haggai’s prophecy to Zerubbabel came to be seen as a prophecy that relates to the Church in Heb 12:26–29 merits some inquiry). Easy or difficult, hermeneutics must suggest how it is to be done. For

the cultural trappings of the urbanized, technologized West of today are very different from those of the rural and pastoral Near East in the two millennia before Christ and also from those of Hellenistic towns in the first century A.D.—the worlds from which came our Old and New Testaments respectively . . . noting the distance between their worlds and ours with regard to manners, customs, expectations, and assumptions about life is very necessary in interpreting Scripture, just as it is in all study of ancient documents that present to us people of the past. To think of Jesus, or Socrates, or Julius Caesar, or the Buddha as if he were a man of our time and never to ask what was

13. Indeed, we should be more concerned about the implicitly Docetic view of Christ that often lies in the shadows of robust affirmations of inerrancy in the Bible that draw the kind of analogy between Christ and the Bible that the Statement draws.

14. It would be entirely irrational, in fact, to “distrust the Bible” simply because it shares in the nature of all historical documents—that what it says, it says in time and culture. It would be worthy of our distrust only if it were shown to be intent on deceiving us or if, despite a lack of intent, it were found in fact to be misleading, once the implications of its time-bound statements were fully understood in relation to each other.
involved for him in being a man of his own time is bound to issue in grotesque misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{15}

Moving on, Article III itself gives us one well-known hermeneutical key that has deep roots in Christian history. It affirms “that the person and work of Jesus Christ are the central focus of the entire Bible” and denies “that any method of interpretation which rejects or obscures the Christ-centeredness of Scripture is correct.” It is not easy to argue with this article as long as the word “focus” indeed means just that, and there is no intention to collapse the entirety of biblical theology into Christology.\textsuperscript{16} It would be difficult on any reading of the Bible to come to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is not the most important figure therein; and indeed that He is the center that makes ultimate sense of the remainder. Any reading of the “parts” of the Bible must keep in mind this center around which the parts coalesce.

Article IV affirms “that the Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture acts through it today to work faith in its message” and denies “that the Holy Spirit ever teaches to any one anything which is contrary to the teaching of Scripture.” This is closely related to Article V, which affirms “that the Holy Spirit enables believers to appropriate and apply Scripture to their lives” and denies “that the natural man is able to discern spiritually the biblical message apart from the Holy Spirit.” These are again unexceptionable statements in themselves. It is difficult to see what they have to do with biblical hermeneutics directly, however. How does belief in the work of the Holy Spirit, so described, help us specifically in our quest to “read, understand, and apply” biblical texts? It is not made clear.

Article VI affirms “that the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements” and declares “that biblical truth is both objective and absolute,” going on to explain “that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts.” It denies “that, while Scripture is able to make us wise unto salvation, biblical truth should be defined in terms of this function.” It further denies “that error should be defined as that which wilfully deceives.” Here is substantive guidance about how the Bible should be read. It is somewhat prob-

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\item \textsuperscript{15} Packer, “Infallible Scripture,” 330–31. I cite this passage from this essay in full awareness that the author was himself a member of the drafting committee that produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, whose wording I am here criticizing, I do so because I believe that it is an excellent passage—one of many in the essay—whose implications lead in a direction that the Statement itself does not appear to take. Indeed, I am convinced that a Statement formed on the basis of the essay would look very different from the Statement that we actually have—which I assume to be, like all committee products, a patchwork of compromises made between different views.
\item \textsuperscript{16} The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy appears to fail to avoid falling into this trap in its only reference to hermeneutics, albeit in the exposition that accompanies it (under “Authority: Christ and the Bible”) rather than in any of the articles: “No hermeneutic . . . of which the historical Christ is not the focal point is acceptable. Holy Scripture must be treated as \textit{what it essentially is}—\textit{the witness of the Father to the incarnate Son} [my italics].”
\end{itemize}
lematic, however. In the first place, it is perfectly clear that the Bible does not in fact always express God's truth in propositional statements. As J. I. Packer notes:

> revelation is person-to-person communication (personal self-disclosure in and through the giving of information about oneself) . . . revelation is embodied not only in propositions relayed by God's spokesmen on His behalf, but also in the attitudes, wishes, invitations, appeals, and reactions that they expressed by the way they put things . . . divine revelation should not be thought of as if it were the kind of depersonalized conveying of information that one finds in official memoranda or company reports. Whether operating through verbal utterance, vision, sign, miracle, providence, or any other means, God's revelation was and is His personal self-disclosure, to which the only proper response is faith, worship, and obedience. Revelation is essentially God revealing God.17

It is one of the tasks of hermeneutics, indeed, to suggest how it is that God reveals Himself to us in all kinds of biblical texts, whether they make propositions or not and, indeed, to what extent God reveals Himself to us in any given text. For God is not revealed to us in equal measure in all parts of Scripture. “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1–2); and most assuredly, this latter speaking says more than all the former ones. In fact, all revelation of the divine self prior to the Incarnation must surely be regarded as partial and limited with respect to this great event. The OT authors did not know as much about God as we know now. This is the difficulty of the use of the word “absolute” of biblical truth in Article VI. Biblical truth taken as a whole may well be considered “absolute”; but biblical truth considered in the particular is often presumably only relatively true. For example, it is not absolutely true that “as the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more” (Job 7:9)—as the NT resurrection narratives know. Nor is it absolutely true that “a slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov 10:4)—as the OT book of Job already knows. The first statement is only true in Job’s limited experience of the world. The Church, having witnessed one person

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17. Packer, “Infallible Scripture,” 334–35. The Statement’s emphasis on propositions is very curious especially when one considers that Article X clearly states that “Scripture communicates God's truth to us verbally through a wide variety of literary forms,” and Article XIII affirms “that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study.” Geisler’s commentary on Article X does not aid us in clarifying the matter (Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics,” 895), for he appears to equate the term “propositional” in Article VI (although he erroneously refers to it as Article II) with the terms “verbal” and “sentential,” in the course of acknowledging that “the Bible is a human book which uses normal literary forms.” This is extremely confusing.
rise from the dead, hopes for something more for others. The second statement may reflect the limited experience of its author too, if it is intended to express a general truth. Whether it is so intended or not, it is certainly the case that the Bible knows of other causes of poverty than laziness (for example, oppression) and is well aware that there is no universal connection between diligence and wealth (as, in fact, other proverbs show). A biblical hermeneutic needs to consider statements such as these in relation to others in order to weigh how far they are true, so that Bible readers can come to a considered view on how absolute biblical truth is to be expressed on topics such as the afterlife or wealth and poverty.

This necessary task is, however, denied to the reader by the article’s apparent attaching of an ill-defined notion of “absolute truth” to all biblical statements in their individuality. Indeed, an impossible burden is thus laid on the reader’s shoulders, for the definition of truth offered in Article VI makes no allowance at all for limitation of any kind arising out of the historical nature of divine revelation. On this definition, a text such as Job 7:9 “represents matters as they actually are,” if true; if it does not represent matters as they actually are, it is in error. There is no room for any middle ground here, in which (for example) error might be defined “as that which willfully deceives,” and the overall truth of biblical revelation might be affirmed, while the limitations of particular biblical statements taken by themselves might be recognized. Yet the biblical interpreter requires such middle ground if (s)he is to make sense of the Bible.

It is at this point that the reader of the Bible begins to wonder how far the Bible itself is truly guiding the principles of interpretation being advocated in the Statement, and how far other factors are far more determinative. For if the Bible itself were guiding the enterprise, how could anyone affirm that “the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements” that simply represent matters “as they actually are”? Article VII increases one’s sense of unease, for it affirms “that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite, and fixed.” Along with this article must be read Article XV, which affirms “the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed.” It denies, further, “the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.”

So the meaning expressed by the writer in each biblical text is single, definite, and fixed; and this is the only meaning of importance to us as interpreters of the Bible. Yet the Bible itself does not encourage us to take this view of things. The Bible itself appears to suggest that God can mean things by scriptural words that their human authors did not mean. Let us return to the example of Hag 2:20–23. As far as can be ascertained from the words employed, Haggai meant no more and no less than to promise Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, that on the day that God shook the heavens and the earth and overthrew the throne of kingdoms, He would take
Zerubbabel and make him king. Yet the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:26–29) takes that divine promise to Zerubbabel as referring to his own time (“now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven’”) and looks forward from his own time to a future in which created things will be shaken but not the kingdom of God. There is no reason to think that Haggai “meant” this by his words, yet his words are given this meaning in Hebrews.

Then again, let us consider the famous Immanuel prophecy in Isa 7:14 in its immediate Isaianic context. Isaiah promises King Ahaz a sign in regard to his current predicament, faced by the military might of the kings of Israel and Aram: a young woman will have a child and call his name Immanuel. Of whom does he speak? Clearly it is of a child to be born imminently; for “before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria” (Isa 7:16–17). Isaiah means to refer to a contemporary child. Yet Matthew’s Gospel (1:22–23) records the fulfillment of these words as taking place in Christ: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.’”

In neither of these examples is the meaning expressed by the writer—the grammatical-historical sense—of great interest to the later biblical author. The words are considered to carry another, far more significant meaning—at least, more significant for readers of the Bible who now share a different context from the original readers and hearers. One could multiply examples from the NT of the same kind of approach to biblical texts; and one would be hard pressed, from this cumulative NT evidence, to mount any argument that the meaning we are ultimately to be concerned with as biblical interpreters is any single, definite, or fixed meaning of a text that we can discern, as expressed by the original author. Indeed, one is led to worry that from the standpoint of the Statement our NT writers might be regarded as illegitimate interpreters of Scripture, for they appear clearly to attribute to it, from time to time, “meaning which the literal sense does not support.”

Taking our lead from the Bible rather than the Statement, on the other hand, we might argue on the contrary that, while interest in the grammatical-historical sense of an individual text may well be an important starting point for biblical interpreters, if they are to avoid reading anything they like into texts, far more important, surely, is the meaning of a text as it may be discerned within the entire canonical context of Scripture—its canonical sense. Biblical hermeneutics must give attention not just to what authors may have explicitly meant (so far as this can be ascertained) but also to ways in which the meanings of biblical texts elude their authors and take different shape within the larger biblical and historical context, speaking
now to us in very different terms from the terms in which they spoke to our forebears.\textsuperscript{18}

Unsurprisingly, given the pressure of the biblical data, the authors of the *Statement* themselves evidently feel compelled to acknowledge this “gap” between words and meaning to some extent, for in Article VIII they deny “that the writers of Scripture always understood the full implications of their own words.” Unfortunately, they attempt to concede the point while still holding on to their impossible formulation with respect to single meanings, and the consequence is the most tortured prose of the entire document: “WE AFFIRM that the Bible’s own interpretation of itself is always correct, never deviating from, but rather elucidating, the single meaning of the inspired text. The single meaning of a prophet’s words includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding of those words by the prophet and necessarily involves the intention of God evidenced in the fulfilment of those words.” The “single” meaning of the text now turns out to include meaning that was not in the mind of the original author at all. It is a desperate and unconvincing attempt to accommodate the biblical data to a frame of reference that is not in itself biblical. If Scripture “is its own best interpreter,” we are surely obliged to pay it better attention than this when trying to discover in what ways it possesses “unity, harmony, and consistency” (Article XVII). We should not simply assume in advance that we know which kind of unity, harmony, and consistency it must necessarily have. For this would presumably be to risk committing the error against which Article XIX rightly warns us: refusing to bring our preunderstandings of Scripture into harmony with what the Bible has to say, and indeed requiring Scripture to fit into alien preunderstandings. This article only mentions a few of the alien preunderstandings—naturalism, evolutionism, scientism, secular humanism, and relativism. These are not the only possibilities, however. Modern readers of ancient texts must constantly keep in mind the distance between the reader and the text and the danger of being blind to what we are bringing to their reading—in all respects.

One way of guarding against the ill-considered imposition of our own categories on biblical literature, of course, is to ask careful questions about what we may expect of these ancient texts, taken on their own terms, and what it might be anachronistic to expect of them. The authors of the *Statement* helpfully introduce this matter into their reflections in Article XIII, where they affirm “that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis,

\textsuperscript{18} It is consistent with the ways in which our biblical authors have a far more flexible understanding of the relationship of words to meanings that John in his Gospel can report the following (11:49–53): “But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.” Caiaphas assuredly did not himself mean this; but he prophesied of it nonetheless.
and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study.” Genre-recognition is indeed an indispensable aspect of biblical hermeneutics, as it is of the interpretation of any text, biblical or nonbiblical. If we read a fictional work as if it were a historical work, or a poem as if it were a scientific treatise, we are going to make mistakes in our interpretation of these works of literature. Reflection on the genre or type of text with which we are dealing on any given occasion is a crucial part of the interpretive process. The denial that accompanies the affirmation in Article XIII is, however, curious: “WE DENY that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.” It is a curious denial because it seems obvious that no interpreter should impose a generic category on any text to which it is not suited—this would be an entirely counterproductive thing to do, if one were seeking understanding. Rather, one should endeavor to attach to every text the genre label that best fits. It is still more curious that the interest of the Statement has at this point narrowed for no reason that is immediately apparent to “biblical narratives which present themselves as factual”—as if unfortunate genre labeling were only a matter of serious concern to the interpreter of the Bible regarding these kinds of texts. I should have thought, on the contrary, that any misapprehension of genre with regard to any of our biblical texts should be a cause for concern—biblical narratives included.

And here I must register a concern with regard to the word “factual” in this denial. We have come across a concern with “facts” before, in Article VI, where we encountered the problematic claim “that the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements,” allied to the assertion “that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts”; and we noted how this way of looking at the Bible was not flexible enough to deal with the actual data of the Bible as they exist on the page. There is a lot more to biblical literature than “propositions” about “facts,” and the propositions that do exist are always reflective of the circumstances of time and culture in which they are made. The examples I chose there to illustrate the point were taken from poetry and proverbs (Job and Proverbs), but exactly the same may be said of biblical narrative literature. We may well agree that this or that narrative appears to be intended as historical narrative by its authors; yet access to the history is still through the narrative, and there is more to the narrative than simply “factuality.” This is true of all historical narrative, not just biblical historical narrative. Historiography is never merely a matter of stating “facts.” All historiography is on the contrary purposefully designed narrative about the past that involves, among other things, the selection of material and its interpretation by authors who are intent on persuading themselves or their readership of certain truths about the past. This selection and interpretation is always made by people with a particular perspective on the world—a particular set of presuppositions and beliefs that do not derive from the facts of history with which they are
working but are already in existence before the narration begins—and these same people necessarily employ the customary literary conventions and style of their time and culture in making their presentation of the past, which determines the precise way in which their story of the past is told.  

The author of the biblical conquest account of Josh 9–12, for example, does not merely give us “the facts” of the matter with regard to the time period he is describing. He selects and interprets some facts from an innumerable array and weaves them into a story about the past that is designed to teach his readers something, not only about the past, but also about God and God’s purposes in the world. It is further evident, when the broader context of second- and first-millennium B.C. conquest accounts from Assyria, Hatti, and Egypt is taken into consideration that the biblical conquest account of Josh 9–12 is a fairly typical example of this ancient form of writing, using commonly shared literary conventions to speak about that event.  

This helps us greatly in reading the biblical text. It helps us to see, for example, what might already have been obvious to a careful reader of Joshua and Judges, that the summary of Joshua’s southern campaign found in Josh 10:40—Joshua “left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed”—should be regarded as hyperbole indicating a very successful campaign and not simply as “fact” (though it is certainly a statement in a historical narrative). If indeed it were a “factual” statement, we should have to conclude within the terms of reference of the Statement that it is an error, for “a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts”—and there is plenty of evidence in the biblical texts themselves that many Canaanites survived the Israelite onslaught.  

For these reasons, it would have been much better if the authors of the Statement had avoided the word “factual” in Article XIII’s denial and instead employed the word “historical.” The current wording gives the impression that they are interested only in one manner of inappropriate imposition of generic category on biblical narrative historical texts and not in others. Certainly we should not impose generic categories on these texts that lead us to devalue their historical referentiality; but should we not also avoid imposing on biblical historical narratives generic categories that conceal within them a particularly modern understanding of historicity and that, embracing this understanding, assume too readily and without due reflection that history-writing is only or mainly a matter of reporting “facts”? Should we not allow biblical narrative and historical texts, considered in their ancient environment, to lead us in our determination of the ways in which they intend to be historical, rather than accept what is

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perhaps an alien, modern preunderstanding of history (in the terms of Article XIX)?

The problem is that biblical hermeneutics must wrestle not only with what the biblical texts say but with what they mean in the saying of it, which is connected with the form in which it is said. Much interpretive trouble has followed from an inability among modern biblical interpreters to think well about this distinction, particularly in relation to the complex matter of “historicity.” Unfortunately the Statement itself does not really help the interpreter in this regard. It seems less interested in helping us to read well—in their various dimensions as history, art, and theology—“biblical narrative texts that present themselves as factual” than it is in ensuring that the historicity of these texts is safeguarded. Article XIV is equally unhelpful in this way, while pursuing the same theme. It affirms “that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact”; but it does not help us at all to know how “the variety of appropriate literary forms” impacts on our understanding of what the history is that the literature witnesses to, much less the theology that it teaches. It seems strange that a statement on hermeneutics should be thus content with telling us what to think about the biblical texts (or some of them), rather than helping us to read them; and indeed that it should apparently be more interested in certain preordained outcomes of our reading than in the process by which we arrive at the outcomes.

This “interest” is particularly clear in Article XXII, in which the main reason for the denial of Article XIII is perhaps to be found and in the light of which we may well question the seriousness of the Statement’s commitment to genre recognition as a fundamental aspect of biblical interpretation. If Article XIII denies “that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual,” Article XXII simply affirms “that Gen 1–11 is factual, as is the rest of the book,” proceeding to deny “that the teachings of Gen 1–11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.” That Gen 1–11 intends to provide us with “facts” I do not dispute. There are facts in it about God (for example, God is one and not many); facts about human beings (human beings, both male and female, are made in the image of God); and facts about the world in which we live (it is not itself divine, although it is blessed by God). Yet the question remains: in what form are these facts given to us? How has the final author of Gen 1–11 selected his material and interpreted it, in line with his particular set of presuppositions and beliefs, and employed the literary conventions and style of his time and culture in presenting it to us? That we do not simply have “facts” in these chapters, in the sense in which the Statement uses the term, is obvious. It is presumably not factually the case, for example, that the man and the woman of Gen 3 “heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze,” as if God actually
“walks.” The narrative speaks of the fact of God’s intimacy with human beings in the garden, but it does so in a “nonfactual” way (if that is even the correct term—perhaps “nonliteral” would be better). Likewise, it speaks in the opening two chapters of Genesis of the fact of the creation of the world by the one God who will later reveal Himself to Moses as Yahweh, but it does so in a way that shows little interest in a “factual” chronology of events. To be sure, there are facts in Gen 1–11—propositions about God, humans, and the world that may be derived from their content. But these “facts” are presented to the reader in a particular narrative form; and if one then presses on to discover more about the precise nature of this narrative form, one is driven relentlessly to the conclusion that it has been heavily influenced by its ancient Near Eastern environment.

Genesis 1–11 is in fact at all points in dialogue with the governing presuppositions about reality expressed in ancient Near Eastern literature outside the Bible as well as in various nonliterary aspects of ancient Near Eastern culture such as architecture. So are other biblical texts of a non-narrative nature. Genesis 1, for example, is written against the background of, and alludes to, a common ANE cosmogony (that is, an account, usually in the form of a mythological tale, about the genesis or birth of the structured universe). The source of this cosmogony used to be understood as Mesopotamia, the location of the creation tale Enuma elish with its account of the battle between the god Marduk and the dragon goddess Tiamat; or Egypt, with its tale of combat between the creator god Re and the dragon Apophis. More recently, however, the mythological texts from Ugarit in Syria have demonstrated a more local version of this same myth, in which the god Baal Haddu (familiar as Baal in the OT) battles the forces of chaotic destruction and death, called by such titles as Prince Sea (yam) and Judge River (nahar), and sometimes Lotan (the equivalent of the biblical Leviathan) or the seven-headed serpent. The Bible reflects and alludes to this common ANE cosmogony in various ways and at different levels. For example, Ps 29:10 portrays the victorious God of Israel enthroned upon the “flood.”

Psalm 74:13–14, in the midst of a section explicitly devoted to cre-
tion, tells of Yahweh’s victory over “Sea” (yām) and the crushing of the heads of the “Sea Monster” (tannīnîm) and of Leviathan. Another hymn to God as creator (Ps 89) refers to Yahweh’s rule over the “Sea” (yām) after defeating the dragon Rahab; and Ps 104, which possesses various similarities with the Egyptian celebration of creation called the Hymn to the Aton, again alludes to the defeat of watery chaos, going on to describe the various positive uses to which water has been put within creation. We may also note Isa 51:9–13, where Yahweh is said to have killed Rahab, the “Sea Monster” (tannîn), and dried up the waters of “Sea” (yām) and the “Great Deep” (tēhōm rabbî). The very brevity and allusiveness of the texts suggests familiarity on the part of their original authors and hearers with the cosmic battle pattern that we are describing here. So it is with Gen 1:1–2. Watery chaos and darkness did already exist when God began to create the heavens and the earth, these verses tell us; but the forces of chaos posed no real threat to the one true and living God. They were simply “there,” waiting to be organized into useful entities. If a battle took place to subdue them, it is of so little consequence to the author of Genesis that it is not even mentioned; and sea-monsters (tannînîm) only appear in Gen 1:21 as creatures of God like any other creatures.

The biblical authors do propose things about the nature of reality; and what they propose—about God, and the world, and the nature and vocation of human beings within this world—is radically different from what the surrounding cultures propose. The narrative in which the propositions are embedded, nonetheless, inevitably reflects the time and culture of its origin and speaks the language of its day. One of the tasks of biblical hermeneutics is precisely to clarify the propositions by clarifying the nature of the narrative in which they are embedded and the nature of the time and culture in which the narrative was composed. It is of little help in this task to make the kind of facile distinction between “fact” and “myth” that is found in Article XXII; and while one must agree that “scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity” should not “be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation,” this does of course beg the question about what it is that Scripture teaches about creation, which can only be settled by the sort of careful attention to the nature of the biblical texts about creation that I am advocating.

Clearly some of the alleged “facts” of Gen 1–2 are more problematic than others when the claims of modern science are considered, and there is muddled thinking on both sides of this debate—not just among the Bible readers who cannot understand the inevitable limitations, from a scientific point of view, of texts produced in ancient times by authors intent on refuting their neighbors’ ideology rather than in producing a scientific

22. See the helpful chart in J. H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 33–35, which summarizes the differences.

23. One assumes, for example, that we are not to regard Isa 51:9–13 as teaching us that Yahweh really did kill a sea monster called Rahab at the time of creation?
textbook, but also among the scientists who suffer from the delusion that science can ultimately pronounce on the existence of a Creator, the nature of the human being, and the destiny of the world. Article XXI actually strikes the right note: “WE AFFIRM the harmony of special with general revelation and therefore of biblical teaching with the facts of nature. WE DENY that any genuine scientific facts are inconsistent with the true meaning of any passage of Scripture.” All truth should cohere; but if it does not, the problem may lie either with one’s grasp of the scientific facts or with one’s understanding of Scripture. Both will need to be reviewed. The reluctance of many modern interpreters actually to engage in a re-view of this sort with regard to their interpretation of a book like Genesis is in striking contrast to a Reformer such as Calvin, who well understood that we must be careful not to make the Bible into a modern rather than an ancient book and play it off against modern science, as this extract from his commentary on Genesis (on 1:16) reveals:

I have said, that Moses does not here subtilely [sic] descant, as a philosopher, on the secrets of nature, as may be seen in these words. First, he assigns a place in the expanse of heaven to the planets and the stars; but astronomers make a distinction of spheres, and, at the same time, teach that the fixed stars have their proper place in the firmament. Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honoured who have expended useful labour on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise. Nor did Moses truly wish to withdraw us from this pursuit in omitting such things as are peculiar to the art; but because he was ordained a teacher as well of the unlearned and the rude as of the learned, he could not otherwise fulfil his office than by descending to this grosser method of instruction. . . . Moses, therefore, adapts his discourse to common usage.24

Before Calvin, Augustine had expressed his own impatience with people who read Genesis in ways that contradicted the best science of the day:

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of the world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions... and so forth. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well... how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren.

Biblical texts must be understood on their own terms for what they are—ancient, and not modern, texts. A biblical hermeneutics that does not take seriously this necessity but pays only lip service to it will mislead the interpreter as to the biblical message. The presence of Calvin in our midst at this point in our article indeed prompts the question how “Reformed” a hermeneutics of this sort would be. The question is relevant because many evangelicals see their emphasis on literal interpretation of the Bible as in line with the practice of Luther and Calvin—that is, they claim that their hermeneutics represents only a recovery of forgotten Reformation emphases, not something essentially modern. The fact is, however, that while the rhetoric is often resolutely Reformed, the implicit reading theory is often resolutely modern in the sense that its emphases are historical, empirical, and referential, and “literal reading” has in fact become, not the reading of the text by “the exegete [who] seeks to put himself in the writer’s linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious shoes” and to understand that writer’s expressed meaning, but “literalistic reading.” This literalistic reading is not as Reformed as some people think, and it is certainly far from sensible. It is typically not even very consistent; for, even while insisting that science should not be invoked to overthrow what Scripture


27. See further on this point J. I. Packer, “Understanding the Bible: Evangelical Hermeneutics,” in *Honouring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Volume 3* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 147–60, on p. 153: literalistic reading “can produce unhappy mistakes: celebrations of the created order get read as lessons in science (e.g. Gen 1–2), apocalyptic symbolism as prosaic prediction (e.g. Rev 6–20), the Gospels as ventures in biography...” See also Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?* 113–26, for a most helpful discussion of “literal reading,” in the course of which a literalistic reading is defined as one that insists on “staying on the level of ordinary usage, even when another level is intended” (p. 117); and later, on pp. 303–35, in the course of which he proposes that we “define literal meaning as ‘the sense of the literary act’... literal interpretation is less a matter of identifying objects in the world than it is specifying communicative acts— their nature and their objects... only when we consider the text as a literary act requiring a number of levels of description can we give an account of what the author is doing in the text” (pp. 304–5). And again (p. 311): “Literal interpretation... is more like a translation that strives for dynamic equivalence and yields the literary sense.”
teaches, reading of this kind has already and in all sorts of ways allowed its own interpretation of Scripture to be influenced by scientific discovery (as any comparison of what has been deduced about the world and its history by modern Christian readers when compared with ancient Christian readers of the Bible reveals). It simply chooses, somewhat arbitrarily, which science will be allowed to impact our understanding of a book like Genesis and which will not. Article XX reflects this arbitrariness when it rather extraordinarily asserts “that in some [my italics] cases extrabiblical data have value for clarifying what Scripture teaches.” This affirmation leaves in the hands of the interpreter, of course, which cases these might be. So it is that we find interpreters insisting that this detail of the text can only be taken “literally” by the person who truly regards the Bible as authoritative (for example, the “days” of Gen 1 must be “real days”), whereas that detail need not be so taken (for example, the sun was not “really” created on the fourth day). It is apparently acceptable to allow modern heliocentric understandings of the nature of our solar system to influence our reading of Genesis but not modern understandings of the way in which our world was created and came to be as it is. It sometimes seems, indeed, that genre questions are only invoked in this way of approaching the Bible when it is convenient that they be so, in order to justify a decision that has already been taken on other grounds—when the interpreter simply cannot believe, as a person with at least one part of his mind rooted in modernity, that the Bible can really mean a certain thing “literally” (in his or her own narrow sense of the term).

It is of course in pursuit of this understanding of biblical texts on their own terms as ancient texts that biblical criticism in general (and not just genre criticism) has been developed as a discipline. Article XVI recognizes the important place of critical method in biblical hermeneutics, affirming “that legitimate critical techniques should be used in determining the canonical text and its meaning,” albeit refraining from telling us which critical techniques it considers legitimate. We deduce from the denial that follows, however, that once again desired outcome is the focus of concern and that any critical method would be considered illegitimate by the authors of the Statement, at least in its employment, that did not produce this outcome: “WE DENY the legitimacy of allowing any method of biblical criticism to question the truth or integrity of the writer’s expressed meaning, or of any other scriptural teaching.” It is once again a curious denial, however. The desired outcome is that the writer’s “expressed meaning” should be taken seriously; but how is the writer’s expressed meaning to be

28. Geisler’s commentary on Articles XX to XXII is interesting in this regard (“Explaining Hermeneutics,” 901–3). “Scientific knowledge of the spherical nature of the globe” is allowed to correct a faulty interpretation of Isa 11:12 (p. 902). Yet it is denied “that we should accept scientific views that contradict Scripture or that they should be given an authority above Scripture,” and it is especially important that a literal hermeneutic should be applied to Gen 1–11, with the result that “belief in macro-evolution, whether of the atheistic or theistic varieties,” is excluded (p. 903).
grasped, if not through meticulous study of the text in its context, both literary and historical? Are we simply to imagine that we already “know” somehow what our biblical texts mean, without subjecting them to meticulous study—without, indeed, countenancing suggestions from biblical critics that we may be mistaken? Yet if “God is the author of all truth . . . biblical and extrabiblical” (Article XX), and truth is indeed everywhere to be found in God’s world, how can one assume in advance that proposals made by biblical critics about biblical literature are untrue? They may be untrue, in whole or in part, but they may not; and their truth or untruthfulness must surely be discovered by measuring their explanatory power in any given case in terms of the biblical data that are the object of study—not by measuring their impact on our received interpretation of an author’s “expressed meaning.”

To return to our earlier example from Josh 10:40, the “expressed meaning” of the text might well be assumed by the first-time reader of the book of Joshua to be that all Canaanites in the land were slain. The Statement would then apparently encourage this reader not to allow form criticism, with its emphasis on understanding the genre of the literature we read, “to question the truth or integrity of the writer’s expressed meaning.” Form-critical inquiry, however, suggests that this reader is not correct in his/her assumption regarding the “expressed meaning” of Josh 10:40, presenting a good case for reading the text as conventional hyperbole, which in turn makes excellent sense of the biblical data overall with respect to the Israelite settlement of the land. Measured in terms of its explanatory power with respect to the data, this proposal deserves to be regarded as true, in which case the first-time reader is found to be misunderstanding the “expressed meaning” of the text. The problem is that this reader will never discover his/her misunderstandings of Scripture, because (s)he has been told in advance that conflicts between his/her current reading and any suggested new reading are always to be resolved in favor of the former.

Article XXIV compounds the problem with its weak advice not to “ignore the fruits of the technical study of Scripture by biblical scholars,” accompanied by its strong affirmation “that a person is not dependent for understanding of Scripture on the expertise of biblical scholars.” Quite how the authority of Scripture is upheld in all this, as opposed to the authority of one’s current interpretation of Scripture, is unclear. The proposed Hermeneutic of the Statement in Article XVI and in other articles that we have examined appears heavily to favor the latter, or at least not to recognize in any significant way a possible difference between the two. A Hermeneutic that takes the authority of the Bible itself more seriously would need to allow critical method to take its own course in helping to form our opinion on everything that is likely to be true about our biblical texts, on the way to trying to understand what it truly is that our biblical texts can be said to mean.

It is, for example, crucial to the interpretation of the Gospels that the interpreter gain some clarity on what a Gospel is and is not by examining
the four Gospels in relation to each other and to their ancient cultural context, if (s)he is not to impose upon them improper expectations and ultimately derive from them indefensible readings. Clarity of interpretation is not aided by beginning with fixed conclusions about what the Gospels are and say and then proceeding to argue what else must be the case in order to defend these conclusions. It is indeed the task of any “method of biblical criticism,” as such, not “to question the truth or integrity of the writer’s expressed meaning” but to help to clarify this meaning by working patiently and intelligently with the text in question. All too often attacks from within the evangelical camp on modern biblical criticism, and indeed on modern hermeneutics generally, have had nothing in reality to do with faults in the method or approach being employed as such but everything to do with covert attempts to defend traditional interpretive outcomes against disliked and competing readings of texts. A truly evangelical approach to the Bible must surely always place Scripture over tradition and will wish to discover the truth of the matter as to how to read Scripture well even if in the process tradition (including traditional reading) is overturned.

It will readily be seen from this critical reflection on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics that I do not consider it a very satisfactory statement. It may be that I have not understood it in all respects as it means to be understood. I have certainly sought to read it, however, according to its literal, grammatical-historical sense; and I find its propositions, as written, in many respects problematic and sometimes plainly in error. In many ways it is not truly a statement on hermeneutics at all, for it focuses on telling the reader what to think about the Bible rather than on helping the reader to read the Bible; and in fact, much of what is said with respect to the latter is so poorly stated that it is most unhelpful to the Bible reader who is seeking to understand actual biblical texts and to have them shape his or her life. The requirement to read an OT psalm, for example,

29. For example, the recent book edited by R. Thomas and D. Farnell, The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), begins with a particular view of what is entailed in affirming the historical veracity of the Gospels (for example, that the Gospels must give us word-for-word transcripts of what Jesus said) and proceeds to argue for the absolute necessity of believing that the Gospel writers worked independently of one another and against the employment of redaction criticism on the Gospels (because any view of literary dependence by one author on another will lead to a denial of historicity). The theory that they propose cannot deal at all adequately with the data of the Gospels themselves, however, and certainly not as well as the standard modern redaction-critical hypothesis: see the excellent, measured response to the book by G. R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” JETS 42 (1999): 193–210. Commenting on Thomas’s work, J. H. Marshall says (“Evangelicalism and Biblical Interpretation,” in The Futures of Evangelicalism [ed. C. Bartholomew, R. Parry, and A. West; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2003], 100–123, on p. 106): “Some scholars want to start from a position which rules out the possibility of what they regard [my italics] as error in Scripture. Therefore any method which might find errors is ruled out as inappropriate in principle. Clearly a lot hangs on what one understands as an error.” Indeed so; and reading the Gospels carefully on their own terms, trying to account coherently for the data with which they present us, might well prompt some reflection (if one is at all open to it) on whether one’s understanding of an error, or indeed of “historical veracity,” is correct.
as making propositional statements conveying absolute divine truth (Article VI) will not get the reader very far in understanding that psalm. It is more likely to impart in equal measure reverence for the text and ignorance about what to do with it. This may indeed help to explain why it has so often been my experience as a teacher of the OT that students who are ready and willing to expound on why the OT must be regarded as the Word of God nevertheless have not read very much of it, understand still less of it, and have little idea of what to do with it as Scripture in any practical, meaningful sense. That is the serious edge to my opening paragraphs, in which I playfully but with intent retell part of the story of Acts 8. If hermeneutics is about helping people to perceive “what the biblical revelation means and how it bears on our lives” (Article IX), the Statement is disappointingly inadequate.

THE WAY AHEAD

What kind of biblical hermeneutic should evangelical Christians embrace and advocate to others, then? The various elements of my proposal are already evident in the critique above, but here I pull them together into one whole piece. We should certainly begin where the Statement begins: “the normative authority of Holy Scripture is the authority of God Himself, and is attested by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church” (Article I). We are dealing here with a single book that we receive from Christ and his apostles, in which and through which God speaks—the same Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture acting through it today to work faith in its message (Articles IV and V). The voice of God when it is heard is obviously to be taken deeply seriously in terms of what we should believe and how we should live as His creatures. It would be folly to behave otherwise. It is from this beginning point that hermeneutics launches itself, as “the study of the process whereby the Bible speaks to us (from God, as Christians believe).”

What is the Bible that speaks to us from God? It is literature. More precisely, it is a body or library of literature—one book, and yet also many books; and the many books are of many different types or genres. The Bible is narrative; yet it is also poem and proverb. The many different types of book contain within them many different kinds of individual text and employ a great diversity of literary conventions. To hear God speak, all these texts through which He speaks must be understood for what they are, and we must be careful to identify what they are not. For we do not, for example, wish to find ourselves affirming that God wants us to believe that floods possess hands, and hills voices, if it is not really so. We do not wish to find ourselves misunderstanding what is meant as a result of adopting an insufficiently curious attitude toward what is said. The distinction is explored briefly but entertainingly by Father Brown in one of G. K. Chesterton’s short stories:

31. “Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy” (Ps 98:8).
Have you ever noticed this—that people never answer what you say? They answer what you mean—or what they think you mean. Suppose one lady says to another in a country house, “Is anybody staying with you?” the lady doesn’t answer “Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the parlour-maid, and so on,” though the parlour-maid may be in the room, or the butler behind her chair. She says: “There is nobody staying with us,” meaning nobody of the sort you mean. But suppose a doctor inquiring into an epidemic asks, “Who is staying in the house?” then the lady will remember the butler, the parlour-maid and the rest. All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly.”

Biblical hermeneutics must give careful attention to the type of text with which it is dealing, as it seeks to affirm what God is saying (and meaning) through the human words on the pages of this literature. This inevitably involves biblical hermeneutics in historical study, for the many-books-in-one of which we are speaking were written in places that are foreign to most of us and over a lengthy period of history that pre-dates our own period of history by between 2,000 and 4,000 years (depending on which books we are speaking of and which precise dates we are attaching to these books). Language—as the Father Brown story reminds us with its words concerning country houses, butlers, footmen, and parlourmaids—is always intrinsically connected with time and place. We cannot assume that the literary conventions of the ancients or their mode of writing—indeed, even their view of authorship and books—were the same as ours. Only historical study would make this clear, as the biblical texts were considered together as ancient texts and located within and measured against their times and their cultures, and their similarities to and differences from comparable texts came to full light. This kind of study has often been called “historical-critical” study, and sometimes simply “literary-critical” study. These are labels that have often caused discomfort among conservative Christians who think that it is wrong to “criticize the Bible.” Yet the enterprise is directed toward the same end as the “grammatical-historical” method—that is, understanding biblical texts in their historical context. And of course the word critical, which can mean “censorious” or “fault-finding,” can also carry the more neutral sense of simply “skillful at or engaged in criticism.” The Concise Oxford Dictionary refers to “textual criticism,” for example, as the process by which people bring their minds to bear on texts and try to decide, by the use of reason and evidence, which is the correct text of an author. It differentiates this “lower criticism” from so-called “higher criticism,” which certain conservative Christians “know” they are supposed to be against, yet “higher criticism” is really nothing

other than the further employment of the mind in inquiring into the nature and meaning of the biblical texts as historical artifacts. To be “against” it is to imply the possession of a docetic lack of interest in the texts as historical artifacts at all. As two authors have put it so well: “To deny that the Bible should be studied through the use of literary and critical methodologies is to treat the Bible as less than human, less than historical, and less than literature.” 33 It is not clear on what grounds one would wish to do that. One would have thought, on the contrary, that Christians readers of the Bible would wish to discover as much as they can about the biblical texts in their historical context precisely in order to hear God speak the more clearly through them and to avoid misunderstanding Him.

I suggest, then, that it is a direct implication of the nature of the biblical texts themselves that biblical hermeneutics must employ a historically-oriented biblical criticism; for God must be heard in the “now” through a reading and appreciation of texts through which He first spoke “back then,” and it is as we understand better what was said back then that we shall understand better what is said now. There is no knowledge about these texts as historical artifacts that is “too much” knowledge in this quest. Attention must be paid to what source criticism and form criticism suggest about where our texts came from and how they may once have functioned in situ in ancient Israelite society. This may impact on how they are to be read today. Consideration must be given to what redaction criticism claims about how our texts were put together and came to their present form; to what narrative and rhetorical criticism have to say about the art through which biblical texts communicate their message; and to what ideological criticism suggests about the specific “interests” in which individual texts were written and the social contexts out of which they arose. Not everything that scholars employing these methods say about our texts will turn out to be true, and sometimes little of it may turn out to be true; but whatever does turn out to be true or likely to be true is important and must be factored into the larger Truth in which we are interested as Bible readers.

If narrative criticism discovers truly, for example, that biblical narrative is “scenic, subtle, and succinct”—that is, that biblical narrators “do more showing than telling . . . are generally reticent to make their points directly, preferring to do so more subtly (and) . . . accomplish the greatest degree of definition and color with the fewest brushstrokes” 34—then hermeneutics must take these things seriously in attempting to say what the text means. If source criticism were to discover truly that the Pentateuch is based on four major sources of different dates, ranging from the monarchical to the postexilic periods, then likewise hermeneutics would need to consider what impact that made (if any) on how the text is to be

It is all simply part of taking the biblical texts seriously as texts from the past. “Higher criticism” may or may not be flawed in all sorts of ways as it comments on and hypothesizes about the Bible, from its presuppositions to its conclusions. It is not flawed, however, in its commitment to the historical-critical method, and must not be ignored by any serious Bible reader when it turns up data important for the reading of biblical texts. Indeed, to attempt to move from biblical text to biblical meaning without taking seriously the nature of the text is to fall inevitably into the pit of incomprehension described once again by G. K. Chesterton in another of his short stories, in which the policeman Valentin “had come to the end of his chase; yet somehow he had missed the middle of it . . . he had grasped the criminal, but still he could not grasp the clue.”

Biblical hermeneutics, then, must begin in its quest to know the meaning of the Bible for us now with the question: what did this or that biblical text mean back then? This question is of course more complex than is sometimes understood, precisely because many of our biblical books evi-

Having examined the matter, I do not myself believe that source criticism has discovered truly that the Pentateuch is based on four major sources of different dates, ranging from the monarchic to the postexilic periods; but if I did believe that this was the best explanation of the biblical evidence, I would be bound to accept this view of the composition of the Pentateuch. I would then need to explore what implications existed for my reading of the final form of the text that we have (although it seems obvious that the mere fact that the Pentateuch was composed using these sources would not of itself necessarily alter my reading of it at all). Any theory about the nature of our biblical texts requires to be thus assessed on its merits; a commitment to truth (rather than merely an attachment to one’s current beliefs) requires this sort of approach. I find it troubling, therefore, that when B. K. Waltke argues for the plausibility of the Documentary Hypothesis’s analysis of Gen 1–2 (“Historical Grammatical Problems,” in Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible [ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 69–129), A. A. MacRae’s first and lengthiest response is not to the substance of the argument in regard to Gen 1–2, but to note that he is “disturbed” because (a) there has been no movement more effective in destroying Christian faith than higher criticism; (b) to many readers, use of Wellhausen’s symbols “P” and “J” for the sources in Genesis seems to imply that his antichristian reconstruction of Bible history is true; (c) source-critical endeavor of this type has largely been abandoned in secular scholarship; and (d) source-critical positions held by biblical scholars vary (“A Response to Historical Grammatical Problems,” in ibid., 143–62). We may respond to the response thus: (a and b) if any view produced by “higher criticism” were true, it could only have destroyed faith that was in part false. This being so, it is not the effects of believing this or that higher-critical position that should be the concern but the truth or error of the position itself; (c) the helpfulness of an approach to texts is not measured by its current popularity; and (d) the fact that source-critical positions held by biblical scholars vary does not of itself mean that none of them is right. One is reminded of the novelist Thomas Hardy’s response to criticism that his writings were marked by “pessimism”: “Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. So that to say one view is worse than other views without proving it erroneous implies the possibility of a false view being better or more expedient than a true view; and no pragmatic propppings can make that idolum specus stand on its feet” (preface to the final revision of his novels in 1912, available in T. Hardy, The Return of the Native [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978], 475–80, on p. 479).

dently have a history to them, in the course of which the context in which individual texts were read undoubtedly changed; and the true meaning of individual texts is certainly bound up with their context.

The Psalter, for example, evidently came into its present form over the course of considerable time and contains texts from the monarchic (for example, Ps 2) as well as the exilic period (for example, Ps 137) and perhaps beyond. A sentence in a psalm meant what it meant first to the author of that psalm, and that meaning may be deduced from a careful reading of both the sentence and the whole psalm. What the sentence meant to the compilers of the section of the Psalter in which the psalm now sits, however—and to the compiler of the whole Psalter—might conceivably not have been quite the same. If Ps 1:3 proclaims, for example, that in all that the righteous do they prosper, the meaning of this sentence for the author, as deduced from a reading only of Ps 1, may reasonably be suggested to have been just that—in all that the righteous do, they prosper. The meaning of the sentence for the compilers of the Psalter, on the other hand, is only arrived at via reflection on the present suffering of the righteous and the present prosperity of the wicked in other psalms not only in Book 1 of the Psalter (for example, in Ps 37, which gives us the most extensive discourse on the wicked and the righteous and their two ways outside Ps 1) but in later sections as well (for example, Ps 73). Read with attention to its entire context in the Psalter, in other words, Ps 1:3 cannot be understood as telling the whole truth of the matter, at least in the sense that the reader might first have taken from it. The verse then affirms as a general truth that people who are obedient to God are blessed, but it is set in a context in which is acknowledged the reality of the obedient life all too often in present reality—the reality of lament and complaint.

Likewise, the proverb in Prov 26:4 (“Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself”) taken by itself might be understood (and perhaps once was meant) to prohibit the wise from answering fools according to their folly. It is currently followed in the book of Proverbs (26:5), however, with the advice: “Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” The whole truth of the matter from the perspective of the compilers of the book of Proverbs, it seems, is that one must make a judgment in each case when asking whether one should answer a fool, for there are risks on all sides. The whole truth is, however, only perceived when one considers more than just the words of the single text, which offers only a limited perspective on the matter.

Perhaps in the case of both the Psalms text and the Proverbs text, the author of the individual text already possessed the broader perspective described, and the compilers of the books in question have simply clarified this. Perhaps so; we cannot know. My point is only that the individual texts as such—whether or not their authors thought other things that they did not express—do not provide us internally with the clues that enable us in the end to avoid (from the point of view of the final form of the books) a mistaken understanding of them. And the purpose of this paragraph is to
underline, in a context in which we often become confused about which “original meaning” of a text we are interested in when seeking to determine “what a text meant,” that it is indeed the “original meaning” of individual texts within whole biblical books with which biblical hermeneutics should be first concerned, for these are the primary contexts within which the individual texts are set and declare their meaning.

Thus the careful reader of the book of Exodus, for example, when confronted with the story of Exod 4:19–26, in which God first tells Moses to go back to Egypt and then meets him on the road and tries to kill him, will resist the conclusion that the text reflects divine arbitrariness (that is, God cannot make up his mind whether he wants him to go or not), for this interpretation of God is not borne out by the remainder of the book, even though it is certainly the interpretation that the reader might first be drawn to by the passage in itself.

If individual texts provide only limited insight into the truth that a whole book spoke “back then” to its readers or hearers, however, it is equally true that entire biblical books also provide only limited insight into biblical truth overall as it was directed toward its ancient recipients—and also toward us. This limitation, too, biblical hermeneutics must reckon with. How is the book of Proverbs, for example, to be understood, with its advocacy of wise behavior that leads to life in all its fullness, its warnings about the foolish behaviour that leads to destruction, its overall apparent belief that the way in which the world works is reasonably plain and that one can easily determine the way to go forward? It must be understood in relation to the book of Job, which denies that proverbial wisdom provides us with invariable rules about life and specifically denies that we can deduce what God is doing in the world from observing who is suffering and who is prospering. It must also be understood in relation to the book of Ecclesiastes, which argues the weakness of an empirical approach to these matters even more vehemently. The truth of the OT Scriptures is to be found by reflecting, not on one of these books individually, but on all three in all their similarity and difference and on others besides.

How is OT Law as it is described in the Pentateuch to be understood, in all its complexity and variety, as direction to the OT people of God for living in God’s world? It must be understood in relation to the pentateuchal narrative, which presents the Law not as a means to redemption for God’s people but as a gift that follows redemption; and, within itself, in relation to the Ten Commandments, which lay out certain great principles of behavior that ground and explain the various practical case laws that surround them. It must further be understood in relation to passages such as Isa 1, which make clear that there are weightier and less weighty aspects of law and that the practice of the lesser is of little worth in the absence of the practice of the former (as Jesus himself said in Matt 23:23); and Job 31, which makes clear that in any case the virtuous way of life to which an Israelite is called is not defined by law and cannot be contained within law.
Biblical truth, insofar as it is contained in the OT Scriptures, can only be determined as text is compared with text, and an overall picture emerges of what may be said and what may not be said about this or that matter. What the OT has to say is itself limited in regard to the whole Bible, of course; and so its truth must also be measured by what is now known to Christians as a result of the divine revelation in Christ and the apostolic witness to this revelation. It turns out that there is more to be said of who God is, who we are, and what the world is like than has ever been said before. It also turns out that the OT people of God, when they spoke of these things, saw them far more dimly than they themselves imagined, so that the meaning of their words was often transformed by its new context into something that they themselves apparently never conceived. Thus their prophecies of a king who was to come, for example, took on a significance far beyond their grasp in the coming of Christ; their expectation of a land to call their own was met in a land beyond our physical existence; and their desire for a rebuilt temple was ultimately fulfilled in a new people of God that was international in composition. Their hopes were not fulfilled literally, but truly, nonetheless, as they peered into the future “through a glass darkly.”

In summation of all the above, the kind of biblical hermeneutic that evangelical Christians should embrace and advocate to others begins with the understanding that we receive the Bible from Christ and his apostles as a book in which and through which God speaks to us, yet also with the understanding that God speaks in words written by people of old. This being so, biblical hermeneutics must seek to hear God’s voice in the Bible by giving attention in the first instance, in the case of the individual text, to the meaning of words in their ancient literary context within the document of which they are part—which involves (among other things) attention to matters of genre and literary convention. It must use all the critical tools at its disposal in the effort thus to understand the text, in itself, in its historical context.

It should then go on to clarify how this text is to be read along with other biblical texts—in which ways these other texts impact on the matter of what the text in question can be said to mean. The ultimate measure of how texts are to be read is the divine revelation in Christ and the apostolic witness to this revelation. This revelation makes clear the only-partial grasp of the truth possessed by the biblical writers who preceded its time and sets the context within which the true meaning of all biblical texts must be pursued. As Vanhoozer puts it: “the ‘fuller meaning’ of Scripture—the meaning associated with divine authorship—emerges only at the level of the whole canon.”37 The Reformers referred to this same process of

37. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning? 264. He goes on to say this (p. 265): “A text must be read in light of its intentional context, that is, against the background that best allows us to answer the question of what the author is doing. For it is in relation to its intentional context
“reading texts along with other texts” under the rubric “analogy of Scripture.” Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture and certainly not set against Scripture. Indeed, individual Scriptures should always be read within the whole sweep of the canonical story, with due attention to what appears to be secondary, incidental, and obscure and what appears to be primary, central, and plain.

Although it is common to contrast this approach with a pre-Reformation approach to biblical interpretation, especially because of the Reformation insistence on the literal sense of the text over against allegorical reading, the fact is that the differences are overstated—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that once the more problematic aspects of hermeneutical theory in both pre-Reformation and post-Reformation (especially post-Enlightenment periods) have been set aside or clarified, we can see more clearly what they share that is good rather than what distinguishes them. Medieval Christian exegetes, too, employed a canonical approach. They regarded the meaning of Scripture in the mind of the person who first uttered it as only one of its possible meanings. It might not be, in certain circumstances, even its primary or most important meaning. The literal sense of Scripture was regarded as basic and as limiting the range of other possible meanings; but other meanings had to be considered when the literal sense of a particular passage appeared absurd. Sometimes a passage was required to be reinterpreted because it did not address directly the Church or did not in general edify the Church, nurturing the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. God, it was held, can mean things in speaking in the whole Bible that individual human beings do not mean of themselves, and what God means to say to the Church in any given case must be measured by what he means elsewhere, as the reader is led by the Spirit to read the Scriptures aright.

Here, too, is a way of “reading texts along with other texts” and allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture within the whole sweep of the canonical story, with due attention to what appears to be secondary, incidental, and obscure and what appears to be primary, central, and plain. This formulation of hermeneutics in fact explicitly reminds us of the important point that we read the Bible not only to understand it in itself but to understand how to live in relation to God and to our neighbor. The most simple rule to give to a first-time Bible reader who wants to know how to

that a text yields its maximal sense, its fullest meaning. If we are reading the Bible as Word of God, therefore, I suggest that the context that yields this maximal sense is the canon, taken as a unified communicative act. The books of Scripture, taken individually, may anticipate the whole, but the canon alone is its instantiation.”

38. As M. Silva (Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987]) notes (p. 63): “Allegorical interpretations are very difficult to avoid for a believer who wishes to apply the truth of Scripture to his or her life” (cited from Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning? 143 n. 76, whose own comments on pp. 113–20 underline the difficulty of any facile distinction between Reformation and pre-Reformation interpretation).
read, indeed, is to tell him or her to read with a view to loving God and neighbor more deeply and more truly, and to organize his or her thoughts about individual biblical passages around these two imperatives—as ancient Christians such as Augustine advised.  

Is there more to be said? On the matter of hermeneutical “rules and procedures that enable us to grasp first of all what Scripture meant as communication from its human writers speaking on God’s behalf to their own envisaged readers,” perhaps not. It is the case, however, that “a man might possess all the linguistic and historical knowledge required in order to interpret a text, but still not be able to understand the text in question.” We are thus reminded that the existential grasping of a text in terms of “what it means” does not arise automatically from an understanding of “what it meant.” As Anthony Thistleton explains:

if a text is to be understood there must occur an engagement between two sets of horizons (to use Gadamer’s phrase), namely those of the ancient text and those of the modern reader or hearer. The hearer must be able to relate his own horizons to those of the text. Gadamer compares the analogy of the ‘understanding’ which occurs in a conversation. . . . The nature of the hermeneutical problem is shaped by the fact that both the text and the interpreter are conditioned by their given place in history. For understanding to take place, two sets of variables must be brought into relation with each other. Gadamer’s image of a fusion of two horizons provides one possible way of describing the main problem and task of hermeneutics.

“There is a reader horizon as well as a textual horizon when it comes to hermeneutics.” Biblical hermeneutics needs to take account of this fact, for “the heart of the hermeneutical problem does not lie in the determining of the historical meaning of each passage . . . it lies, rather, in seeing how it applies to you, me, and us at the point in history and personal life where we are now.”

We need not interpret the language of the “fusion of two horizons” to mean “that the message of Scripture derives from, or is dictated by, the interpreter’s understanding” rather than by the biblical text (as does Article IX of the Chicago Statement). At the same time, however, understanding of

39. Vanhoozer, ibid., 117: “When confronted with a range of interpretive options, Augustine’s advice is to choose the one that best fosters love of God and neighbor.”
41. Thistleton, Two Horizons, 5, referring to Schleiermacher’s view. Note similarly Vanhoozer’s summary of Kierkegaard’s view that “linguistic and historical scholarship is not yet genuine reading. It is rather like examining and working on the mirror itself—looking at the mirror rather than in it. Such, he suggests, is the danger of modern biblical criticism” (Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning? 16).
42. Thistleton, Two Horizons, 15–16.
44. Packer, “Infallible Scripture,” 346.
what a biblical text means does not arise in a self-evident manner from an understanding of “the expressed meaning of the Scripture,” as the Statement might be read to imply. The task of translation from past to present is a real one. As J. I. Packer says on the matter of the fusion of horizons, “at the heart of the hermeneutical process there is between the text and the interpreter a kind of interaction in which their respective panoramic views of things, angled and limited as these are, ‘engage’ or ‘intersect’—in other words, appear as challenging each other in some way.” He comments further on Gadamer’s insistence that “distancing” must precede “fusing” of horizons, thus:

[W]e must become aware of the differences between the culture and thought-background out of which the words of the text come and that of our own thought and speech. Only so can we be saved from the particular naïveté that H. J. Cadbury pinpointed when he wrote The Peril of Modernizing Jesus. The naïveté consists of treating people and words from the past as if they belonged to the present, thus making it impossible to see them in their own world and have our own horizons extended or redrawn by the impact of what they actually meant. Popular Bible study and preaching easily go astray here—indeed one might almost say inherit a tradition of going astray here—and anyone who highlights the danger deserves our thanks.  

It may well be the case that in a properly conceived biblical hermeneutics “the reader’s understanding has no hermeneutically definitive role.” Yet definitive or not, the reader’s understanding necessarily possesses a hermeneutical role. This is indeed not only true of the process by which a text comes to mean something to the reader but also of the process by which the reader assesses what was meant. It is, for example, intrinsic to the fact that OT narratives are “scenic” that “[t]he reader is seldom explicitly told by the narrator how this or that character, or this or that action, is to be evaluated (though this does occasionally occur). Instead, the reader is shown the characters acting and speaking and is thereby drawn into the story and challenged to reach evaluative judgments on his or her own.”

Here too the reader follows the guidance of the text itself in making his/her judgments; nonetheless, it is the reader who is doing this. It does not happen by itself. It is an unfortunate aspect of the Statement’s articulation of the hermeneutical task that it is so concerned to emphasize the objectivity of biblical interpretation that it can find no proper place for its subjectivity—for what are sometimes called “in-front-of-the-text” issues affect the interpretation of biblical texts as much as “behind-the-text” and “in-the-text” issues. Biblical hermeneutics properly conceived must find

45. Ibid., 339–40.
48. It would be unfair to suggest that it is by any means alone in this. It is in fact the common assumption of what we might call “modernist” biblical scholarship (and, for example, the
a place for both, recognizing the necessarily personal elements that are part and parcel of interpreting the Bible, especially if it is to have genuine existential impact on modern readers and we are to avoid the pitfall of "honoring the Bible as embodying what God said to mankind long ago while failing to listen to it as God's word to us in the present." The Bible itself does not tell us how to express the meaning of its words (first addressed to an ancient world) to the modern world. This is something that the reader must do—in prayer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as Christians would insist, as well as in community with the Church both present and historic. Max Turner puts it in this way:

We need fully to appreciate the importance of “in front of the text” issues, and how much they can, do, and must shape, not merely our appropriation of texts, but also (to a lesser extent) our exegesis of them. We can thus learn from even the most radical reader-response critics and ardent postliberals—though, in the final analysis, we need to avoid their temptation prematurely to fuse the horizons of author/text and reader. The canonical principle bids us join the apostolic conference table with the NT writers and give them due hearing. It does not invite us to gag and bind the apostolic authors and hustle them into our century, and into our churches, where they are able only to stutter out, in stifled whispers, the things we have already told them to say.

**Conclusion**

It follows from everything above that biblical hermeneutics involves hard work, for it is possible to err in one's reading of the Bible, even as one is insisting that one is only articulating the plain meaning of a text.

49. Packer, "Infallible Scripture," 325, of Barth. As Packer notes (p. 326), "Bultmann, too, has shared with Evangelicals a concern that the Word of God be heard today, though Evangelicals have judged that his account of revelation makes this formally impossible."

50. M. Turner, "Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 40-65, on p. 42 n. 5) draws attention to the common preface to the Hermeneia commentary series, which states that "the editors . . . impose no systematic-theological perspective upon the series. . . . It is expected that the authors will struggle to lay bare the ancient meaning of a biblical work or pericope. In this way the text's human relevance should become transparent, as is always the case in competent historical discourse" [italics from Seitz].

51. Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2) provides some examples: "the following has been urged as the voice of God: in that the patriarchs practiced polygamy we may practice it; in that the Old Testament sanctioned the divine right of the king of Israel, we may sanction the divine right of kings everywhere; because the Old Testament sanctioned the death of witches, we too may put them to death . . . because the Old Testament declared that some
Sometimes these errors do not have great consequences, but it is possible to interpret biblical texts in harmful and even demonic ways, even while remaining faithful to their apparent historical-grammatical sense.\textsuperscript{52} It is possible to err even while believing oneself to be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as all long-time readers of the Bible are able to attest; for “the Spirit works through human understanding, and not independently of it.”\textsuperscript{53} Biblical hermeneutics requires an enormous commitment to education;\textsuperscript{54} it requires the embrace of discipline; it requires the arduous re-

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\textsuperscript{52} Satan himself interprets Scripture demonically, but in accordance with its plain sense, in Matt 4:6 (citing Ps 91:9–12). Jesus’ response is not to correct him with respect to the plain sense but to place this text in its broader scriptural context.

\textsuperscript{53} Thiselton, \textit{Two Horizons}, 440.

\textsuperscript{54} It has often been claimed within conservative Protestantism that Scripture is “perspicuous”—that is, “plain to the understanding especially because of clarity and precision of presentation” (\textsc{Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary}). The defense of the perspicuity of Scripture has often been presented, indeed, as essentially the defense at the same time of the notion of the priesthood of all believers, in contexts where biblical scholars are presented as potentially forming a “priest-scholar class” that will teach everyone else how to read the Bible; so Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics,” 904; and L. I. Hodges, “New Dimensions in Scripture,” in \textit{New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson} (ed. D. S. Dockery; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 209–34, on pp. 223–28. It simply does not follow, however, from the fact that the entire community of Christian believers is called to mediate God’s blessing to the world as “priests” that all believers are equally well-equipped to understand the Bible (not least because not all believers have invested equal amounts of time and effort in the task). It is also manifestly clear that believers all through the ages have in fact often made mistakes in reading the Bible, even on matters of central importance to the Christian faith, through want of education (as well as other reasons), which calls into question just how “perspicuous” Scripture really is. Perspicuous to whom? We should certainly affirm that those who seek will find; but we should not give the impression in our speech about biblical interpretation that the task is an easy one (any more than Jesus did). If “a person is not dependent for understanding of Scripture on the expertise of biblical scholars,” indeed (\textsc{Statement, Article XXIV}), then what are biblical scholars and others doing writing a long and complicated \textit{Statement} on biblical hermeneutics? Or is it only \textit{some} (other) biblical scholars who are in mind? In all truth, the rhetoric about Scripture’s perspicuity often seems to represent merely a convenient and effective way in which to encourage selective antiintellectualism among Christians. At its worst, the argument almost becomes: “anything about the Bible that requires some intelligence to understand cannot really be important and probably is not true, because the ordinary Bible reader might not find it there for himself and would need to depend on someone else for help.” See further on this topic R. C. Van Leeuwen, “On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics,” in \textit{After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation} (ed. C. Bartholomew, C. Greene, and K. Möller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 284–311, who notes (p. 300): “Literature in
requirement of constant repentance from and revision of previous opinion, “for all of us make many mistakes” (Jas 3:2). It requires all this and more from the reader.56

People who wish to hear God speak through the Bible and to obey Him have no alternative but to accept the challenge, and those who want others to hear God speak through the Bible and obey Him must also accept it. For there are multitudes of “Ethiopian eunuchs” in the world who look for understanding and receive no help—not even from people who believe that correct biblical interpretation is important and practice a version of it. These people need “someone to guide them” (Acts 8:31). There is a need, then, for many “Philips,” who have wrestled with the Scriptures, understand what they mean, and are capable of “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). The hermeneutical process by which I believe we should arrive at this “right explaining,” in the case of any given biblical text, is what I hope I have now adequately described. The rest is practice, as we seek to give substance to biblical authority in our lives by listening to “Scripture communicating instruction from God about belief and behavior, the way of faith and obedience, and the life of worship and witness.”57
As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it: “Neither standing nor understanding . . . is the final word in interpretation. The final word belongs to following.”

that many people who regard the Bible as authoritative for faith and life would have less difficulty than they currently do with these terms (particularly the second).