An Essay on Liberal Hermeneutics

The present composition attempts to expound on the meaning and development of liberal hermeneutics. At first glance, this is a frightful task. Both terms, ***liberal*** and ***hermeneutics***, have been and continue to be with increasing rapidity moving targets within the world of biblical scholarship. The investigation must also hazard the popular notions of such words, especially the tag of ***liberal***. Oftentimes in our Christian circles, the word ***liberal*** means "anyone who doesn't agree with my standards of holiness." Arguments over dress codes, theater attendance, and other items on the various Christian taboo lists become the focus of debate. For this article, such popular notions of the word ***liberal*** will not be disputed.

Classical Liberalism

While such discussions have their place, the focal point of this essay can be found in the multi-faceted movement within Christendom which rose out of the development of higher critical approaches to the Bible along with (and leading to) a humanistic expression of theology. Generally, the movement views the early nineteenth century German Frederick Schleiermacher as its "father," although several philosophical streams were watering the conversations about God and His Word.[1] Whatever else can be said about this particular movement, there is the certain devaluing of the supernatural so that inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible are not a possibility. In addition, in liberalism theology is reduced to anthropology.[2]

What we have been describing is "classical liberalism." Its use of the Bible was often limited to the ethical statements of Jesus without any focus on the supernatural elements. Adherents were also frequently enmeshed in a quest for the "historical" Jesus, the real Jesus hidden somewhere within the pages of Scripture. It was assumed that the picture of Jesus in the New Testament was the creation of the Church and not the real Jesus who actually lived in space and time. In addition, classical liberalism's understanding of man included the belief that every man has a spark of divinity within him. Such a rosy picture of man, besides denigrating the doctrine of sin, was reinforced by Darwin's theory of evolution which provided a biological rationale for belief in the inevitability of human progress, a naïve belief that survived until the great World Wars and the Holocaust of the twentieth century. [3]

Developments Within Liberal Thinking

[1] See Norman L. Geisler, ed., ***Biblical Errancy***, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

[2] One example of this is Schleiermacher's adoptionistic view of Jesus. To him Jesus was just a god-intoxicated man, not the incarnate Son of God found in orthodox belief.

[3] Of course, belief in human progress does continue in some forms. In 1999 we are far enough removed in time from a world-wide war, that positive outlooks may be on the increase. Even postmillennialism through forms of dominion theology is making a small comeback. However, the events of the twentieth century have markedly destroyed any simplistic belief that man is innately good.

The rethinking of classical liberalism from the liberal side of the spectrum which resulted from the decimation of human optimism was jump started by Karl Barth's famous commentary on the book of Romans following Word War I (1919). Barth embraced a fairly orthodox view of Christology and reintroduced discussions about the depravity of man and his utter separation from God. This emphasis shocked the sensibilities of many liberals and began a movement which has been called ***Neo-orthodoxy***. However, Barth's view of the Bible was that the Bible was not revelation from God but that it functioned as a pointer to the human experience of revelation. Apparently, he was unable to shed all of the humanistic tendencies of liberalism and continued to accept all of the higher critical methods when approaching the text.

Rudolf Bultmann, from within neo-orthodoxy, favored immanence over Barth's focus on transcendence. The thrust was also increasingly existential as man's self-authentication became the goal. This self-authentication was not tied to the supernatural God of the Bible in any concrete way. Bultmann spoke of "modern man" who could no longer believe the myths of the Bible:

> For modern man the mythological conception of the world, the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with. Is it possible to expect that we shall make a sacrifice of understanding, *sacrificium intellectus*, in order to accept what we cannot sincerely consider true – merely because such conceptions are suggested by the Bible? Or ought we to pass over those sayings of the New Testament which contain such mythological conceptions and to select other sayings which are not such stumbling-blocks to modern man?[4]

Bultmann used the term ***de-mythologizing*** to label in a descriptive way the process of determining what supernatural parts of the text to pass over. He noted that "its aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. It is a method of hermeneutics."[5] What he meant by "interpret" is actually a *reinterpretation* in light of the rejection of the supernatural. In other words, any texts bearing on the supernatural need to be made palatable for modern man. What separates Bultmann from classical liberalism is his insistence (like Barth) on using the Bible in the search for self-authentication. However, on the other hand, Bultmann, perhaps more than any other twentieth century figure, embodies the distaste of the supernatural teachings of the Bible which is at the heart of evangelical belief.

Besides the two premier examples of Barth and Bultmann, there have been many currents of theological and philosophical thought in the twentieth century. After cataloging the vast majority of writers and theories about theology and philosophy, the existentialist John MacQuarrie makes some interesting closing comments:

> At the end of our survey, the reader may well feel somewhat bewildered. We have met so many views of religion, some of them sharply conflicting, others shading off into each other, and some of them so diverse that they seem to be talking about quite different things or at any rate very different aspects of the same thing. Out of this teeming diversity, no common view emerges. At the beginning of the book we quoted the remark made by an English theologian at the beginning of the century, in which he pointed to 'a multitude of incoherent and incompatible points of view, all of which may be called modern, but none of which can claim to be typically representative of the

[4] Rudolf Bultmann, ***Jesus Christ and Mythology***, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 17.
[5] Ibid., 18.

> age—currents and cross-currents and rapids and backwaters of thought'. At the end, we can parallel this with a quotation from a mid-century philosopher: 'To-day, as always, a violent struggle is raging between antagonistic views of the world, and it is possibly more violent in our own time than it was during the past century. Rarely has it been of such intensity, with such a wealth of opposing viewpoints or expressed in such elaborate and refined conceptual frameworks.'[6]

It is interesting that no view of religion which is surveyed comes remotely close to genuine evangelicalism. C. S. Lewis is not mentioned. Francis Schaeffer is not discussed. In his mind, no contributions to thought have been made in this century by anyone who is biblically orthodox. The closest Macquarrie comes is his labeling of neo-orthodoxy as a "theology of the Word," for which he saves some of his most strident criticism.[7]

What is Macquarrie's conclusion in light of the massive number of contradictory claims to religious insight? It is the same conclusion that many in our present culture have come to; there is no such thing as absolute truth. Macquarrie absolutely says that "absolute and final truth on the questions of religion is just unattainable."[8] In fact, one might say that the present culture appears to have been so exhausted in its search for truth throughout the "liberal" experience of the past two centuries that it has simply given up hope.

It seems that the best way to use the word ***liberal*** in the light of all of these kinds of discussions is as a generally descriptive term of various post-Enlightenment versions of Christianity. These versions have an aversion to the traditional and supernatural teachings of the orthodox Christian faith found in the Bible. The latter is championed in our day by what in broad strokes has been called ***evangelicalism***. What remains to be seen is what hermeneutical ideas have shaped the liberal side of this debate so that the perception of certainty (although unbiblical) in classical liberalism deteriorated into the even more dangerous abandonment of any concept of truth at all. The discussion that follows will survey two areas which attempt to answer that question: (1) historical-critical methods and Bible interpretation, (2) postmodernism and the rise of subjectivism in hermeneutics. Most of the discussion will be on the first with a few comments touching upon the second.

Historical-Critical Methods and Bible Interpretation

As little as twenty-five years ago, conservative seminary professors instructed their students that hermeneutics is the science (and sometimes art) of biblical interpretation. Discussions abounded over rules of exegesis and detailed Bible analysis. Chief in this focus among conservative evangelicals was the belief in grammatical-historical (or historical-grammatical) interpretation. The assumptions were (and are) that the text should be taken in a straight forward way as an act of communication and that meaning derives from the text itself. Furthermore, the text is to be studied in its

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[6] John Macquarrie, ***Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1980***, (New York: Scribners, 1981), 371.

[7] Ibid., 318-38.

[8] Ibid., 372.

grammatical-language context on its own terms and it should be read with proper historical understanding as an ancient document (i.e., what did the author say to his audience) rather than read as a modern document (i.e., what does it mean to me). The latter is an application question that can only be answered correctly after the Bible is understood on its own terms. Of special interest for our understanding of where liberal hermeneutics has drifted is that traditional evangelicals have insisted on the historicity of the text. That is, the events in the text really took place as stated and these historical facts are a significant part of what the text is telling us.

On the liberal side, grammatical-historical interpretation has been abandoned in favor of a ***historical-critical approach*** (historical criticism[9]) which has evolved over the last two centuries.[10] This approach is also sometimes referred to as ***traditional criticism***. This view generally assumes that much, if not most or all, of the biblical text is not historical. That is, the events recorded therein did not actually happen. However, it has a keen interest in its own set of historical concerns, namely, the history of the text itself. In broad strokes, this approach prioritizes text over event (to use some recent terminology).

Various sub-categories within historical criticism have tended to focus on stages within the overall history of the text. ***Source criticism*** has come to the text with the idea of trying to identify the original sources that lay behind the text. One famous example of this approach would be the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis (JEDP) which applies the doctrine of evolution to textual transmission. The Pentateuch is especially divided up into constituent parts (the J, E, D, P portions) which supposedly reflect varying emphases over time as sources for the final textual form.

Form criticism is the discipline that attempts to determine any past oral forms of the stories which eventually came together in the text of the Bible. Oftentimes, once identified, they are studied in isolation from the actual biblical text in which they are embedded. Sometimes the term ***tradition criticism*** is also used to describe the study which traces the history of the textual tradition beginning with the oral forms and resulting in the final form given in the written text which we have today.

Redaction criticism in some respect stands at the opposite end of the historical-critical spectrum from source criticism. This discipline, rather than search for the original sources which started the transmission process, focuses on the finished product, the text as we have it. However, it asks some hard questions about the details of that text. For example, in what ways do the human authors of the Bible shape, mold, change, or invent the material that is found in the final text. One area that redaction criticism has in common with the sentiments of evangelicalism (which none of the other approaches listed have) is that it deals with the biblical text as it exists in its entirety.[11]

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[9] In the past, this area was often referred to as higher criticism. Terms are sometimes used differently. Some authors refer to the discussion of source, form, and redaction criticism as ***literary criticism*** while historical criticism is the study of the historicity of the text. See Harrison, Waltke, Guthrie, and Fee, ***Biblical Criticism***, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

[10] The two main views of grammatical-historical and historical-critical should not be seen as the only two views necessarily. A study of the early church fathers, especially the school at Alexandria, shows other possible ways of coming to the text. However, in the present day, these two views predominate.

[11] It should be understood that in all of these approaches there are many variations by the many practitioners and that all should not be painted with the same exact brush. What we are dealing with here are tendencies.

There is the assumption among historical critics that there will be ongoing development in future biblical scholarship along the same general anti-supernatural lines. In a significant article in the last decade, the problems with the present form of the documentary hypothesis (JEDP theory) are analyzed with the affirmation that form criticism, tradition criticism, and redaction criticism will be more fruitful areas of study.[12] The author comments:

> To obviate any possible misunderstanding, let me emphasize that there is no question of a return to a pre-critical reading of the biblical text. If the documentary hypothesis is in crisis, the question for those still interested in the formation of the Pentateuch is whether the hypothesis is salvageable and, if not, what might take its place. But it remains clear that we cannot simply jettison a historical-critical approach to the biblical text.[13]

No thoughtful evangelical would want to follow a simplistic dogmatic reading of the text. However, by "pre-critical" the author would certainly include the idea that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. In summary, he is saying that we can never go back to believing Moses wrote it, but must look for a better solution even if the best one we have presently is falling apart at the seams. This bias within historical criticism ensures some measure of incompatibility with evangelicalism and shows attitudes latent within liberal hermeneutics.

Evangelical Responses to Historical Critical Methods

It is clear, then, from a casual reading of the definitions of the historical-critical approaches that those who use them do something quite different from most evangelicals who use the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. However, within the world of evangelicalism there have been two major responses to the use of historical critical methods: (1) reject all use of any of the historical-critical methods as totally incompatible with grammatical-historical interpretation; (2) glean good and valid observations from the historical-critical method without buying into the anti-supernatural bias it encapsulates.

The difference between the two evangelical schools of thought on this matter has been highlighted recently by two events. First, Norman Geisler's presidential address at the national Evangelical Theological Society meeting in November 1998 warned in sharp overtones of the philosophical dangers facing evangelical interpreters including perils for evangelicals who imbibe at the fountains of higher critical methods.[14] Geisler mentions with approval the second event highlighting differences among evangelicals on this issue when he refers to the 1998 book ***The Jesus Crisis*** by Robert Thomas and David Farnell.[15] This work, which focuses on the interpretation of the Gospels in light of modern

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[12] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Documentary Hypthosesis in Trouble," ***Bible Review*** (Winter 1985): 22-32.

[13] Ibid., 26.

[14] Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," ***Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*** 42 (March 1999): 3-19.

[15] F. David Farnell and Robert L. Thomas, eds., ***The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*** (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

developments such as the liberal Jesus Seminar, notes that there is indeed a crisis among evangelicals on the same issues:

> Evangelical New Testament scholars have conceded much ground to critical methodologies that question the accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. By adopting the methodology of those who are less friendly to a high view of Scripture, most evangelical specialists have surrendered traditional, orthodox understandings of historicity in various parts of the first three gospels.[16]

The contention of the entire book is that evangelicals should stay away from any use of the historical critical methods because they automatically bring with them the anti-supernatural presuppositions of liberal hermeneutics which then leads toward a devaluing of historicity even within evangelical interpretation.

On the other side of the debate within evangelicalism on this matter, writers like New Testament scholar Grant Osborne respond that

> It is true that some evangelical RCs (redaction critics) go too far at times, but it is not true that the discipline demands that they do so. The writers in The Jesus Crisis assume that when evangelical RCs use the term "redaction" they mean non-historical material. This is not true . . . "Redaction" to an evangelical RC means that the writer selected from his sources and from his memory those details that he wished to highlight. Every saying and every story came from the historical event and from what Jesus originally said.[17]

Thus, Osborne allows use of the higher-critical methods but tries to stop short of denying historicity of the text, the major point that higher-critical methods assume when used in the hands of a liberal interpreter.

Moises Silva adopts basically the same position as Osborne while at the same time being troubled by the defection of many conservatives to the liberal side and chiding some evangelicals for being totally unaware of the anti-supernatural commitment of the methods they are using.[18] He reminds us of James Barr's old criticism about "scholars who in one way or another have abandoned distinctive evangelical principles and are simply not very honest about it."[19] Nonetheless, Silva holds to a cautious use of the methods current in biblical scholarship in general. Elsewhere Silva points out the significance of holding to the historical aspect of the biblical text in the literature-history or text-event debate.[20]

In summary, there are those like Geisler, Thomas, and Farrell who want all evangelicals to abandon any use of insights from historical criticism. On the other side

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[16] Robert L. Thomas, "The 'Jesus Crisis': What is It?" in ***The Jesus Crisis*** (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 13.

[17] Grant Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," ***Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*** 42 (June 1999): 208.

[18] Moises Silva, "'Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?' Evangelical Theology and Biblical Scholarship," ***Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*** 31 (March 1998): 3-16.

[19] Ibid., 11.

[20] Moises Silva, "Has the Church Misread the Bible?" in ***Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*** edited by Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25-27. This work was a separate book published in 1987.

are those like Osborne and Silva who argue for a cautious use of such insights.[21] It is not the purpose of this paper to settle this debate. Rather, it is to show at this point, that a crucial difference of evangelical interpretation compared to liberal hermeneutics is a commitment to the historical truth given in the Bible.

Further Developments in Liberal Hermeneutics

Toward the end of the present century, the growing relativism mentioned earlier has taken on a scholarly formulation as the culture has become "postmodern." To be sure, this has not meant liberal rejection of historical criticism, since a disbelief in the historicity of the biblical record and, in fact, a debunking of the historical enterprise in general, go hand in hand with a belief in the absence of absolute truth. Consequently, the focus on text as opposed to event, literature as opposed to history, has been intensified in recent years.

Much of the continued research under the banner of historical criticism has really been a continuation of redaction criticism with its focus on the text as we have it – a literary text. Within that arena, a focus on style has come to predominate in some circles which is sometimes labeled ***rhetorical criticism***.[22] As biblical scholars focused on the details of style in the text such as chiastic structures, repetitive textual clues, the role of genealogies stylistically in some books like Genesis, and other detailed textual points, there was a growing awareness of the need to read the text holistically as a literary piece. The name for this approach has increasingly been called ***literary criticism*** although that term earlier had been used to label source criticism.[23]

This emphasis on literary structure attracts many evangelicals who want to take the details of the entire text seriously. In the past, it was assumed that such concerns were really part of the focus of grammatical-historical interpretation in "context" although over the last two decades a growing number of evangelicals have begun talking about grammatical-historical-*literary* interpretation of the Bible in order to highlight the need to examine the literary structure of the text and all that such an effort entails.[24]

However, at this point one should be reminded of the primary distinction between liberal and evangelical hermeneutics – the rejection versus acceptance of the historicity of the text itself. The liberal, because of his rejection of the historical truth of the Bible, can be more selective in the particular literary structures he chooses to examine and what

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[21] Eliott E. Johnson as a cautious evangelical and dispensational scholar might also be placed in this camp. See ***Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). At the present time, it may be that a majority of evangelical scholars would line up with Silva and Osborne.

[22] Trempor Longman notes that the term rhetorical criticism, although originally emphasizing a focus on style, sometimes takes on a broader meaning in the minds of some ("Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation" in ***Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*** edited by Moises Silva [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 101; this work was originally published as a separate volume in 1987).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Elliott Johnson notes that "literary affirms that these textually based meanings are in part determined within the context of textual design considered in the composition as a whole" (***Expository Hermeneutics***, 22).

particular literary schemes he elects to highlight.[25] Since the evangelical tenaciously clings to historicity, he must be more holistic, so to speak, in his understanding of the text, leaving no stone unturned, distinctions as well as continuities, natural as well as supernatural elements in the text.[26]

There can also be some legitimate concern that the focus on literary structure has not necessarily brought about any growing consensus over what in fact the text actually says. This present author has notebooks full of articles by liberals detailing the literary structure of Genesis and other books of the Bible. These articles reveal a division just as deep, if not more serious, as classical Protestantism's denominational divisions over certain doctrinal teachings. The emphasis on literary structure has its own fads that appear to come and go according to the whims of the individual interpreters. Evangelicals must be careful, then, not to buy into the current fads of liberal interpretation on this score lest their own commentaries of today be outdated in ten years with nothing useful to be offered.

One final caution concerning a possible overemphasis on literary structure is that the biblical text is composed of more than stylistic innuendoes and structural markers. For example, examine the ***toledoth*** sayings in the book of Genesis (Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12; etc.). These provide structural markers which help the interpreter to see certain significant movements within the Genesis text. However, if one views these markers as "all" that is going on in the text, he might come to the conclusion that there can be no pre-patriarchal dispensations since no dispensational scheme ever advanced for Genesis chapters 1-11 strictly follows the boundaries marked of by the ***toledoth*** sayings. However, the dispensational distinctions usually given by dispensationalists follow conceptual distinctions and divisions which the text discusses rather than any literary elements found in the text (for example, the post-Fall fixation on conscience). In other words, there are several levels of movements going on in a text, all of which have significance for the one who would rightly divide the Word of truth.[27] This should not be surprising. If Charles Dickens can write multi-layered literary works, why not Moses under inspiration of the Holy Spirit?[28] Consequently, the evangelical must make sure that the liberal tendency of over-selectivity in literary areas does not cause him to miss all that God has to offer in His Word.

Related to literary structure (and somewhat to form criticism) is the issue of using ***genre*** to interpret the Bible. It is certainly helpful for the Bible interpreter to know what type of literature he is reading, be it poetry, narrative, epistle, parable, apocalyptic or other particular forms or types of literature. Evangelicals have certainly acknowledged its

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[25] This is not to suggest that all liberals are careless in their reading of the text. Their main problem is unbelief, not cognitive understanding. Evangelicals are here being warned not to let the liberal disinterest in historicity leak into their study of literary structure.

[26] One disturbing trend that can be seen at times is a focus on common or repetitive elements in the text. However, this feeds a false assumption. The text is just as likely to highlight discontinuity as it is continuity. It seems that a dispensational interpreter might have a theoretical advantage over the nondispensational evangelical because of his openness to distinctions as well as commonalities.

[27] A helpful resource on this score is Vern Poythress, ***Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology***.

[28] It is a matter of pride and an application of the false theory of evolution that causes many liberals to look at ancient writers as unable to match more recent authors.

importance. Liberal hermeneutics has been generous in its use of this particular method of focusing interpretation. However, the issue is not a simplistic one. One sometimes finds that extra-biblical ideas of the forms of literature become the driving force for interpretation. The evangelical correctly asks to what extent these forms, which are usually derived from extra-biblical literature, should judge the text of the Bible. However, another complicating factor is the presence of mixed forms. For example, apocalyptic sections of Daniel are embedded in a seemingly narrative story. Poetry is often interwoven in narrative as well. Right away one senses the need not to rush to judgment on using various genres in an uncritical way.

Some examples may be instructive. First, there are some liberals (and perhaps some claiming evangelical credentials) who regard the book of Jonah as the particular genre of fiction.[29] If fiction has become a genre, then there is no end to what can be denied in the biblical record. The seriousness of this cannot be denied:

> Several years ago, I wrote the author of a commentary on Jonah from a good evangelical school who had declared in it that it was not necessary to take Jonah literally. After pointing out that Jesus took it literally in Matt 12:40-42, I asked him if it was necessary for us as believers in Christ to believe what Jesus taught. Surprisingly, he had apparently not considered this, and the statement was subsequently retracted.[30]

Unfortunately, not all of life's stories end with such solid corrections.

A second example would be the often discussed analyses of the biblical covenants (especially the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New) and the attempt to categorize their form or genre. The classification as a vassal treaty that many scholars render is especially instructive. This particular form seems to fit the Mosaic Covenant and a comparison to extra-biblical literature may substantiate the traditional date of the Exodus account. However, an unthinking assignment of all of the covenants to this particular form assumes a uniformity to all of the biblical covenants that denies diversity in the text and undermines the grace or grant nature that the details of the text actually yield when many of the other covenants are in view (especially the Abrahamic and Davidic). What is at stake is the unconditional nature of these other covenants. When we think about the kingdom promises associated with these covenants , what is in danger of being lost by this genre assignment is nothing short of premillennialism itself.

A third example highlights the tendency in liberal hermeneutics to reinterpret any supernatural elements in the text. The apocalyptic portions of Daniel (chapters 7-12) give such detailed prophecy with explicit historical fulfillment that liberals, who deny that God can pre-write history, insist that all of these specifics must be written after the fact.[31] Consequently, the date of the book of Daniel becomes a major battleground. To complicate matters is the fact that the liberal date of the second century B. C. (Maccabean period) has Daniel written during a time when apocalyptic literature is exploding on the scene. The forms of that literature can be identified and easily read by the liberals into

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[29] There is known to this particular writer, through the testimony of a colleague, a seminary of an evangelical denomination which is encountering this debate right now.

[30] Geisler, ***Beware***, 17.

[31] For a more detailed survey of this issue, see Mike Stallard, "Inerrancy of the Major Prophets," ***Conservative Theological Journal*** 3 (August 1999).

the book of Daniel. It is assumed that these forms can be used this way since the book of Daniel is part of that normal stream of literature. On the other hand, the evangelical points to the overwhelming evidence that the book of Daniel is a genuine sixth century B.C. work. Thus, to read the forms of apocalyptic back into the book of Daniel may be anachronistic. Instead, it might be best to see Daniel as one of the earlier forms of apocalyptic which forms the fountain for later developments in that genre. In the end, it appears that the presuppositions about the supernatural decide the case.

One other issue must be mentioned in this matter of use of genre for interpretation. One must ask how the interpreter recognizes the genre that a piece of biblical literature happens to be. The answer is by literal interpretation, that is grammatical-historical interpretation. In other words, literal interpretation logically precedes genre recognition. This means that the sometimes heard statement that "genre determines meaning" is wrong. While genre is one input to the exegetical process, it is not an extra-biblical truism that is somehow the pre-judge of the text before the exercise of the normal reading of the text.[32]

The Rise of Subjectivism in Liberal Hermeneutics

Walter Kaiser has classified present interpretive schemes into four categories: (1) the proof-text model which fits many dogmatic approaches to the text; (2) the historical-critical method which has been highlighted above as the essence of liberal hermeneutics; (3) the reader-response method; (4) the syntactical-theological method.[33] The last method appears to be Kaiser's adjustments to the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. What is of interest here is the third one in the list, the reader-response option. This is an approach within liberalism that is built upon historical criticism while simultaneously reacting to it. It incorporates insights from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur and thereby emphasizes the reader's participation in the interpretation process. The recognition of the subjective nature of interpretation is greatly intensified to the extent that the issue is what the text means now, not what the text meant when it was written. While continuing the liberal disinterest in the historicity of the Bible, the significance of Bible interpretation is moved from the text to the reader's experience. Some have even begun to say that we have moved to the era of "post-critical" studies.[34]

Perhaps the harshest application of this subjective edge can be found in the language of ***deconstructionism***. Carson describes this radical subjectivism with these words:

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[32] This approach is diametrically opposed to the interpretation theory of the liberal Paul Ricoeur. Kaiser summarizes his use of genre this way: "Literary genres do more than classify text; they actually give a code that shapes the way a reader will interpret the text" (Walter Kaiser, "The Meaning of Meaning" in ***An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*** by Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 30.

[33] Ibid., 31-34.

[34] Karlfried Froehlich, "Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move" in ***A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*** edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 175-91. Froehlich bemoans this mention of "post-critical" studies.

> In its various forms, deconstructionism or "deconstructive postmodernism" . . . implicitly adopts the more radical insights of the new hermeneutic and some of the insights of structuralism, and goes beyond both. It boldly argues that there is no escape from the hermeneutical circle, none whatsoever. As for words, not only is their meaning constrained by other words (structuralism), but words are viciously self-limiting. In the strongest form of deconstruction, not only is all meaning bound up irretrievably with the knower, rather than with the text, but words themselves never have a referent other than other words, and even then with an emphasis on irony and ambiguity—the "plain meaning" of the text subverts itself. Language cannot in the nature of the case refer to objective reality.[35]

What does this mean? Words in any text are just tools to be used for some functional purpose that has no bearing upon the original author's intent as expressed in the text. Liberation theologians can emphasize certain texts with certain themes in light of their own modern desires for political deliverance. Feminist theologies can distort any original intention of the biblical authors in a reworking of male-female roles according to the subjective desires of "modern women." Such foreign territory for the evangelical highlights the perilous days of hermeneutics in which we live.

Conclusion

The modern development of liberal hermeneutics confrontationally instructs the conservative evangelical on two major fronts. First, the evangelical must affirm the significance of the historicity of the Bible. To be a follower of Christ means that one must never accept the presuppositions that lay at the root of historical criticism. To do so is a contradiction. Second, the slide into total relativism and the absence of any anchor for biblical studies within liberal hermeneutics leaves culture in the pit of non-understanding. What may be the heart issue on this score is the perspecuity of the Bible as taught to us by the Reformers.[36] According to them the Bible was an understandable book. We know that some of the Bible is difficult to comprehend. The existence of professional theological societies reinforces that conclusion. Yet, Tyndale's famous statement about the plough-boy knowing more than the Pope is a real possibility. The only way to really understand is not to bury oneself in the depths of redaction criticism but to accept the text at face value, that is, to practice grammatical-historical interpretation.

[35] D. A. Carson, ***The Gagging of God*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 73.
[36] This is the concern of Moises Silva in "Has the Church Misread the Bible?," 62-74.