
PROCLAIMING BIBLICAL HOLINESS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Central Task of Wesleyan Biblical Studies

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The call of the Bible rings out for the twenty-first century: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy”’” (Lev 19:1-2; cf. 1 Pet 1:16). Is this command only an unattainable wish, or is holiness really possible in our world today? The answer is clearly that holiness would not be possible if it were not for the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The central mission of the people of God has not changed in almost 3500 years. We who call ourselves teachers and preachers of the gospel must proclaim the call to biblical holiness in this new millennium.

As we begin the new millennium, we are posed with a critical and essential question: how do we proclaim this high calling to an increasingly hostile and anti-Christian world where the old ways of doing “church” have become ineffective and are being constantly challenged? Now is a good time to re-evaluate our goals, priorities, and presuppositions so that we can proclaim once again the call to holiness with the result of transformed lives.

A question that has occupied the minds of many Wesleyan scholars in the last few years is this: how does the Bible fit into theological education, especially with the changes that are taking place in the church?¹ In this paper, I wish to offer my perspective on the task of biblical studies in theological education, preparation, and ministry. In the midst of this journey, I will expand a hermeneutical model which I believe holds promise for reaching the goal of proclaiming “holiness unto the Lord.”

I. The Need for Clarification

A. Clarification and Ownership of the Meaning

Each generation of leaders in the church must begin the theological task anew. Old answers are not always adequate for a changing world. Old paradigms need to be modified, new applications need to be found, and visions need to be focused and clarified. Those of us who call ourselves ministers are involved, to some degree, in the process of taking the gospel from our minds and experiences to the situations of other people in application to various situations. My basic thesis is that the biggest challenge for the Church of the Nazarene and other holiness denominations in the twenty-first century is one of hermeneutics. This is especially true and critical for the field of biblical studies. The process of hermeneutics challenges us to present the old time gospel message about Jesus Christ in terms that the world around us can understand, accept, and live by.

The goal of biblical studies in the academic setting should not be to improve or come up with new methods of interpretation, but to explain the gospel in ways people of diverse cultures can understand. According to Joel Green, there is a fallacy that lurks in the wings of

¹See especially the discussions in the last five years in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*.

biblical scholarship. This fallacy is called “presentism,” “the erroneous assumption that our methods and state of knowledge always evolve in higher forms, so that the way things are done in the present is necessarily better than in the past.”² “Presentism” is the notion that modern thought is the most advanced yet. There is a lot of pressure upon young scholars, such as myself, to say something ever new about the Bible. One must gain a reputation through publication and presentations at academic meetings in order for one’s ideas to be respected. This reputation building is critical if one wishes to secure a job in the academic setting in much of the world.

The greater goal of biblical studies must be, as John Wesley said, to give “plain truth to plain people.”³ Sometimes in our pursuit of higher levels of knowledge we complicate the message so much that we, let alone the people to whom we minister, end up confused about essentials. Without making the Bible relevant to our time and culture, we assign it a secondary role in the life of the church. It becomes a relic of the past, an encyclopedia of ancient history, a tool for social studies, good literature for reading, a source book for ethics, or an ideological instrument for political, social, or sexual agendas.

B. Clarification of the Message

Vital to the task of hermeneutics of holiness is clarifying the message of the Bible. Two basic approaches are used to clarify this message, both of which are inadequate in this task. The first method is one of education. We educate people to understand the Bible from our perspective using our cherished terminology and categories. The

²Joel Green, “Reading the Bible as Wesleyans: A Response to Robert Wall,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:2 (Fall, 1998): 120.

³John Wesley, Preface, §3, “Sermons on Several Occasions,” *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial edition; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-83) 1:104.

practice of this method suggests that translation of the gospel for the world today is a matter of education. This has been by far the dominant approach in missions for a long time. Holiness people are really good at coming up with complex terminology. Many people are confused in our churches because of the terminology we use. This approach is a significant hurdle for evangelism and church growth and is being challenged today on many fronts.

The second approach is to use a particular ministry context as the guide for understanding the Bible. This approach is called “ethnohermeneutics.” Ethnohermeneutics attempts to find the key for interpreting the Bible in a specific cultural context. For example, culture A approaches the Bible with hermeneutic A, and culture B approaches the Bible with hermeneutic B.⁴ The problem with this approach is that it leads to syncretism or pluralism. Having an open-ended hermeneutic allows the contextualization process to progress without clear boundaries and standards.

The solution to this dilemma is with a combination of these two approaches. The wonderful thing about language is that it is not static but always changing. The concept of Christian holiness is more than a matter of terminology or culture. The narrative of God’s interaction with humanity throughout history can be understood by all cultures because every culture is part of that grand story. The challenge before the church today is the pressing need for clarification without a loss of identity. We should not lose the need for education while also not being afraid to embrace an ownership of terms and concepts. We

⁴See Larry W. Caldwell, “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1 (March, 1999): 21-43. See further the response by Daniel A. Tappeiner, “A Response to Caldwell’s Trumpet Call to Ethnohermeneutics,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1 (September, 1999): 223-232.

work with an ear listening to the past and an ear listening to the needs of the present. We proclaim the gospel with flexibility within the specific framework of our orthodox inheritance.

C. Clarification of the Movement

With the globalization of the Church of the Nazarene and other denominations which emphasize the doctrine of holiness, old ways of doing things are being challenged. The center of the Christian movement has shifted from North America and Europe to South America, Africa, and Asia. This shift signifies a move from guilt orientation to shame orientation, from individualism to communalism. A significant and important debate wages in the Christian Church today over the place of liberation theology, Asian theology, and other so-called “theologies.” Is there any justification in having a distinctive theology from a specific cultural context? The Bible is both timely and timeless and can speak to all cultures. The Bible is a document of history describing a great and grand story taking place in the created order of history. A problem results when this ancient story is interpreted to different cultural contexts.

The challenges to the church of today are significant. The increased secularization has made God-talk difficult. The increased globalization leads to the challenges of pluralism and syncretism. Temptation and compromise with culture have left some segments of the church with a loss of fervor for evangelism. What will be our reaction to such theologians as Keith Drury, Richard S. Taylor, and Kenneth J. Collins who say that “The Holiness Movement is Dead!”⁵ But I must ask, are the problems facing the church of today any

⁵Keith Drury, “The Holiness Movement is Dead,” *Holiness Digest*, 8:1 (Winter, 1994): 13-15; Richard S. Taylor, “Why the Holiness Movement Died,” *God’s Revivalist and Bible Advocate* 111:2 (March, 1999): 6-27; Kenneth J. Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 54:1 (Fall, 1999): 27-36.

different than what previous generations faced? I suggest to you today that the basic problems facing the church in the twenty-first century are no different. We need to be honest and acknowledge that the basic problem has been and remains as sin, although we humans are quite creative in the ways we rebel against God. The response of the field of biblical studies to these problems must involve being faithful to the past story of the Bible while being concerned with building bridges to the present.

D. A Clarifying Model

New interpretive methods, like the New Hermeneutic and Reader Response Criticism, share the same premise: that the meaning of a text is determined to some extent by the reader of that text. Although this thesis can lead ultimately to pluralism, it suggests an important point for consideration. This point is that individuals and communities will interpret a text differently because of their location in a particular point in history. The text of the Bible is irrelevant to our world unless we interact with it and allow it to transform us. The power of the Bible as scripture and as the word of God appears with the intersection of interpreter and word. We need a flexible approach within a specific framework for this converging of text and reader.

II. A Model for a Holiness Hermeneutic

I would like to offer to this community a hermeneutic for the Holiness movement in Asia and the Pacific for the twenty-first century. Models are only attempts to put into coherent and understandable terms complex realities and relationships, and are obviously prone to over-simplification. The following model is no different, but attempts to put in a figurative way the vital process of translating the ancient message of the Bible into terms that people of the twenty-first century can understand. In this model I want to focus on the relationship and interchange between the interpreter and the Bible. I am using a

figurative relationship of position. The one who stands over another has a certain relative degree of power or authority over that person, and can peer into and interpret the other party. Conversation and dialogue occur when people stand beside one another. Relationship is vital in all positions. The sequence of steps in the following model is also very important.

A. The first and primary step is that ***we as interpreters stand under the Bible.***⁶



The first and critical step in this holiness hermeneutic is that we stand under the Bible and allow it to be authoritative over us. We are accountable to the truth claims in the Bible.

1. Here we understand the Bible as God's unique revelation to us.

The Bible is part of a transcendent message from God to humanity. It is not the exclusive message, but the primary message of history. The marvel of grace is that the perfect and holy God chose to commune with sinful and imperfect humanity through the events of various people and nations over the course of several thousand years. The Bible is a book rooted in history reaching to the immortal. It is the story of God reaching in grace through the barriers erected by the rebellion of humanity. It describes the drawing force of prevenient

⁶Illustrations are by APNTS student Jacob Urri.

grace throughout the ages culminating in the story of Jesus the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God.

2. In this step we also treat the Bible with reverence and seriousness.

We stand ready to submit to what God wants to say to us through the Bible. The Bible is not just any piece of literature, but unique in its authority over us. To call the Bible “scripture” is a statement of faith. To claim the words of the Bible as divine words is an act of faith.

We stand in the tradition of Martin Luther who acknowledged the authority of the Bible and applied his supposition, *sola Scriptura* (“scripture alone”), to counter the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Scripture became for Luther and other Protestant Reformationists the only sufficient guide and rule of faith. For John Wesley and those in his heritage, the Bible is central to the theological task. The Bible shows the way to heaven. Wesley, in a now famous statement, wrote:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.⁷

The power of the Bible as the Word of God is not simply in a theological claim of inspiration but in the power of the message contained in the ancient, written words. The sufficiency of the Bible is confirmed by its ability to point the way to salvation. Wesley believed in the soteriological aim of scripture. The reason God has given us a

⁷Wesley, *Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 1:105.

Bible is so that we might find the way to Him. The Bible stands in the flow of God's grace. Donald Thorsen writes, "To Wesley, Scripture provided that means whereby God performs an action of grace corresponding to the finished and ongoing work of Christ in our lives for salvation."⁸ The Bible shows us how to pursue holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Heb 12:14). The Bible points the way how to be transformed into the image of Christ through grace.

When we consider the authority of the Bible, we need to consider *all* of the Bible authoritative, including the Old Testament, and not a reconstructed word of source or form criticism, or its heirs like the recent Society of Biblical Literature *Jesus Seminar*, nor in selecting certain parts as more authoritative than others, thus ending up with a canon within a canon. Sometimes it would be convenient to drop some difficult passages from the Bible so that we end up with a nice, safe book that fits our modern sensibilities. The Bible is the book of the church. The Holy Spirit worked with the church through the canonization process to present a holistic story complete enough so that we can find our way back to God.

Allowing the whole Bible to speak to us makes it possible to construct biblical theologies. Some parts of the Bible, if read alone, seem irrelevant or even disgusting to the modern mind. Theological confusion results when texts are taken in isolation from the larger context of God's story of grace. It is vital in making the Bible relevant to our world that we begin with the entire story of the Bible. If we look carefully, we will find that we are part of the ongoing story of the Bible. We are between Acts 28 and Revelation 21. The Bible talks to us humans on the journey called life. Biblical theology is a necessary task in the academic study of the Bible because it allows us to see the soteriological aim of scripture. The Bible speaks primarily about God and God's relationship to humanity.

⁸Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 136.

The story of the Bible is complex and based on various situations, which makes constructing a systematic theology of the Bible difficult if not impossible. The Bible does not lend itself easily to the rational scrutinizing and categorization of systematic theology. The solution for this difficulty lies at the center of scripture: Jesus Christ. As heirs of Wesley and the Reformationists, we see the *kerygma* as the heart of the Bible. The *kerygma* is a broad term which basically refers to the message of proclamation, that Jesus Christ died, rose again, and brings a new existence to those who put their faith in Him. This *kerygma* must also be the center of Wesleyan theology if this theology is to be called Christian. The Bible is essentially evangelistic because it shows a God who, by love, has sent His one and only Son so that all who believe in this Son might have eternal life and experience restored relationship with God (John 3:16). We should be careful, moreover, that we not limit the scope of our concept of the *kerygma* or even salvation. Westerners tend to describe salvation in narrow, rationalistic terms. Eastern and third-world concepts challenge this narrowness by interpreting salvation in communal and relational terms, often with political and economic implications. We should not abandon one for the other but allow the two to dialogue under the umbrella of Christology.

3. The Bible in the Seminary Curriculum

We as a seminary community must join in this desire to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. The academic discipline of religion is becoming increasingly specialized. Indeed, it must be if one is to keep up with the exponential growth of literature and research being done in the field. This trend has discouraged conversation between the fields within the study of religion. To claim the Bible as authoritative over us invites us as a community to allow the Bible to be the basis of our curriculum. It is my conviction that all disciplines of the seminary must be rooted in the Bible. This is not intended to be a dogmatic or narrow statement, nor to say that each course is to be a course focused upon the Bible, but that each course should be built upon the

foundation of the Bible and biblical principles. The Bible needs to be the constant reference point for what we do.

The Bible must also be the basis of our creed, “Called unto Holiness.” George Lyons comments, “Loyalty to the primacy of Scripture gives Wesleyans a deep dissatisfaction with the easy conclusions of church dogma, even Wesleyan dogma. To be Wesleyan is to read the Bible with no prior constraint as to what it may mean.”⁹ I can appreciate scholars quoting Wesley and other authorities; I obviously do this myself. But sometimes I wonder if we have relied too much on Wesley or the nineteenth-century holiness movement and not enough on scripture in the formation of our doctrine. Lyons suggests that Wesleyan scholars in the past thirty years have tended to rely more on systematic theology and philosophical presuppositions than exegetical conclusions. Lyons asks, “Have scholarly sophistication and objectivity made us reluctant to move from descriptions of what biblical writers said—or what Wesley and nineteenth-century holiness figures thought—to normative conclusions? Have we traded holiness scholasticism for Wesleyan antiquarianism?”¹⁰

I join Lyons in a call to exegetical rigor in translating and articulating the message of holiness to the world around us. We cannot replace scripture with reason, experience, or tradition. We cannot allow the needs of our ministry and context to become the norm, and scripture only a proof text for constructing our theologies. But yet the ancient scriptures must still be interpreted and translated for these ministry contexts. Therefore, there are two further steps which clarify this primary one.

⁹George Lyons, “Presidential Address: Biblical Theology and Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30:2 (Fall, 1995): 23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 24.

B. The second step in my model for a Holiness Hermeneutic is that ***we stand above the Bible*** because it is an ancient, written document needing interpretation.



We should not deceive ourselves by thinking that the Bible is a simple document and that we only need to read it to understand it. It is a document far removed in time from today. It is written in languages not spoken today; it speaks of cultures and ways of thinking that have disappeared from history.

1. The Bible as Literature

Thus, with this second step, we take seriously the Bible as literature and as a historical document. In this second step, the Bible is allowed to be a human document written in specific times for various situations. The Bible is an ancient document and difficult to understand without care and the tools of interpretation. It is vital that this step be seen in the shadow of the first one. We must take the authority of the Bible seriously before and while we seek to understand it as an ancient document. We need the best tools of interpretation available to us to understand this ancient collection of writings.

There are more tools today than ever before for interpreting the Bible. We should not be afraid to use all the critical tools and methodologies we can to understand the text and message of the Bible. God has given us minds that think and reason, and traditions rich with theologians, historians, linguists, and other specialists.

Gerhard Ebeling writes that church history for Protestants is a history of exegesis.¹¹ Yet there are dangers lurking close to this step in my model. If this second step is allowed to precede or supercede the first step, then the interpreter becomes the authority and not the Bible, and significant hermeneutical errors result. A displacement of authority leads to significant challenges to the Bible.

2. Challenges to the Bible

There are too many challenges to the Bible for me to list in detail, but a few are worth noting here. One clear and serious challenge to the Bible is *neglect*. I have heard many sermons in my life from well-meaning pastors which were not based on the Bible but were based on some other factor like experience or reason. I have also heard many sermons which were not what I would call biblical. They made little or no reference to the truths of the Bible. The basis of the sermon was a shaky theological dogma of tradition or a favorite illustration or story of the preacher.

A second challenge to the Bible is *ignorance* or *simplistic notions*. Many Christians and ministers today do not reflect upon the major messages and grand story of the Bible. They build their lives upon simplistic notions that are only part of the treasury of scripture. They do not consider how a particular text fits into the story of God's grace. Ignorance is one of the most significant dangers to the church. Please do not misunderstand me, because I believe God can use simple folk. Some of the most profound influences of my life have not only been my college or seminary professors but my dear old Sunday School teacher we called Grandma Roberts and my inspiring youth leader named Ken. These people were not trained in higher criticism and did not possess the exegetical tools I do, but they possessed sincerity and a love for the Bible. The result of this early training was that I was prepared to consider deeper issues when I entered college.

¹¹Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1963).

A third challenge to the Bible is *modernism*. In an effort to make the Bible palatable to modern thought and not simply an ancient relic, some have taken the supernatural out. This is the driving force behind modern liberal approaches to the Bible. There are many heirs today of the existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann who attempted to remove the layers of myth within the New Testament in order to find more clearly the essential *kerygma* which could be made relevant to modern minds. Bultmann replaced the supernatural world of the New Testament with a modern, scientific worldview.¹² The significant danger of this approach is that humanity on its own is seen as having the ability to perceive truth and make sense of the world, that human intellect itself can make sense of the Bible. The Wesleyan understanding of inspiration and grace confronts this head on.

A fourth challenge to the Bible is the *extremism of Fundamentalism* and its doctrine of inerrancy. Many holiness people have too easily embraced the concepts of Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism relegates Christology to a secondary place in its emphasis upon scriptural authority, thus undermining the Living Word about whom the written word speaks. The written word has been allowed to take the place of the Living Word of God.¹³

A fifth challenge I present is *seeing the Bible as history or literature without seeing it also as revelation*, in other words, making this step of my model the only step in hermeneutics. This is the dominant approach today in the academic study of the Bible evidenced in the historical-critical method, the heir of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The dominance of historical-critical questions leaves the reader of the Bible grasping for spiritual nuggets of application in a desert of barrenness. Wesleyan interpreters, however, should have paramount interest in

¹²Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, trans. by Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 170-77.

¹³See Paul M. Bassett, "Conservative Wesleyan Theology and the Challenge of Secular Humanism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 8 (1973): 74-75.

application for the purpose of transformation. Questions of history are necessary but must be only one step among many to the greater goal of divine-human interaction. It is not that these other readings are invalid or unimportant, but that they are not ends in themselves.

A final challenge is that some main-line churches and seminaries are moving into a post-biblical era where *the Bible has no central place in the preparation of ministers*. Study is rather devoted to pastoral ministry theory and practice, social and political concepts, preaching, church growth, and systematic theology. A neglect of conscious attention to the study of the Bible has led to a clergy and ministry uninformed about the basic messages and facts of the Bible.

Let me give a personal illustration of the present state of biblical studies in a typical, main-line seminary in North America. My doctoral program has emphasized modern methods of interpreting the Bible. Most of my teachers in this program are major voices and leaders in the modern academic study of the Bible in North America. I have noticed a profound absence of spirituality in my doctoral classes. A Doctor of Philosophy is intended to be academic and not devotional. Yet, there is an emptiness that results from a purely rationalistic interpretation of the Bible. I had a bit of a controversy with one of my former professors. He read through some of the early drafts of my dissertation. His problem with my work was that my piety came through too much. I did not tell him this, but the reason my piety comes through in my writing is because of my theological orientation. I cannot deny nor do I wish to deny who I am, what I write, and the greater revelatory purpose of the Bible.

3. A Denial of Presuppositions

This leads me to another point. We interpret the Bible from certain perspectives and with certain presuppositions. It is my opinion that interpreters cannot separate themselves from their environment. We bring certain presuppositions to the text, no matter how hard we

try to be objective or scientific. We each have interpretive lenses that color what questions we ask of the Bible and how we interpret the answers we find. The goal of many biblical scholars is to be as objective as possible.¹⁴ The trend of the last part of the twentieth century has been for scholars to keep their personal theologies—if they even have one—hidden.

I want to embrace the stream of tradition in which I stand. I studied under some great Nazarene biblical scholars including C .S. Cowles, Wendall Bowes, Joseph Mayfield, Morris Weigelt, Alex Deasley, Alvin Lawhead, William Greathouse, Roger Hahn, and others. They and other professors have taught me much about the Bible and interpretation. I have also been taught many excellent exegetical skills from professors in my doctoral program. My presuppositions have also been influenced by the denomination to which I belong. I was brought up in the Church of the Nazarene and know it well. I have studied its doctrines and polity. My stream of tradition joins others in the Wesleyan/Holiness river which combines with others emptying into the great ocean of Christianity. I have been influenced significantly by the books I have read and the churches I have attended. My family and personal decisions have also had a profound influence upon me. It is good to stand within this stream of tradition because this stream then becomes my intuitive and conscious guide in interpretation. The more I channel my pre-suppositions into conformity with streams I consider consistent with the intent of scripture, the firmer a foundation my hermeneutics will have. We must have the surety to accept sound teaching and the integrity to reject faulty instruction.

¹⁴See Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1960).

4. Devotion to Scholarship or Devotion to the Church?

In my pursuit of clarifying my presuppositions and developing my interpretive skills, I must ask myself whether am I serving the academy and scholarship, or whether am I serving the church. A temptation for a young scholar such as myself is to replace devotion with intellectualism. I spend a lot of time in the pursuit of knowledge. I am reminded of Paul's words to the Galatians, "Am I now trying to please people or God?" (Gal 1:10). Scholarship can too easily replace ministry and application. The driving force behind biblical interpretation for us must be the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and the proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor 9:16).

C. The final step in my hermeneutical model is that ***we stand alongside the Bible***, in communication with the Living Word.



We dialogue with the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to use the findings of our research from step two. We allow the Bible to speak to us about the needs of our life and the world around us. This dialogue is a process which involves both speaking and listening to the Spirit as He inspires the Bible once again.¹⁵

¹⁵Wesley wrote, "The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer" (*Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* [London: Epworth Press, 1952], 794).

1. The Need for Divine Assistance

It should be immediately noted that we need divine assistance in interpreting the Bible. Karl Barth acknowledged that human language cannot be the bearer of divine revelation. God must empower human knowledge and language to speak about Him. In summarizing Barth's position, Bruce McCormack writes,

In and of itself, even the biblical language cannot teach us how to speak rightly of God. In and of itself, the biblical language is simply ordinary human language—language which awakens in readers all the connotations which they ordinarily ascribe to it. Barth's view is that this problem is overcome in that God continually takes up the witness of the biblical writers and bears witness to himself in and through their witness. In that he does so, the human words of Scripture are made to conform or correspond to the divine Word.¹⁶

2. Contemporary Inspiration

For Barth, God continues to speak through the ancient scriptures in new ways because God is living. The power of the Bible came by way of the Spirit but was mediated in the church.¹⁷ Barth spoke of the "analogy of faith" by which he meant that God acts in revelation, and humans then respond to that act of revelation by faith. God speaks to us by grace through the Bible. We acknowledge this gracious act by our faith in this divine word.

¹⁶Bruce McCormack, "Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and P. Rorem (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 332.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 335.

This dynamic understanding of inspiration of Scripture fits well with Wesleyan theology. Wesley, commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16 in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, writes: “All Scripture is inspired of God—The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer.”¹⁸ This Wesleyan position does not weaken Scriptural authority, but strengthens it and puts it in its proper place in believers’ lives.

3. Divine-Human Synergism through Prevenient Grace

This final step in my model involves a divine-human synergism or working together enabled and sustained through prevenient grace. The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in the interpretation process. According to John 16:12-15, one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to lead us deeper into the truths of Christ. The Corinthian church is an example of believers failing to allow the Spirit to teach them the mind of Christ because of their fleshly living according to the ways of the world (1 Cor 2:16-3:3). The Holy Spirit can transform us into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:17-18). Christ is the source, means, and goal of grace.

The Wesleyan optimism of grace is vital in the interpretation process. The Calvinist position is that our total being is fallen, including our mind, will, and reason. A Wesleyan would agree to a point. Where the two perspectives part ways is with the understanding of grace. The Wesleyan position is that God has restored a measure of freedom of the will through prevenient grace. Wesley writes, “There is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which ‘enlighteneth every man that

¹⁸Wesley, 2 Tim 3:16, *Explanatory Notes*, 794.

cometh into the world.’”¹⁹ Grace enables us to respond to the Holy Spirit’s leading through the written words of the Bible. Prevenient grace enables the reader of the Bible to respond in a dynamic and free way to the message of Jesus Christ through the prompting of the Holy Spirit in the written words of scripture. Since grace is God’s message through Christ leading to Christ, the task of biblical interpretation is essentially and ultimately Christological.

We humans are dynamically involved in this hermeneutical process. To some degree we cannot avoid the second step of my model and use our minds and reason to interpret the Bible. In fact, we must and should use our reason to make sense of the text. We are free agents and can respond positively to the leading of the Holy Spirit or negatively by closing our minds and hearts to the leading of the Spirit. The Spirit works with our minds to provide us insights into the Bible and, more importantly, into the character of God.

Wesley talked of developing spiritual senses by which we can discern spiritual matters. It is impossible to have these senses until our spiritual eyes are opened by the Holy Spirit. Wesley writes,

So you cannot reason concerning spiritual things, if you have no spiritual sight; because all your ideas received by your outward senses are of a different kind; yea, far more different from those received by faith or internal sensation. . . . How will [reason] pass from things natural to spiritual; from the things that are seen to those that are not seen; from the visible to the invisible world? What a gulf is here! By what art will reason get over the immense chasm? This cannot be till the Almighty come in to your succour, and give you that faith you have hitherto despised. Then upborne, as it were, on eagles’ wings, you shall soar away

¹⁹Wesley, *Works*, Jackson ed. (reprinted Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1986), 10: 229f; cf. 9: 273, 275, 294; 8: 52.

into the regions of eternity; and your enlightened reason shall explore “the deep things of God;” God himself “revealing them to you by His Spirit.”²⁰

God can speak through the two rather subjective entities of our spiritual senses and our sharpened presuppositions to guide us deeper into biblical truths. We can develop skill and consistency through this divine-human relationship.

There is a reality behind the words of the Bible which is hidden from those without the eyes of faith. Jesus’ own teaching made little sense to the Pharisees and Sadducees because they lacked faith (see Mark 4:11-12). Much of Jesus’ teaching also made little sense to the disciples until after the resurrection because of their lack of faith. Their understanding grew with their faith. The Bible is seen today by many biblical scholars as simply a human document to be interpreted like other ancient and modern literature. By skipping the first step in my model, they also stifle the work of the Spirit within their own hearts. The influence of this rationalism has penetrated every fabric of the modern church and has even infiltrated the ranks of holiness denominations.

With this third step in my model, we dialogue with the Bible through both speaking and listening. There is no way around the speaking because of our presuppositions, but we can certainly do less speaking and more listening. In this dynamic dialogue we find the freedom to approach the Bible critically and the devotion to be changed by the message we hear. We find ourselves wrapped up in the story of grace.

²⁰Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” *Works* (Jackson), 8: 13-14.

III. The Ongoing Story of Grace

A. The Goal of Grace

The ultimate goal of all grace is to lead humanity back to God. The Bible is a means and channel of grace.²¹ The ultimate goal of the field of biblical studies, even in an academic setting, must be the transformation of people into the image of Christ. Hence, biblical studies should be the major contributor to the evangelistic and training mission of the church (Matt 28:19).

B. Knowing the Contexts

Good exegesis and thus good hermeneutics are finally dependent upon the ability to retell the story of grace. Reason must be subservient to faith, but faith cannot do without the strength of reason. The ultimate transforming meaning of a text cannot be determined by examining that text in isolation from its contexts, both ancient and modern. The passage should be considered in the various settings throughout the ages in which it has been used. None of these contexts should be taken in isolation since all are part of God's redeeming activity in history. Consistencies should be embraced and variations considered.

C. Knowing the Story

The story of God's grace is quite simple, and every minister of the gospel should know it intimately and intricately. Basic to this story is, first of all, the command to obey resulting in relationship. A consistent theme throughout the Old Testament is that obedience to the commands of God results in relationship with God. Secondly, basic to this story is the human problem. The disobedience of Adam and Eve resulted in a broken relationship with God. This

²¹Wesley, Sermon, "The Means of Grace," *Works* (Jackson), 5: 192-193; cf. Thorsen, 136-137.

disobedience became paradigmatic for the condition of the people of Israel. The Old Testament is a two-part story. It is the story of the failure of humanity to fulfill the terms of covenant with God and the consequences of this decision. It is also the story of the patient God of grace who, in spite of this sin, forgives and offers hope for the future. The Old Testament ends looking forward to a day when God would circumcise the human heart with His Spirit and make relationship once again possible (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:25-27).

Thirdly, basic to this story is the divine answer to the human problem. The reason Jesus Christ came was to impart the possibility of salvation for humanity. Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds (Rom 5:20). In a world where the power of sin reigns, the message of hope in Christ must ring out with clarity. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life sets us free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:1-2). The clutch of sin upon the human race has been broken! For just as in Adam we die, so also in Christ we can be made alive (1 Cor 15:22). This transformative freedom influences all of life. Christ's sacrifice justifies us from the guilt of our sins. His death redeems us from the power of sin (1 Cor 1:30). His resurrection reveals His power over our last enemy, death, the consequence of sin (1 Cor 15:55-56; Rom 3:23; 6:23).

Christ brings not just freedom from . . . but freedom to. . . . The Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers in Christ to bring them to a point of total commitment, where the desire shifts from the ways of the world to the ways of God. We want God more than we want our fleeting and empty old ways (Luke 9:57-62). The Spirit writes on our hearts the ways of God and empowers us to walk in these ways (Heb 10:15-18). Purity of heart and life become our mark (1 Thes 4:3-7). Our desire every day becomes to be like our Lord in word, thought, and deed (2 Cor 3:18). His grace is so great that even when we mess up and give in to our temptations, the offer of forgiveness still stands

(1 John 1:9). Peace and assurance accompany this transformation (John 14:27; Gal 5:22-23; Rom 8:16). We see our neighbor and enemy in a different way. Where hatred and fighting once ruled, love now reigns (1 John 4:7-8).

This new life of holiness calls us to participate in this message of hope. I urge us as individuals and as a community to proclaim this message with urgency and clarity. The central task of the church is to offer this better alternative to our world. Offering this message of hope is the hermeneutical task which I have been speaking about today. It is there in the Bible. Our world needs it. Our job then is to take the gospel to the world and allow the gospel to confront and transform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, students, scholars, and ministers in Asian and Pacific contexts have before them a tremendous opportunity to approach the Bible with eyes opened by the optimism of God's transforming grace. APNTS and its graduates should speak loudly in the twenty-first century about the call to discipleship. The task of hermeneutics urges us to proclaim the message of the Bible in ways that reach to the hearts and minds of those to whom we minister. Let us take the call to holiness out of the halls of learning and into the streets where real people can experience transformational living. We who are professors at APNTS can only equip students for the difficult process of proclaiming the gospel in a hostile world. It is impossible and even undesirable to translate the gospel into every situation and need represented by this diverse group. We cannot preempt the Holy Spirit in this task. We can set you on your way in a stream of tradition with presuppositions built upon sound methods all under the authority of the Bible. The world out there is a tough place that is in desperate

need of the message you hold in your hands. Indeed, as the hymn goes,

“Holiness unto the Lord,” is our watch word and song,
“Holiness unto the Lord” as we’re marching along.
Sing it, shout it, loud and long:
“Holiness unto the Lord” now and forever.