

### Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old

by Robert L. Thomas

(Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 515pp, paperback, \$16.79

Dr. Thomas discusses aspects of Biblical *hermeneutics*: the principles by which the text of Scripture may be properly interpreted. The author gives several purposes for the book:<sup>1</sup>

- to discuss significant changes in evangelical hermeneutics
- to show new meanings being attached to "grammatical-historical interpretation"
- to compare traditional grammatical-historical interpretation with new evangelical hermeneutics
- to point out the dominantly negative nature of new evangelical hermeneutics

Lest the casual reader make the mistake of dismissing these issues as being academic and largely unrelated to daily life in the pulpit and pew, the *effects* of these changes are very significant and of great concern:

*Preunderstanding has taken its place at the head of the exegetical process and has effected changes in other traditional hermeneutical principles. Long-standing definitions of words have been altered. Misuse of the analogy of faith has grown more widespread. Techniques of Bible translation have undergone extreme changes. General revelation has increased in stature to the point of equaling special revelation. Interpreters no longer limit each passage to a single meaning. Application of Scripture has come to control interpretation of Scripture rather than vice versa. The secular discipline of modern linguistics has elevated itself to a role of usurping the prerogatives of traditional exegesis. How the New Testament uses the Old Testament now depends on personal biases of the interpreter. Literary genre can, in contemporary estimates, overrule traditional principles of interpretation.<sup>2</sup>*

Because hermeneutics is the bedrock upon which our understanding of the Bible rests, subtle and not-so-subtle changes in the principles of interpretation are amplified into serious deviations in doctrinal understanding of what God has said:

*New hermeneutical principles have given birth to new systems of doctrine, including progressive dispensationalism, evangelical feminism, evangelical missiology, theonomy, and open theism.<sup>3</sup>*

As serious as the above distortions of Scripture are, they are just a taste of what is to come assuming the current trends within evangelical hermeneutics continue unchecked:

*The new hermeneutics provide no stopping points to limit the extremes to*

---

1 p. 9

2 p. 507

3 p. 507

*which individual personal inclinations may go in fostering new teachings allegedly derived from Scripture. For example, as this is written, a new evangelical system of interpretation is emerging to support a homosexual lifestyle from the Bible!*<sup>4</sup>

The material in the book is divided into two major sections: (1) The Role of Revisionist Hermeneutics in Altering Interpretive Principles, and (2) The Role of Revisionist Hermeneutics in Fostering New Doctrines. The relationship between these two topics cannot be overemphasized: modern doctrinal drift can be traced directly back to changes in the foundations of hermeneutics. Thus, anyone who is interested in doctrinal purity would do well to become familiar with the dangerous trends Thomas documents.

Thomas devotes 10 chapters to describe ways in which traditional interpretive principles have been altered, such as: the integration of preunderstanding into hermeneutics, the misuse of the analogy of faith (scripture interprets scripture), the rise of dynamic equivalence as a preferred means of translation, the abandonment of the principle of single meaning, confusing application with hermeneutics, and the use of literary genre to override hermeneutical principles in the gospels and Revelation. Each topic is treated in considerable detail including a helpful tabular summary of the salient points discussed. This reviewer found the chapters on the principle of single meaning and the New Testament use of the Old Testament to be particularly useful--especially by illustrating the varied approaches taken by different interpreters and analyzing their weaknesses.

The second half of the book comprises an additional 6 chapters which discuss the symptoms resulting from the departure from traditional historical grammatical hermeneutics documented in the first half. Thomas (with help from Paul W. Felix) examines the hermeneutics employed by progressive dispensationalism, evangelical feminism, evangelical missiology, theonomy, and open theism. In each case, the doctrinal deviations--which most will find alarming--can be traced back to a shift in the foundation of hermeneutics. This is not surprising since the groups involved all consider themselves "evangelical" and consider (for the most part) Scripture to be the Word of God. *If we all have the same text and all believe it is authoritative, then whence the different theology?* The answer is found in *hermeneutics*: the principles by which we interpret the text! Subtle and not-so-subtle differences in our hermeneutical principles result in large differences in what we see the Scriptures to be teaching. It is like the jetliner which veers off course by one degree after taking to the air. Initially, it is not far from its predicted track to the destination. But after a few hours, it is many miles off-course. So it is with hermeneutics--which is why this topic is of foundational importance to reading and interpreting Scripture.

Many of the problems which Dr. Thomas examines in this work have a common theme--an increasing elevation of the place of *man* and a corresponding denigration of the place of *God* in the theology and practice of the church. The elevation of cultural uniqueness in the field of missiology, the emphasis of uncertainty of meaning by linguistics, and the desire of interpreters to place emphasis on the subjectivity of the interpreter rather than

---

4 p. 508

the objectivity of the Biblical text share a common focus on man and *I*. Man's *inability* to be objective is seen to overrule God's *ability* to communicate. The result of this "false-humility" is that the objective Word of God is held to be "unknowable" due to cultural differences and our own individual biases:

*It is now the interpreter who is under investigation rather than Scripture as God's vehicle for communicating truth--human limitations in regard to language as a means of communication, human predisposition to distort, human conceptual distance from the text, human incapacity to know anything with certitude, human inability to comprehend communication originating in another culture, etc. In essence, hermeneutics has become an exercise in probing anthropological finitude instead of an attempt to grasp the meaning of a written revelation from an infinite God.*

This must be recognized as part-and-parcel of our times where men have become lovers of self--as illustrated by postmodernism which asserts "personal truth" above an external objective reality. Thus, the trends identified by Thomas can be understood within the larger context of the paradigm shift within the culture as a whole--away from propositional truth and "knowability" toward subjectivism and confusion. Masking as academic concern and inquiry, the focus is almost entirely inward--at man--making his limitations and views the ultimate measure of the effectiveness and objective truth of Scripture. As Thomas pithily observes, it is far easier to assert unknowability than to roll up one's sleeves and do the hard work of hermeneutics:

*The grammatical-historical system of hermeneutics has proven itself adequate for a long time. It smacks somewhat of vanity for this generation to think it has 'outgrown' the method and has come up with something better. If the retort comes that the traditional system does not work in today's world, the reply must be, 'Have you really tried it?' The only thing that has changed from Terry's day to the present is a current scarcity of those willing to pay the price of diligent exegetical study. It is much easier to blame exegetical conclusions on preunderstanding than to do the hard work of culling out the objective exegetical data to arrive at the meaning that God and the human author intended in a given passage.*

We highly recommend this work to anyone who wishes to understand the paradigm shift taking place within evangelical circles regarding how the Bible is to be read and understood. Without a grasp of what is going on in hermeneutics, we are left watching the symptoms (doctrinal aberration) without being cognizant of the root cause (changes in hermeneutics).

Reviewed by Tony Garland, [www.SpiritAndTruth.org](http://www.SpiritAndTruth.org)