1-1-1995

Hermeneutics In The Churches of Christ

Thomas H. Olbricht

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, History of Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol37/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.
1 Hermeneutics in the Churches of Christ
THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

28 Alexander Campbell as a Publisher
GARY HOLLOWAY

36 Sociological Methods in the Study of the New Testament
A Review and Assessment
THOMAS SCOTT CAULLEY

45 Recent Patterns of Growth and Decline among Heirs of the Restoration Movement
FLAVIL YEAKLEY, JR.

51 Book Reviews

63 Book Notes
The word hermeneutics means whatever the person employing it wants it to mean. It is difficult to fault the position of John Locke that words represent an idea in the mind of a speaker.\(^1\) I must, however, point out that regardless of how we conceptualize hermeneutics, the word has a long history which even predates Christianity.\(^2\) For several centuries religious scholars have meant by hermeneutics those rules for explaining obscure texts or for setting out the full significance of selected Scriptures. According to Carl R. Holladay in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, hermeneutics "encompasses both the study of the principles of biblical interpretation and the process through which such interpretation is carried out."\(^3\) Colin Brown in the glossary of *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* defines hermeneutics as "the science of the interpretation of written texts in accordance with scientifically formulated rules and principles."\(^4\) I respect these traditional definitions. At the same time, here and elsewhere, I employ a somewhat privatized meaning which is more inclusive in scope. I mean by hermeneutics "the perspectives and commitments from which believers put questions to the Scriptures."

It is my conviction that one cannot appreciate the hermeneutics of any era, or of a specific subset of believers, without assessing their perception of reality, the role the Scripture plays in it, and the questions they put to it. The sociological and theological backgrounds of any confessional group therefore weigh heavily upon their hermeneutics. Hermeneutics are shaped by culture and theology and once formulated, in turn, shape the culture and theology of a specific body of believers. Therefore to locate the parameters of

---

hermeneutics in the Churches of Christ we must first locate the centers and context of Churches of Christ theology.

The Centers of Churches of Christ Theology

The focus of restoration theology is and continues to be the church and salvation, that is, ecclesiology and soteriology—in the language of Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott, “the ancient order” and “the ancient gospel.” In 1836 Walter Scott (1796-1861), one our early fathers, wrote,

The present century, then, is characterized by these three successive steps, which the lovers of our Lord Jesus have been enabled to make, in their return to the original institution. First the Bible was adopted as sole authority in our assemblies, to the exclusion of all other books. Next the Apostolic order was proposed. Finally the True Gospel was restored.5

Fourteen years later Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) highlighted the commitments of our movement in his “Prefatory Remarks” to the 1850 Millennial Harbinger. In looking back over twenty-eight years of editing, Campbell was expansive as he surveyed the advance of restorationism through most of the English-speaking world: “The earth has been almost girdled with advocates, calling upon their contemporaries to enquire for the old paths, and beseeching them to walk in them.”6 Campbell was at that time sixty-two years old and in a reflective mood. He proceeded to set forth the fundamental platform of the movement in five topics: (1) “The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible,” (2) “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone,” (3) “on this rock I will build my church,” (4) the voice of the “Messiah and his Apostles” [that is, the New Testament], and (5) “organized effort” [that is, churches working together on cooperative projects].7 The centers are essentially the same as those advanced by Scott, though Campbell did not mention the “ancient gospel.” As Campbell set them out, items two through five focused on the church. We can ascertain more precisely what Campbell meant by the “ancient order” since under this title he published in the 1820s a series of thirty articles in The Christian Baptist discussing the Lord’s supper, fellowship (contribution), bishops, love feasts, purity of speech, deacons, hymns, church discipline, names and titles. Under “Ancient Gospel” [The Christian Baptist, Jan. 1828, 10 numbers] Campbell discussed baptism, immersion, faith, reformation, and repentance.

We in the Churches of Christ in the latter half of the twentieth century have preserved the identical mission regarding the church and salvation. The publication of Leroy Brownlow’s Why I Am a Member of the Church of

---

6 Millennial Harbinger, 3
7 Millennial Harbinger, 1850, 3-8.
Christ established the basic agenda for the remainder of the century. In Brownlow’s book such matters as the Scriptures, their interpretation, Christology, and salvation are all collapsed under the doctrine of the church.

The Context of Restoration Theology and Hermeneutics

Restoration theology reflected many of the concerns of the Reformation, especially the English Reformation. The focus was upon the Scripture, a return to a more literal and historical interpretation, and the nature, structure, and characteristics of the church.

The allegorical or metaphorical interpretation of Scriptures began early in Christian experience. Many of the questions which the second century Christians addressed to Scriptures revolved about explaining their views to the Greco-Roman world. Such was the task of the apologists, a category which may appropriately include Origen (185-254). What did the Scripture mean to an intellectual world immersed in Platonism of various stripes? The answer seized upon, especially in Alexandria, was suggested by the Platonists themselves. The meaning lay, not so much in the discrete, literal aspect of the text, but in a spiritualized, allegorized explanation. Internal divisions within the early church did provide occasion for comparing one Christian perspective with another, but the major task was to relate a growing Christianity to the surrounding world. In the view of many church leaders, however, excessive allegorizing destroyed the historical significance of the biblical faith and recycled it into another religion.

Hermeneutical battles in the third and fourth centuries pitted Alexandrian interpretation against the Antiochene. Alexandrians moved from the bodily or literal level upward to the spiritual. The Antiochene, in contrast, focused upon careful textual criticism and philological and historical studies. But though the Antiochenes were especially interested in the literal meaning of the text, they did not eschew spiritual meanings, just as the Alexandrians did not ignore textual and philological matters. These battles waned through Medieval times and, partly under the influence of Augustine, crystallized into a fourfold sense of Scripture, set forth in standard form by John Cassian in *Conferences* in about 420 A.D. The fourfold sense, for example, in regard to the city of Jerusalem meant that (1) literally it was the Palestinian Jewish

8 Leroy Brownlow, *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ* (Fort Worth: Leroy Brownlow Publisher, 1945). Another highly influential book of the same genre, especially for adult Bible classes, has been Roy E. Cogdill, *The New Testament Church* (Lufkin, TX: Roy E. Cogdill Publishing Company, n.d.).


city, (2) allegorically it was the church, (3) tropologically it was the human soul, and (4) anagogically it was the Christian’s heavenly home. While the reformers did not fully reject these hermeneutics, they regarded them as superfluous when it came to specific aspects of church reform, and elevated the literal sense over the other three. Without a doubt Churches of Christ hermeneutics fully embraced the reformation emphasis on the literal sense, later developed in a specific direction under the influence of English and Scottish empiricism.

The work of Augustine (354-430) in his De Doctrina Christiana in some measure set the agenda for works on hermeneutics. In the first book Augustine divided the task of preaching into discovering the message out of Scripture, then teaching it. The focal point of Scripture, Augustine declared, was love (charitas). Every aspect of Scripture must therefore be interpreted according to whether charitas is thereby commended. The rest of De Doctrina utilized Augustine’s insights into the philosophy of language and rhetoric. Augustine was trained in rhetoric, and, in fact, book four of De Doctrina set forth his views on Christian rhetoric.

The new reformation hermeneutic owed much to Martin Luther (1483-1564), but perhaps Churches of Christ owe even more to the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), who greatly influenced Scottish and English churchmen. Luther and Zwingli worked from many of the same principles, some of which came from Augustine. While Luther did not dismiss the other three senses of Scripture, he reversed the priorities, declaring the literal sense the highest. So he wrote:

No violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel; but they are to be retained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids; lest we give our adversaries occasion to make a mockery of all the Scriptures. Thus Origen was repudiated, in olden times, because he despised the grammatical sense and turned the trees, and all things else written concerning Paradise, into allegories, for it might thereby be concluded that God did not create trees.

Luther also contended, “That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way; the father who can do this best is the best among them.”

11 Froehlich, 28.
12 See M. Pontent, L’Exégèse de S. Augustin prédicateur (Théologie, vii, 1945).
13 Martin Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Works of Martin Luther, II, 189f. Augustine took a similar position but was probably less rigorous in eschewing the allegorical than Luther was. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis,” Theology Today 36 (1980) 27-38.
The reformation produced a flowering of books on hermeneutics. Ernesti, the German scholar, cites 19 Roman Catholic and 23 Protestant books on hermeneutics by 1761. Samuel Davidson in 1808 published a history of interpretation in which he included a bibliography of some forty pages covering the category of hermeneutics. This impressive succession of books set the style for instruction and works on hermeneutics which have prevailed since, especially in conservative American circles. A case in point is the hermeneutics of A. Berkeley Mickelsen, popular in Evangelical seminaries such as Bethel Theological Seminary, his own school, and Fuller Theological Seminary.

The presuppositions underlying restoration theology and hermeneutics can best be understood against the backdrop of the Swiss and English reformations in regard to the centrality of the church, and from the English-Scottish enlightenment in regard to a vision of reality and texts. In order to understand the hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ it is important to perceive that the primary questions put to the Scripture concern the church in its overt characteristics.

Restorationist theology owes more to the reformed theology of Calvin and Zwingli than to that of Luther because it is Scripture and church centered. Luther argued for a basically Christocentric interpretation. Calvin rejected the Christocentric, arguing that "scripture itself is the authority for Christian belief rather than any Christocentric interpretation of scripture." More specifically, however, Churches of Christ theology resounds with echoes of Zwingli:

[He] had the same basic aim as Luther, but highlighted the purification of the Church by the proclamation of the Word of God which involved necessarily not merely the revivification of its faith and reconstruction of its doctrine, but the overhauling of every department of ecclesiastical life and practice.

This connection, though not direct, is not accidental. One can mention, first, the influence of Zwingli on John Knox and Scottish Presbyterianism and thus the Campbells, who came from Scottish Presbyterian backgrounds. But there is also the connection with English Puritanism and from these important

---

15 Samuel Davidson, *Sacred Hermeneutics Developed and Applied, Including a History of Biblical Interpretation from the Earliest of the Fathers to the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1843). Davidson has an annotated bibliography on hermeneutics (677-718), which is helpful for the period covered.


churchmen to the British independents of various stripes. While these disparate groups may not have been genetically connected in every case, they were from the same milieu and believed that what Christianity needed most of all in order to return to the ancient paths was the purifying of the church.

The connection between the Zwinglian reform and the British scene may be specifically documented. Various English exiles in the time of Mary Tudor (Queen 1553-1558) made their way to Zurich. Already some influence from the Swiss reformation had occurred through the correspondence of English church leaders with Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), who succeeded Zwingli as chief pastor of Zurich. Somewhat later because of opposition, Martin Bucer (1491-1551), the successor to Zwingli as leader of the Swiss reform, made his way to Cambridge (1549), where he was appointed Regius professor of divinity.19

Zwingli assigned top priority to the Scriptures in his endeavor to reform the church. He did not avoid quoting the church fathers, however, so as to show that for his interpretation he had age-old support.20 W. P. Stephens wrote:

From the beginning of his reforming ministry Zwingli presented the scriptures as our “master, teacher, and guide.” He recognized the danger that we come to them seeking confirmation of our own opinions, so that they become our pupil rather than our teacher, and that we want someone to act as judge when there is a disputed interpretation or an obscure passage. But that is to seek to be master of scripture and not to let it be master.21

Zwingli concluded that the literal interpretation of Scripture was alone of decisive significance for this task, but he retained a sensitivity to poetic imagery and symbolism.22 He was well aware that persons who differed with him theologically also quoted Scripture. He believed that in the final analysis it is the Holy Spirit in the church who can judge between the interpretations.23 Comparing passages in the manner emphasized by Luther was one means through which the Spirit interprets the Scriptures, Zwingli argued. Passages may be selected from any part of the Scriptures for these comparisons.24

In determining what specific matters were to be adapted, Zwingli spoke of both the commands of Christ and biblical examples.25 I have not found as

21 Stephens, 58.
24 Stephens, 64, 65.
25 Bromiley, Zwingli and Bullinger, 25.
yet, however, a statement in which Zwingli brought the two together as a clear hermeneutic principle. Whatever the case, an English contemporary of Bullinger, Edward Dering (1540-1576), a Puritan, offered what may be one of the earliest statements on commands, examples, and inferences, in arguing for the theological importance of inferences. He insisted that conclusions based on Scripture and drawn from “proportion, or deduction, by consequence, . . . is as well the Word of God as that which is an express commandment or example.” This early expression of the tripartite formula is worth noting because this formula rose to the forefront in the middle of the twentieth century as the consensus Churches of Christ hermeneutic.

The tripartite formula is found in American Puritan, Baptist, and other circles. For example, Barnas Sears, onetime professor at Newton Theological Seminary and president of Brown University, wrote,

(1) Popular and poetical language is to be translated, so far as may be, into the exact language of science. Hence it presupposes an exegetical training. Some subjects can be so well understood by us, as to enable us to determine with clearness how language must be understood; but on subjects beyond our comprehension a difficulty in interpreting language will always remain.

(2) Subjects must be analyzed philosophically, so far as it is in our power to do it. Otherwise, their nature, their difference or agreement with others cannot be understood, e.g., repentance, faith, love, regeneration, sanctification.

(3) The relations of doctrines to each other must be so far ascertained as to preserve their harmony. The uncertain must conform to the certain; our inferences must not set aside divine testimony. Express and clear declaration of Scripture, and simple and necessary inferences, take the precedence of philosophical speculation and long concatenations of reasoning. Two doctrines fully established by independent evidence must be allowed to stand, even when we cannot perceive the connection, which is most likely to occur on subjects which lie out of the sphere of human knowledge.

The demands of theology, as a science, are exegetical and logical, the former furnishing the material, the latter the instruction.

In addition, Zwingli worked from a postulate similar to “We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where it is silent,” a phrase prized by Thomas Campbell. According to Bromiley, in the view of Zwingli the church must not retain “traditional forms or ceremonies simply on the ground that they were not actually forbidden by Scripture.”

From the time of Henry VIII (1491-1547) the focus of English Christianity had been on the church. The battles of Henry and his successors

---


27 Alvah Hovey, Barnas Sears, A Christian Educator, His Making and Work (New York: Silver, Burdett) 72, 73.

28 Bromiley, Zwingli and Bullinger, 29.
were the struggles of royalty and the ruling classes to define the contours of a specifically English Church over against a Christianity politically directed from Rome. Henry broke ties with Rome and became prince and defender of the church. He confiscated the church’s lands, closed the monasteries, and declared the right of the English government to try church functionaries. For a growing group of church leaders, however, later designated Puritans, most of what Henry accomplished was simply a tinkering with the politics of the church. Under the influence of the Swiss reform they wanted to go much further and purify the liturgy and life of the church. According to Ahlstrom, in respect to the Puritans,

From the outset these reformers were determined to achieve a threefold program for purifying the visible church: through a purging of popish remnants and the establishment of “apostolic” principles of worship and church order, through the implantation and teaching of Reformed doctrine, and through a revival of discipline and evangelical piety in clergy and laity alike.29

More specifically the Puritans launched a major attack upon the Church of England, especially in regard to the details of worship such as vestments, ornaments, surplices, the sign of the cross, organs, rochets, and ecclesiastical courts. They demanded explicit scriptural warrant for all such matters, regarding whatever was without such as idolatrous, popish, and superstitious. The Puritans championed plain preaching and heralded simplicity of proclamation and life. In terms of polity they were presbyterian or congregational, but in America the congregational won out. They brought to Christianity the rhetoric of a pure church over against the state church.

While the Campbells and other early restoration leaders had no direct ties to Puritanism, they were heirs of many of its principles.30 The Campbell movement grew rapidly in a country founded on Puritan principles. But in America there was a difference. In America by Campbell’s time, only the vestiges of a state church existed to rally against. Now multiple churches were visible on the scene. The Campbells championed one church over against multiple churches. The question therefore became the parameters of this one church. The solution was to reject all creeds and rebuild the Church of Jesus Christ, plank by plank, from the Oracles of God, the Scriptures, and especially the New Testament. In the minds of certain right wingers from the beginning of the movement, the manner of proceeding was to compare church with church and declare the restorationist church the obvious winner,

based on clear mandates from the Scriptures. The America of the Campbells was specifically one in which the denominations were organizing and testing their wings, as Jon Butler has argued in a recent book. As the growing churches competed for the minds and hearts of Americans, certain restorationist leaders, so as gain a competitive edge, specialized on scriptural warrants for a church which avoided denominationalism.

One of the reasons the restoration emphasis centered upon the overt characteristics of the church was that Alexander Campbell, especially, but also Tolbert Fanning (1810-1874), David Lipscomb, as well as those identified as the "right wing," were all greatly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment. It was persons with this frame of mind (and there were many in America) who were easily won over to the movement. The eighteenth century was the high noon of the Enlightenment. The popularizers were French—Voltaire (1694-1778), Diderot (1713-1784), and Condorcet (1743-1794). British counterparts were Locke (1632-1704), Berkeley (1685-1753), Newton (1642-1727), and Hume (1711-1776). All of these drew on Bacon (1561-1626). Some of the American leaders were Franklin (1706-1790), Paine (1737-1809), and Jefferson (1743-1826).

The Enlightenment of the British Isles, imported to America, championed empirical reason, especially of the commonsense variety. Superstition, ignorance, prejudice, poverty, and vice had long corrupted the church, state, and class. Reason was seen as the channel for purifying and purging. Religion and, for the more conservative, revelation were crucial in this new enlightened society, but even the Scriptures were subject to the dictates of reason. The perspectives of John Locke, as filtered through the Scottish realists Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Sir William Hamilton, Thomas Brown and James Beattie, were paramount in many an American circle and especially in the Campbell wing of the Restoration Movement. While one may overemphasize the influence of Locke on Campbell, one still hears more echoes of Locke in the writings of Campbell than that of any other author, Francis Bacon included.

Biblical interpretation in the Restoration Movement gravitated even more than the earlier Reformation toward a literal and inductive conceptual

31 Richard T. Hughes has written a book, to be published by Greenwood Press, in which he traces this frame of mind in the movement from the early nineteenth century to the present.
framework because of the influence on our leaders of Scottish realism and commonsense philosophy. This background for our heritage has often been documented and discussed. The larger framework revolved about the two books of God: the book of revelation and the book of nature. The same epistemological rules in general applied to apprehending the truth of each, and the factual dimension, in each case, was the dominant. Furthermore, in regard to interpreting the Scriptures, the same rules apply as for any other document. So Campbell wrote,

The language of the Bible is, then, human language. It is, therefore, to be examined by all the same rules which are applicable to the language of any other book, and to be understood according to the true and proper meaning of the words, in their current acceptation, at the times and in the places in which they were originally written or translated.36

These rules, Campbell believed, enabled all men to interpret the Bible alike which is ultimately imperative if unanimity (hence unity) is to be accomplished.37

John Drury, in Critics of the Bible 1724-1873, observed that neither typology nor the imaginative tropes of rabbinic exegesis appealed to Locke. What Locke needed, as a sociable and friendly man, was a field of common and commonsensical discourse on the Bible. His appetite for empirical study of it had already been whetted by his friendship with Nicholas Toinard, who was engaged on a “harmony” of the gospels: in effect, an attempt to establish their chronology by laying them out in historical sequence so that the reader could compare and synthesize them into historical sequence.38

Through his studies on both Jesus and Paul, Locke was especially interested in plainness, facticity, and history. Much of this same spirit he bequeathed to his heirs in the Restoration Movement.


35 See Alexander Campbell, “Foundation of Christian Union,” in Christianity Restored, 106-120. See also the perceptive observations of Ron Highfield in his paper prepared for the 1990 Christian Scholars Conference held at Abilene Christian University, “Hermeneutical Fragments: Why We Do Not Need a New Hermeneutic,” 1-3.

36 Campbell, Christianity Restored, 22.

37 Ibid., 15.

The specific historical route of Alexander Campbell for his "Principles of Interpretation" was the hermeneutics of J. A. Ernesti, translated and elaborated upon by Moses Stuart (1780-1852), the foremost American biblical scholar of his day. It was not atypical in the early nineteenth century for a translator to expand upon the work he translated and this Stuart did. It is the same Ernesti-Stuart tradition which serves as the progenitor of standard American hermeneutic books such as that of F. Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (1883). Terry taught at Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois, beginning in 1884. The work by Ernesti picks up on most of the reformation themes. He declared that the Scripture must be interpreted grammatically by the same rules applied to other texts.

Consequently, the observation of word usage is the special task of the grammarians, whose art is directed for the most part and chiefly to careful determination of what meaning a definite word had at a definite time, the usage of the word by a definite author, and, finally, the relation of the word to a definite form of speech. Therefore the literal sense is also called the grammatical, for the word *literalis* is the Latin translation of *grammaticus* [Greek, "knowing one's letters"]. No less properly it is also called the historical [sense], for it is contained, as other [historical] facts, in testimonies and authoritative records.

Therefore, apart from the grammatical sense there is none other, and this the grammarians transmit. For those who, on the one hand, assume a grammatical and, on the other, a logical sense have not comprehended the role of the grammatical sense; and [this] sense [furthermore] is not changed by any use whatever of any discipline, or in the investigation of the sense of things. Otherwise, it would be no less manifold than the things themselves.

The standard approach in hermeneutics texts of the nineteenth century was to reject mystical and allegorical interpretation in favor of the literal. The rest of the hermeneutic in essence contained instruction for literary analysis and drew heavily upon classical rhetoric and its heirs. It is no accident that the earlier hermeneutic books were produced by persons with training in rhetoric. Ernesti himself was a professor of rhetoric in Leipzig before being granted a professorship in theology and New Testament. The work of

---

39 For details see page 34.
42 His books on rhetoric were *Initia rhetorica* (Lipsiae: C. Fritsch, 1784), *Lexicon Technologie Graecorum Rhetoricae* (Lipsiae: C. Fritsch, 1795), and *Lexicon technologiae Latinorum rhetoricae* (Lipsiae: C. Fritsch, 1797).
Mickelsen in this century follows the traditional pattern. His first section is on basic principles, with a short history of interpretation. The second part, on general hermeneutics, concerns historical and cultural perspectives. The third part is on special hermeneutics and discusses the various literary types and rhetorical figures. Mickelsen may have adapted these characteristics more to the Scriptures than some in the tradition. He closed with advice on the actual practice of hermeneutics.

**Restoration Hermeneutics**

In the current climate of Churches of Christ the impression prevails that hermeneutics revolves totally around commands, examples, and necessary inferences. Our own history, however, reveals at least three major aspects: (1) the command, example, and necessary inference formula, (2) the dispensations, and (3) the grammatico-historical aspects. It was this order in which the three surfaced in the Thomas and Alexander Campbell movement. It is interesting that the same hermeneutical concerns were not so evident in the early days of the O'Kelly, Jones-Smith, and Stone movements. These movements, molded in the awakening traditions, were less influenced by the rational rigors of British empiricism. These leaders were also less interested in detailed ecclesiastical blueprints. The experience of conversion and emotional worship took priority over reason.

The command, example and necessary inference formula

We have already seen that commands, examples, and inferences joined together for ascertaining primitive patterns were clearly set out by Edward Dering as early as 1572. It appears that this formula developed in those churches especially interested in patterns of polity, that is, the Zwinglian reform, the Scottish Presbyterians, the English Puritans, and the various British independents. I am not aware that the formula expressed in this manner preceded the sixteenth century, though it would be well to examine earlier reform movements such as those of Wyclif and Hus. The writings or perspectives of various Anabaptist, Socinian, and Unitarian groups should also be examined.

The formula appears, as if already widely accepted, in the earliest printed document of the Campbell movement, that is, the *Declaration and Address* of 1809. “Express terms and approved precedents” were granted without question, but inferences were suspect. Thomas Campbell conceded

---

43 See, however, the “Witnesses’ Address” of the “Last Will and Testament” in Charles A. Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Chicago: Christian Century Company, 1904) 24, “neither precept nor example.”
that inferences may be useful, but he rejected their ecclesiastical role on the ground that they divide believers.

Therefore, no such deductions can be made terms of communion, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the Church. Hence, it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession.\[44\]

This formula has not had the influence in the life of local congregations of Churches of Christ that was envisioned by its proponents. Its chief employment has been in religious debates and in polemical writings in the journals. In regard to church rule the formula has been applied as follows. The officers of the church authorized by the NT are elders and deacons. A command to appoint elders may be found in Paul's instruction to Titus, "Appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). Several examples exist of elders in the NT, for example, Acts 11:30, and 14:23. Sometimes, however, an alternative term is employed, that is, bishop. According to the argument, we do not know explicitly from the NT that these terms designate the same office. We know this, however, from inference. In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul addressed the "bishops and deacons" (Phil 1:1). In Acts 14:23 the officers appointed in each church were "elders." Therefore "bishop" and "elder" must be the same office. One puzzle is that in Titus 1:5 the command is to appoint elders in every town. The question arises as to what happens if more than one congregation exists in a town. By inference, so the argument goes, we know that each church in a town is to have elders because of the Acts example of Paul appointing elders in every church. Another puzzle is that in some of Paul's letters he does not address these important leaders, that is, elders—for example, Romans, Galatians and 1 Corinthians. According to some scholars, these churches did not have elders. But by inference, so our polemicists have argued, these churches had elders, since Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23).

The tripartite formula has had a checkered career in its five-hundred-year history. It has largely been employed by churches intent on restoring overt ecclesiological patterns, but less so by those restoring lifestyle (such Anabaptists as the Amish) and the charismatic gifts (Pentecostals). In churches in which it once was important (for example, the Congregationalists, originally Puritans, and the Presbyterians), churchmen have lost even a memory of the formula. But, then, they are no longer committed to restoring the ordinances of the primitive church.

In Churches of Christ, over the past twenty years, various writers have pointed out the inconsistent manner in which the tripartite formula has been

\[44\] "Declaration and Address," in Young, Historical Documents, 110.
The tripartite formula was useful in our movement as long as restoring the NT church was our driving dynamic. But more recently we have been inspired by discipleship, servanthood, family, and praise. Obvious manifestations of this change are concretized in workshops, films, and electronically reproduced song collections. Critics of changes away from the older driving mission of our churches have attacked revisions in hermeneutics under the appellation "The New Hermeneutic." This is a pejorative designation since whatever the "new hermeneutic" may be in Churches of Christ, it has little affinity with the German new hermeneutics of the 1950s and 1960s. The task of that movement was how to relate the Christian faith to a post-Christian world. The answer of Bultmann and his admirers was that existentialism or phenomenology, especially that of Martin Heidegger, provided the foot in the door. The "new hermeneutic" in the Churches of Christ, as I have argued elsewhere, is basically a paradigm shift in our driving force. It has little to do with accepting a philosophical or theological position from which to relate to the culture of our time. Our leaders who wish to depart from our traditional hermeneutics have done so on the ground that the Christian faith is larger than the limited parameters of the church and the means of salvation. But they have been faithful to the propensities of the fathers in that they, too, have no interest in embracing a philosophical or theological foundation from which to make the gospel appealing.

The dispensations

Our tripartite dispensationalism has likewise played a decisive role in the manner in which we have interpreted the Scriptures. This formula was

---


47 The most recent critic of the "new hermeneutic" is F. LaGard Smith, The Cultural Church Winds of Change and the Call for a "New Hermeneutic" (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1992). Smith admits some merit in the reevaluation, but, on balance, he is disturbed by the changed perspective.

48 In the past half century we have obviously made this distinction in sermons on rightly dividing the word. But in the intramural battles of the 1950s this formulation dropped out of our explicit hermeneutic, since it was assumed by all the controversialists. So J. D. Thomas does not mention the matter in We Be Brethren (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1958), though he does in Heaven's Window, an effort at total hermeneutics, mostly by way of passing (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1974) 93.
first explicit in our literature in Alexander Campbell’s famous 1816 “Sermon on the Law” presented to the Redstone Baptist Association.\footnote{Alexander Campbell, “Sermon on the Law” in Young, \textit{Historical Documents}, 252.} Even before that, however, the authority of the New Testament over against the Old for reestablishing the primitive church was implicit. In the “Declaration and Address” Thomas Campbell wrote:

The New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.\footnote{Young, 109.}

In our movement ever since, we have been adamant against employing the OT to support any Christian practice. The address as presented to the Redstone Baptist Association was denounced by leaders who realized, if somewhat later, the ramifications and the departures from the typical Baptist attitude toward the OT. In fact, this relegation of the OT to a non-authorial status ran counter to the reformed positions of Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and the Puritans. Luther, in contrast, found employment for the OT, but as a counterpoint to the gospel. Alexander Campbell rejected even Luther’s proposal, commenting pointedly: “There is no necessity for preaching the law in order to prepare men for receiving the gospel.”\footnote{Alexander Campbell, “Sermon on the Law,” Young, 263.}

Campbell’s perspective on the three dispensations was based on the federal or covenantal theology of the Dutch scholars, especially Grotius (1583-1645) and Cocceius (1603-1669).\footnote{See especially Robert Frederick West, \textit{Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion}. Also in regard to the role of these scholars in biblical criticism, Simon J. De Vries, \textit{Bible and Theology in the Netherlands} (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 5ff.} Cocceius held that, with the failure of the covenant of works with Adam, God instituted the covenant of grace in three dispensations—the Patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the Christian.\footnote{“Johannes Cocceius,” John McClintock and James Strong, \textit{Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature} (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 5ff.} This dispensationalism not only established a groundwork for what is authoritative in each dispensation, but it also provided a means of relating the dispensations. In effect, it became a biblical theology, featuring promise and fulfillment. An example of a “biblical theology” so organized in the Restoration Movement was Robert Milligan’s often reprinted \textit{An Exposition and Defence of the Scheme of Redemption}.\footnote{Robert Milligan, \textit{An Exposition and Defence of the Scheme of Redemption} (Cincinnati: Carroll Publishing, 1868).}
American dispensational counterparts may be located in various other quarters, for example, in the lectures of David Tappan (1752-1803), a moderate Calvinist, Hollis Professor at Harvard, on Jewish history.55 Furthermore, Grotius emphasized the need to understand the OT in its own right rather than whatever light it might shed on Christology. As David Steinmetz noted, this relegation of the OT to its own context delimits its use by Christians.56 Furthermore, the Campbells were no doubt influenced by Locke and heirs, who sought primarily to root Christianity in the Gospels and in a secondary manner in the letters of Paul. The Campbells, in contrast, focused upon Acts and the epistles rather than the Gospels.57

In the past twenty years the OT has been rediscovered in our movement, in part, because of certain influential OT scholars such as John Willis, J. J. M. Roberts, and Rick Marrs. While we have rethought the significance of the OT for Christian faith and life, the inappropriateness of the OT for determining the structures and worship of the church remains essentially intact. We share rediscovery of the OT with other traditions, perhaps especially Lutherans, who in the past assigned a negligible, if not negative role to the OT.58

The grammatico-historical aspects

Of the three aspects of hermeneutics, Alexander Campbell addressed in detail the traditional principles of evangelical Christian interpretation last. He set these forth in Millennial Harbinger Extras in the early 1830s and published them together in 1835 in a book titled Christianity Restored. He set out his purpose as “the principles by which the Christian institution may be certainly and satisfactorily ascertained.”59

We have already noted that Campbell believed that the “scientific,” that is, systematic interpretation of the Scripture should proceed according to the same rules for understanding any other document. In that regard, though his “Principles” were sketchy, they were abreast of the best hermeneutic and exegetical principles of the time, especially of the tradition of Ernesti as mediated through Moses Stuart, the foremost American biblical scholar of the

55 David Tappan, Lectures on Jewish Antiquities; Delivered at Harvard University in Cambridge, A.D. 1802 & 1803 (Cambridge: W. Hilliard and E. Lincoln, 1807).
59 Campbell, Christianity Restored, 13.
first half of the nineteenth century. Campbell cites the work of Stuart and others with some frequency. He was knowledgeable in regard to the best grammatico-historical approaches in the early nineteenth century especially British-American but also German.

It seems appropriate here to quote at some length from Moses Stuart's translation of Ernesti's *Elements of Interpretation*.

**Definitions.** The art of interpretation is the art of teaching what is the meaning of another's language, or that faculty which enables us to attach to another's language the same meaning as the author himself attached to it. (Morus, p. 6. III)

It is better to define interpretation as an act than as an art. To interpret a passage is to shew or declare the sense of it, or simply to explain the meaning, i.e. the meaning which the author himself attached to it. Any other meaning than this, can never be called, with propriety, the meaning of the author.

Interpretation, strictly speaking, may be called grammatical, when the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences is made out from the usus loquendi and context; historical, when the meaning is illustrated and confirmed by historical arguments, which serve to evince that no other sense can be put upon the passage, whether you regard the nature of the subject, or the genius and manner of the writer.

It is interesting that Campbell's 1835 "Principles" were not carefully coordinated with dispensationalism, but especially not with the commands, example, and necessary inferences formula. The latter is not mentioned in the "Principles of Interpretation" or the seven general rules at the end, though the dispensational aspect receives passing mention. The same obtains in later books on hermeneutics in our movement, notably those of Lamar, Dungan, and J. D. Thomas. A student at Freed-Hardeman University raised a perceptive question when he asked me what the "new hermeneutic" controversy regarding command, examples, and necessary inferences was all about.

---

60 *Christianity Restored*, 26, 53, 95, 96.


about since all the classic books on hermeneutics in our movement did not
discuss this tripartite formula.

Since the time of Campbell, the grammatico-historical interpretation of
the Scripture has developed dramatically, first in Germany, then early in this
century in Great Britain, and since the 1970s, especially in the United States. Gary Collier has done yeoman’s service in identifying the manner in which scholars in the Churches of Christ have entered contemporary international biblical scholarship, with a few receiving widespread acclaim. He delineated a separate category for these scholars: “The Historical/Contextual School.” Collier ended by bemoaning the fact that these scholars have only cursorily addressed the manner in which their work relates to our old hermeneutic or to the interpretation of the Scriptures in the churches.

Reflections on Our Hermeneutics in Practice

The three interpretive strategies have had significance throughout the
years of the movement, varying considerably from context to context and
from decade to decade. These are the theoretical, self-conscious rules through
which we have interpreted the Scriptures. But I’m not so sure that these
declarations are always the most helpful in depicting Churches of Christ
hermeneutics in actual practice. I think inference is the major means through
which we interpret Scripture and determine what is authorized, but I’m not so
sure that the usual description of the manner in which we infer the teachings
of the Scripture is the most descriptive. Therefore I propose to launch out into
uncharted territory to see if I can depict in a more precise and helpful way
what we have actually done.

Since our central commitments relate to ecclesiology and soteriology, it
is important to determine how we have arrived biblically at our specific views
in each case. The modus operandi is inference, that is, moving from a
commonly accepted premise based upon a key statement in an especially
selected Scripture so as to encompass another selected text. For example, the
affirmation that God does not hear the prayer of the unbaptized, because of
John 9:31, “God does not listen to a sinner.” The approach is not so much
inductive, as deductive. A point of view, a particular vision of Christian
realities, precedes the texts and determines how they are to be interpreted. So
how have we developed our perspectives from the Scriptures?

65 Gary D. Collier, “Bringing the Word to Life: An Assessment of the Hermeneutical Impasse in Churches of Christ; Part I: The Rationalist/Inductive School; Part II: The Historical/Contextual School.” These papers have not as yet been printed in this form but are available in electronically produced copy from the Religion Division, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263. A truncated version is Collier’s “Bringing the Word to Life: Biblical Hermeneutics in Churches of Christ,” Christian Studies 11 (1990) 18-40.
In one sense christology is foundational for Churches of Christ theology. It is clear for both Campbell and Scott that Christ is the beginning point. But in what sense? He is the beginning point because, according to a favorite Churches of Christ text, “Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior” (Eph 5:24). He is foundational because he is the rock upon which the church is built (Matt 16:18). Christ died for the church. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:18-20)

Christ is the head of the church, that is, its lawgiver. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). But once it is clear that Christ died for the church and is the lawgiver in it, then Christ is relegated backstage and the church moves up front center. Neither Campbell nor Scott concerned himself much with the word and work of the earthly Jesus. Nor have preachers in the Churches of Christ since. It is interesting that of all those in Churches of Christ who have completed doctorates in the NT in the past fifty years (perhaps as many as fifty), few have worked in the Gospels, and even those have failed to focus on the character, ethics, or teaching of Jesus. The Gospels, however, have been discovered in the churches in the past thirty years, providing one impetus for a hermeneutical shift.

As head, lawgiver, and savior for the church, Christ is an authorial figure. He is the one imposing upon the church its exterior blueprint. The church is a glorious body because the structural features have been provided by Christ himself. He “gave himself up for her . . . so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). This statement, I think, focuses upon the believers in the church. They are without spot or wrinkle because they have been purified by the death of Christ. In Churches of Christ this text has been advanced as proof that the structural features of the church are perfect because they were set forth by Christ himself. The church in conception and blueprint is perfect because God, through Christ, generated them. Believers, even though washed and forgiven, are nevertheless blemished, so that the church proclaimed is always the perfect plan of God, never the redeemed saints, because none of the latter are perfect. In the past thirty years another shift is obvious. The grace of God, rather than the works of the believers, has surfaced more and more so that in several

---

66 This is also apparent in the works of Brownlow, who discussed Christ as the founder of the church (Why I Am a Member, 7-12) and Cogdill, who identified the church as the body of Christ (Church, 8-10).
quarters now the church is more and more depicted as a family of loving and forgiven people of God. The structural church remains, but its privileged position has receded into the background. Once again, a theological and concomitant hermeneutical shift has occurred.

The polity of such a blueprint church may now be appraised. Christ is the lawgiver for the church, and therefore no group (association, convention, hierarchy) may assemble to make rules or provide guidelines for the church. Too, the church has its authorial figures—elders and deacons. But they do not determine laws or guidelines for the church. They continually examine the blueprints provided by Christ so as to replicate as faithfully as possible those structures he gave to the body over which they rule. There is a brotherhood of the Churches of Christ, and one is to love the brotherhood. The brotherhood is never defined structurally, but it is the church universal, for which Christ did not legislate a constitution. The glorious church without spot or blemish is, therefore, the individual congregation which is faithful in replicating the pattern. In an understanding of the history of Christianity for Churches of Christ leaders, apostasy and the need for restoration always occur because of a departure from the church blueprint provided by Christ. The apostasy is not secularity, immorality, indifference to the spirit, or a cold, unfeeling regard for the savior, but a concrete deviation from the perfect pattern of the individual congregation. Associations and conventions—for whatever justification gathered—even if only for mutual encouragement, are always suspect, because in Christian history the departures from the faith, that is, the changes in the structures of the church, have always come about through such supra church gatherings. Now that the model for the church has changed from a structural blueprint to family, Churches of Christ members still retain the shell of the older polity, but are not as clear as they once were as to why it is crucial. The elders or other leaders of the church have become more parental types who serve as models for life, rather than as skilled blueprint readers.

In the 1930s when Churches of Christ members perceived themselves outsiders and less involved in culture, the exalted role of the church was shown in the demand for undivided loyalty to the church. A text cited to inculcate this loyalty was Eph 1:22, “And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” If Christ’s commitment is unlimited, then the loyalty of members to the church should also be unlimited. Such meant that one should contribute money only to the church so that the church will get the glory. Contributing money to the Red Cross or Boy Scouts was to glorify those organizations and not the church. To spend time in a service club involved divided loyalty. One should rather commit that time to church work. After World War II, as members and churches moved across the tracks and became more culturally assimilated, reasons were found for community
involvement. For example, it was appropriate for preachers to belong to service clubs since there they had contact with individuals who might be won to the church, or to Christ, if one prefers, but in Churches of Christ theology being in Christ and in the church is one and the same.

In regard to soteriology, Churches of Christ members have a relationship with Christ by being in the church. They are saved because they have been baptized into the body, into the church. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). Christ died for the church. His blood is therefore available only in the church, into which the believer is baptized. The entry into the church is not determined by any religious leader, any eldership, or any convention. God himself adds baptized believers to the church. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). An eldership may determine whether a person has views sound enough to participate in the activities of the church, but they cannot decide whether one is in the church, in the case that one has been immersed for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Because of the practice of other groups out of which restorationists came, letters of transfer from one church to another sometimes showed up in the 1930s, but the practice has gradually been abandoned for the theological reason that the congregation does not put anyone in the church. God puts people in the church. So a letter from men guarantees nothing. Being saved and being a member of the church are therefore one and the same. In Churches of Christ if one wishes to know the status of a person in the community, the question is never Is she saved? Is she born again? Is she a Christian? The question is Is she a member of the church?

Christ is the savior of the church. The acquisition of Christ as savior has nothing to do with a warm, personal encounter with Christ. It has little to do with a heart warmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the risen Lord. It has to do with obedience to the commands of the one who is the head of the church. Christ is the authorial figure for the church. He is not available as a loving father figure. Changes have occurred, however, in Churches of Christ. If the church is a family rather than a blueprint, then it possesses a loving father rather than a harsh judge who spends all his time pouring over the law. Once again a hermeneutical shift has resulted.

The ecclesiological and soteriological arguments I have set forth are not as detailed as in preaching and teaching but are representative of typical presentations in the 1930s and 1940s. For the most part in teaching and preaching, rather than in polemics, the highlighting of commands and examples tended to be infrequent. What happened was explication and argument by inference. In the era when Bacon and induction were the key for unlocking the truth, inference was perceived to be inductive. In fact, in some matters inductive inference is crucial. It was crucial in Scott’s formulation:
faith, repentance, baptism/ forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. Scott claimed to have examined all the texts in which salvation was discussed and to have arrived at this formula. I did the same when I was a nineteen-year-old preacher: I isolated all the accounts of conversion in Acts, listed the ingredients of each, and came up with the steps of salvation, induced from including all the elements and striking out duplicates. Through this method I isolated the plan, already current in Churches of Christ preaching, the five-step plan of salvation: hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized. This approach has a history also among English dissenters in the century before Campbell. According to Conrad Wright, the New England liberals moving toward Unitarianism, learned not only new perspectives from English Arminians Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and John Taylor (1694-1761), but also a method for establishing positions from the Scriptures.

In the eighteenth century the liberals were wont to complain that the orthodox, and especially the evangelical revivalists, were constructing Christian doctrine on the basis of isolated verses of the Bible wrenched entirely out of context. Any kind of absurdity, they complained, can be demonstrated on the basis of isolated proof texts. The only proper method of determining what the Bible teaches on a given point is to collect all the relevant passages and compare them one with another. . . . The purpose in each case was to let obscure texts be clarified by clear and unambiguous ones; to allow the bold and unqualified language of one verse to be limited by the cautious phrasing of another; and to discover the inner logical consistency of the Scriptures which must pervade the whole, despite possible surface contradictions.67

Luther had already made such a proposal, but perhaps he had not imagined the rigor of application which Clarke and Taylor carried out. In most of their theologizing, however, my impression is that spokespersons in the Churches of Christ reason from Scripture in a deductive manner, arguing from one premise or hypothesis to another so as to arrive at a conclusion. In this regard the approach is much like that of science which, in practice, moves deductively from one hypothesis to another, rather than in a Baconian inductive manner.

Conclusions

I conclude by offering my observations on what has been called a hermeneutic crisis in our churches. This has come about, I believe, because of significant shifts in the driving forces of our churches. We are no longer committed in the same manner to the centrality of ecclesiology and soteriology, as I have shown in several specifics above. In some cases a vision that is more biblical and less dependent on the Swiss Reformation and

the Scottish Enlightenment has emerged. This has forced us, in turn, to reexamine our traditional hermeneutics. This has not been easy since our traditional hermeneutic is more obvious in our theory than in our practice.

In the past we have assumed that the church for which Christ died and for which he is lawgiver is basically one of correct structure in polity, worship, and discipline. Salvation results from entering that church through baptism and maintaining the structure sacrosanct. But now that vision has eroded. The question has arisen whether the church of the NT was a structure or an amicable, sharing, familylike, fellowshiping community. If the latter, then the older presumptions and strategies are called into question. The result has been considerable confusion, which worries some and leaves others without a formulated hermeneutic but probably finds the majority of church members indifferent. Members seem currently more interested in personal struggles than in reflection upon how to interpret the Scripture.

Our trained theologians have not been completely oblivious to the plight of our churches, though Collier is correct that the efforts to address the crisis have as yet been miniscule. Various hermeneutic models have been proposed. One reason is that we retain some disposition to think that scholars make the interpretation of the Scriptures too complicated. Some have argued since the beginning of our movement that mostly what is needed to interpret Scripture is common sense. J. D. Thomas argued this at some length in *Heaven's Window*. I think most of us who have seriously reflected on hermeneutics agree with what Ernesti wrote two centuries ago.

The science of interpretation in general is difficult because it requires much learning, judgment, and diligence. Not unfrequently, a felicity of talent or a more than usual degree of understanding is requisite to manage an exegetical inquiry with success. But the interpretation of the sacred books is, from various causes (a) still more difficult, as the general consent of the learned and the wonderful paucity (b) of good interpreters fully evince.68

Alexander Campbell heralded common sense; nevertheless he would have agreed with Ernesti that the interpretation of Scripture is difficult.

The most widespread recent proposal seems to be to conceive Scripture as a communication from a loving God—something like a love letter. This suggestion may supply a perspective, but no concrete guidelines from its major proponents have been forthcoming.69 Another proposal has been to take advantage of the current interest in narrativity. In this case, literary critics offer concrete guidelines, but no one as yet in the Churches of Christ

---

68 J. A. Ernesti, *Elements of Interpretation*, 1, 2.
69 These proposals have mostly come from leading preachers, for example, Mike Armour of Skillman Avenue, in Dallas; Lynn Anderson of Preston Road; and to a lesser degree Larry James of Richardson East (a Dallas suburb), and Rubel Shelly of Woodmont in Nashville.
has concretized such a hermeneutic.\textsuperscript{70} I myself think that a hermeneutic must revolve about, not so much the questions we wish to put to the Scriptures, but the questions the Scriptures wish to put to us. Biblical theologians are the ones who attempt to locate these questions through identifying the central issues of the biblical faith.\textsuperscript{71}