

TOWARDS THE NEW DISCIPLINE OF ETHNOHERMENEUTICS: QUESTIONING THE RELEVANCY OF WESTERN HERMENEUTICAL METHODS IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT¹

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I. SETTING THE STAGE

As we draw ever nearer to the close of this second millennium, I believe that it is appropriate to evaluate how much the gospel has, or has not, permeated the Asian context. After nearly two hundred years of missionary presence in many Asian countries and among many Asian peoples, it is proper to ask the difficult question, How far have we come?

Unfortunately, Protestant Christianity in Asia to date has not made nearly the same progress as it has over the past two centuries on the continents of Africa and South America. Yes, there are high points of Protestant missionary activity in Asia, like the fact that up to one-third of all South Koreans today are Protestant believers; or that in our own country, the Philippines, the number of churches has grown phenomenally from 4,000 in 1972 to over 30,000 today. But in Asia as a whole, especially in the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic Asian worlds, the gospel has barely scratched the surface. For example, after two hundred years of missionary presence in India, only two percent of the

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total population are Protestant. After fifty years in Japan, with an average of three thousand missionaries per year, less than one percent of the Japanese population are Christian. The bright spot is China where the Protestant church has grown tremendously since 1951, from less than one percent of the total population to perhaps some 10 percent, or more, of the population today. It needs to be noted, however, that this tremendous growth in China occurred *after* the missionary presence was eliminated. And more to the point for us gathered here today, the tremendous growth of the Protestant church in China during the last twenty years has occurred primarily through an informally trained lay movement that was far removed from the trappings of formal Bible college and/or seminary training.

We professional theological educators in Asia, Westerner and Asian alike, must seriously consider some of the above facts and our continuing role in theological education in the Asian context in light of such facts. Now all of the above is not to imply that the reason the gospel has done relatively well in Africa and South America, and correspondingly not so well in Asia, is because of faulty theological education. Far from it. Theological education is just one piece of the complex Asian puzzle, albeit a very crucial piece. Yet, at the same time all of us as theological educators must keep reminding ourselves that the overarching purpose of theological education is, at its very core, a missiological purpose: to help equip others to better understand and communicate the truths of the Bible to a lost and dying world. In light of this missiological purpose we must continually ask ourselves the following question: Are we adequately and aggressively training new generations of Asians to meet the challenges of bringing the gospel to the two billion Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims of Asia, or are we simply perpetuating old models of theological education that are perhaps increasingly irrelevant for meeting the realities facing gospel presentation in the Asian context?

While all theological disciplines must take this question very seriously, I believe that the discipline of hermeneutics is particularly vulnerable to scrutiny. Why do I say this? Because I believe that interpreting God's word for others, as well as training others to correctly interpret God's word, is the heart of theological education, whatever the individual discipline. Good Bible interpretation methods should result in the communication of the good news more effectively in any cultural context. Unfortunately, it would appear that the Bible

interpretation methods of the past two centuries have not adequately equipped the Protestant church for gospel presentation in our extremely culturally complex Asian situation. For example, my bookshelves are filled with dozens of books on Bible interpretation. Most were written during the past two decades. Of these dozens of books, however, few directly address the complexities of interpreting the Bible in multi-cultural contexts. To my way of thinking, this is a serious deficiency given the realities not only of the incredibly complex cultural stew that is Asia but throughout our increasingly multi-cultural world. This deficiency must be overcome if we are to adequately interpret the Bible in the Asian context. It is therefore imperative for us who are theological educators in Asia to be concerned with Bible interpretation done in multi-cultural situations.

Why *ethnohermeneutics*? How does this discipline differ from standard Bible interpretation? The word "hermeneutics" is simply the English rendition of the Greek words "to interpret" and "interpretation." Broadly speaking, hermeneutics deals with the principles used when interpreting any particular text, in our case the Bible. The principles that one chooses to use when interpreting the Bible constitutes a particular hermeneutical method. The discipline of hermeneutics has been more than adequately described by western scholars for western audiences, as evidenced by the plethora of books on Bible interpretation coming out of the West today. But such scholars have primarily reflected upon how a Christian interprets the Bible in his or her own cultural context. While this mono-cultural emphasis is clearly of infinite importance it does not go far enough in addressing the hermeneutical reality currently facing us here in Asia. As a result, there is a need to further explore hermeneutics directed specifically towards how to interpret the Bible from one culture to the next, from one people group, or ethnic group, to another. As a result, many of the old, cherished assumptions and ways of doing things, including how we interpret the Bible, need to be re-assessed. The discipline of ethnohermeneutics, then, is very relevant for anyone who ministers among people from different cultures, as theological educators, missionaries or pastors, in their own culture or in another.

As I have already mentioned, because of the multi-cultural diversity of the Asian scene, one of the assumptions that we must re-assess is our underlying interpretation methods. All of us who interpret the Bible have a tendency to take these underlying methods for granted.

In other words, whenever we interpret a particular biblical text we are inclined to interpret it in ways consistent with our personal theological heritage and training, our worldview, as it were. Dispensationalists, for example, will tend to interpret Bible passages from that perspective. Likewise, Calvinists will tend to interpret biblical texts from that particular point of view. Those trained under the tutelage of an A. Berkeley Mickelsen² will follow his interpretational admonitions while those trained under a Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.³ will emulate his approach. And so on. It goes without saying that the theological heritage and training we have received, both informally in church pews and Sunday School classes, and formally in Bible colleges and seminaries, greatly affects how we interpret the Bible for ourselves and for other people.⁴

There is nothing inherently wrong with this tendency. In fact, we need the stability that a particular hermeneutical method may bring to our Bible interpretation. However, what *is* wrong, or at the very least is inappropriate, is the assumption we usually make based upon this tendency: we *assume* that the Bible interpretation methods that work for us will also work for others. We seldom call into question the possibility that what works for us may *not* work for others. We simply take for granted that our way is the correct way. (I must hasten to add that this assumption is usually made innocently enough, though at times we consciously refuse to question it since we have so much invested in a particular method.) If it works for us why would we, or should we, question whether or not it will work for others?

Is it possible, however, that the Bible interpretation methods that work so well for us may *not* work as well for others? In light of the complexities of our multi-cultural Asian context it is imperative that we ask this question. We no longer have the luxury to assume that *our* way

² Cf. *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

³ Cf. *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

⁴ For an extended discussion on how our worldview presuppositions influence our Bible interpretation methodological choices see Larry W. Caldwell, "Receptor-Oriented Hermeneutics: Reclaiming the Hermeneutical methodologies of the New Testament for Bible Interpreters in the Twenty-First Century" (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1990), pp. 65-111.

is the *best* way or the *only* way.⁵ In fact, to make such an assumption today may make our biblical message irrelevant to the very people we are trying to influence with the truths of scripture. There may indeed be other valid interpretation methods available to us that will help the Bible come alive to those individuals who do not share our particular theological heritage, training or worldview. As a result, both western and non-western Christians facing the complexities of making the Bible relevant in the Asian context need to face this question head on.

II. THE NEED TO RE-EVALUATE THE UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY OF WESTERN HERMENEUTICAL METHODS IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS

I was confronted with the shortcomings of western hermeneutical methods when my wife and I first came to the Philippines in 1980. I was assigned to teach the Bible, theology, as well as the biblical languages, at my denomination's small Bible college located in a rural area on the northern tip of the island of Cebu. The school was isolated in every way: no electricity, no amenities whatsoever; nothing but some classrooms and dormitories located in the middle of a huge sugar cane field. Both the curriculum of this Bible college, as well as the content of most of the courses, were thoroughly western. I soon realized, however, that my Filipino students, obviously enough, were not western. Most were recent high school graduates from predominately poor, rural backgrounds. Though they knew English, many of the first-year students were hearing native English speakers (my wife and I) for the very first time. Nonetheless, in order to adequately understand the content of my courses these students had to think like I thought; in other words, they had to learn to think in western ways. The burden was on *them*, not on me. And everyone at that Bible college, westerner and non-westerner alike, thought nothing of this. It was simply taken for granted.

⁵ Saying this does not mean that I am advocating a pluralistic approach to interpreting the Bible. There are indeed "better" and "worse" interpretation methods. Evangelical scholars are under obligation to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods as well as to advocate the use of methods that are founded upon a high view of scripture as God's inspired word to humankind.

The more I taught the more frustrated I became. I gave my students assignments to read each night in the confines of the well-stocked school library (with all the books written in English). I did this even though I knew that, upon graduation, these financially poor students would receive a packet containing a dozen or so theological books (in English). For most this would be the extent of their access to any kind of theological library for the remainder of their lives. I knew that something was gravely wrong, but what was it? I eventually came to question the appropriateness of my western methods in this non-western context. Everything had been imported from the West, including most of the faculty, the books, and the curriculum. Everything that was taught relied heavily on the western trappings of book knowledge and library research.

No where was this more apparent to me than in my Interpreting the Bible class. Here I diligently taught my students the “proper” methods of Bible interpretation and they just as diligently wrote down and memorized everything I said. I taught them the finer points of Bible interpretation, from initial exegesis to sermon preparation. Several of my students did surprisingly well in class. Most struggled. And then, on the weekends, I would accompany them to their rural church field education assignments and listen to them preach in their churches. Here was my chance to observe them putting into practice what they had so painstakingly learned in my classroom. Or so I thought. In stark contrast to the exegetically correct and logically constructed three point sermons they had prepared in class, what I heard were sermons full of allegories and folksy illustrations, with a story-line that seemed to run circles around a loosely constructed main point. They were exegeting the Bible in ways that would earn them a failing grade in the classroom. I was one disconcerted hermeneutics professor! My frustrations, however, lessened over time as I began to realize that my students were making sense to their audience. They were communicating the truths of the Bible in ways that the people from their own rural culture were understanding. They were communicating the gospel. And they were doing so, for the most part, using non-western hermeneutical methods.

As a result of these Filipino classroom and out-of-classroom experiences, from that time nearly two decades ago until now, I have been actively seeking how best to interpret the Bible in multi-cultural situations. What I have discovered as a result of my quest is that the western hermeneutical methods in which I have been trained are indeed

good methods. Most of these western hermeneutical methods are centered upon historical criticism and the tools of the historical-critical approach. This approach stresses that a biblical passage must be understood in light of at least three factors: 1) the syntax of the words used; 2) the context in which the words are found; and 3) and the underlying historical setting behind the words.⁶ Bible interpreters who use historical criticism, for the most part, are conscientiously attempting to interpret what the Bible means for us today based upon what it first meant to audiences in its original historical setting. While the end results of western theologians may differ widely, most have genuinely attempted to make the biblical text as relevant for today as it was in its original historical context. I have been helped by historical criticism, both by the results of others who have used and taught historical-critical methods, as well as by my own use of these tools in my personal Bible study and my Bible teaching.

Hermeneutical methods based upon historical criticism do work. But are they necessarily the *only* ways to interpret the Bible, especially in a non-western culture? Before I first came to the Philippines I did not stop to think that perhaps the hermeneutical methods that work so well in my own cultural context may not work as well in another cultural context. It was only when I was confronted by individuals for whom historical-critical tools were oftentimes irrelevant and/or incomprehensible that I realized that historical-critical tools may not be the "be all and end all" of proper Bible study and that western methods are not necessarily universal. Furthermore, in a more practical vein, historical-critical based hermeneutical methods typically involve the use of expensive books and highly literate advanced training. The Asian world—a billion of whom live in oral cultures or who are only functionally literate—may not be prepared socially or economically for the use of western hermeneutical methods, especially those based upon historical criticism.⁷ We must, therefore, re-evaluate the

⁶ Historical criticism is also known as the grammatico-historical method. Both phrases, historical-critical and grammatico-historical, fall under the rubric of biblical criticism: "the study which attempts to determine the true meaning of the Bible by using techniques applied to other written documents" according to Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), p. 21.

⁷ This applies, as well, to the more radical hermenutical methods arising in the western world in the last two decades that attempt to discard historical

appropriateness of transporting oftentimes expensive and elitist hermeneutical methods into such cultures.

At this juncture let me share with you another story from my own life. For several years I “bought into” the historical-critical hermeneutical system. With four years of Greek and three years of Hebrew studies behind me I was teaching Hebrew at the seminary level in the United States immediately before my wife and I first came to the Philippines to teach at the small Bible college mentioned previously. Because of my excellent language background I was assigned to teach all the Greek courses at this college. The problem was, my desperately poor students didn’t own individual copies of the Greek New Testament! They had to check them out of the library for each class session. But most of the would-be graduates were required to have at least one year of Greek, with the biblical studies majors needing two years. So I was teaching introductory Greek and advanced Greek grammar and exegesis classes to students who did not even own a Greek New Testament, let alone any of the other resources necessary to really attempt good original language work. I, with my American problem-solving mindset, soon sent back to the United States for an air shipment of Greek New Testaments which I promptly gave to my students. I mimeographed off the essentials of New Testament Greek on a series of “the basics of everything you need to know to learn and use Greek” handouts. My students did well! Many, in fact, became quite proficient in using the Greek New Testament and by the end of the school year were exegeting with confidence and competence. I thought I had solved the problem. A few years later, however, I asked Rachel, my star student, how her Greek was coming along. “The rats ate my handouts” was her answer! She had not continued on in her Greek studies after graduation because her primary source was gone, thanks to the rats, and she could not afford the prohibitively expensive exegetical tools that she needed to carry on. I realized then that something was very wrong.

How many Rachels are there in the Christian world who have gone through arduous training in historical criticism and then do not have the resources to continue using the tools adequately after

criticism entirely. *All hermeneutical methods* must be evaluated in light of their appropriateness to a particular culture, whether or not the historical-critical tools are used. The problem, then, may not necessarily be the historical-critical tools themselves, but rather how they are implemented and taught.

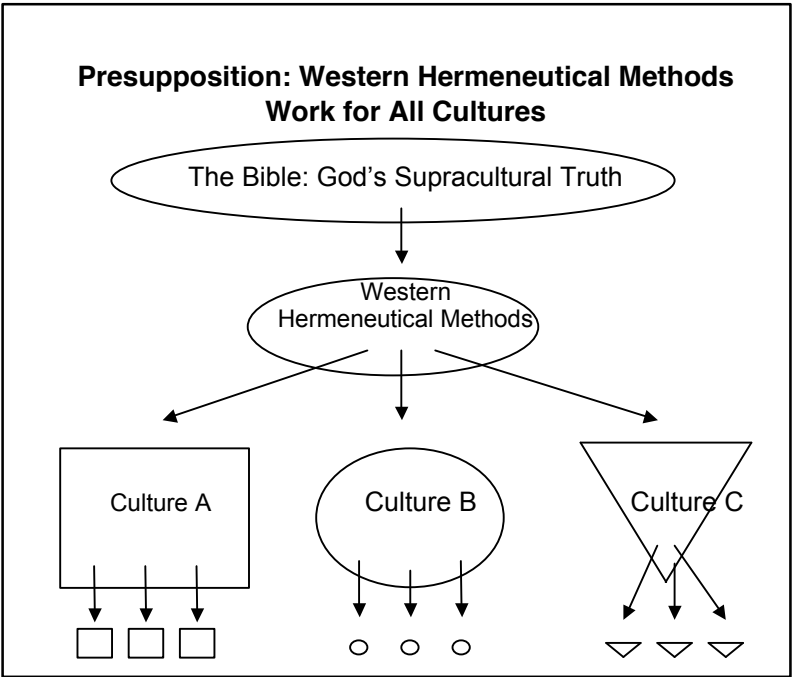
graduation because their access to a western library has ended? It is because of the Rachels of this world that I have been forced to rethink the way I, in my formal training, was taught how to study and interpret the Bible. Indeed, as a result of my encounter with Rachel I was forced to rethink how I taught hermeneutics. Consequently, for the almost twenty years now that I have been teaching hermeneutics I teach it without allowing my students, in both western and Asian contexts, to use any source other than the Bible itself. And it works! Yes, I still throw in careful handfuls of information based on the historical-critical tools, but in subtle ways that will help my students as they use the Bible as their only source.

All of us gathered together today need to rethink what theological training is truly appropriate in the Asian context. There is much talk of appropriate technology and of appropriate development; it is time we seriously talk as faculty of the member schools of Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST)-Philippines about appropriate hermeneutical methods in the Asian context. It all comes down to the question of "Who says?" *Who says* that historical criticism is appropriate for serious, and even scholarly, study of the Bible? *Who says* that it is important for seminary graduates to master historical criticism? *Who says* that the historical-critical tools, with all of their attendant baggage, are appropriate in an Asian context? Might it not be more appropriate to have the faculty of our Bible departments steeped in expertise on animism or on Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist approaches to scripture, and so on, so that we might indeed be more relevant for our own Asian context? I believe we need more biblical studies courses that will help our students come up with answers from the Bible concerning questions about *aswang*, ancestor worship and *anting-anting* than we do with having them answer questions on biblical criticism, Bultmann and black theology. Are we *really* training Asians for Asia? Or are we training Asians to exist in a western-dominated exegetical world that increasingly does not even work in the West? Again, perhaps it is time to look for other alternatives.

III. THE NEED TO USE RECEPTOR-ORIENTED HERMENEUTICAL METHODS

In this paper I am primarily critiquing western hermeneutical methods. I do so because these methods dominate Bible interpretation

worldwide, including Asia, especially for the evangelical Protestant spectrum of the church. Because of this dominance both western and non-western Bible college and seminary teachers, pastors, and missionaries have been heavily influenced by these western methods. Consequently, most western and non-western Bible interpreters believe that there are only a few limited ways to interpret the Bible, usually those that *they* have been taught. Not surprisingly these interpreters, in turn, have helped to perpetuate this dominance in both the western and non-western worlds. Many of these Bible interpreters have, consciously or unconsciously, unquestioningly presupposed that the supracultural



(Figure 1)

truths of the Bible are made known through a universal hermeneutical method (western) that works in all cultures, both western and non-western (Figure 1). It is my observation that this is the prevailing viewpoint of most of us Protestant theological educators here in the

Asian context, not only among the westerners but also among most of the Asians trained in the West or trained by westerners within Asia.

As a result of this underlying unquestioned presupposition western interpretation methods have literally been carried to the four corners of the world. But should these methods have gained such international acceptance? Are they really so universal? Putting the question differently, do the hermeneutical methods that seemingly work so well in the western world really work in the non-western world? Would it not be better if the one interpreting the Bible for others, as well as training others to interpret the Bible in, or for others from, another cultural context, do well to search for indigenous hermeneutical methods by which the biblical message can best be understood? Rather than pressing everyone to accept particular hermeneutical methods may it not be wiser to investigate the hermeneutical methods that each culture is already familiar with? In other words, is it not imperative for multi-cultural Bible interpreters to search for hermeneutical methods that are receptor-oriented? This is the heart of ethnohermeneutics, for ethnohermeneutics is Bible interpretation done in multi-cultural contexts, as far as possible using the dynamic hermeneutical methods already in place in the culture, with the primary goal being to interpret the Bible in ways that will be best understood by the receptor culture.

The basic premise underlying the entire discipline of ethnohermeneutics is this: God is at work in each culture drawing individuals from within each culture to Himself. This is a simple premise, to be sure, but one that has profound implications. Many evangelical Protestant theologians and Bible teachers, pastors and missionaries would agree with this premise. Knowing that this is how God works in the receptor culture, they would affirm the need to look for culturally sensitive ways to present the Bible. They would agree, in principle, that it is good to attempt to contextualize the message of the Bible in order to make it more receptor-oriented. Unfortunately, this sensitivity to the receptor's culture has not extended to exploring the best way to do hermeneutics within that culture. Instead it has been assumed that western hermeneutical methods, typically using the historical-critical tools, is sufficient for any culture. As a result, the following questions are seldom, if ever, asked by Bible interpreters:

- What are the hermeneutical method, or methods, found within the culture of the people among whom I am ministering; and,

- How can I possibly use this method(s) when I attempt to communicate the truths of the Bible to individuals in or from this culture?

What I am arguing for here is an acknowledgement that God not only works through culture, hence the need to communicate the truths of scripture in culturally relevant forms, but, correspondingly, that *God also works through the hermeneutical processes inherent in each culture.*

This, indeed, is modeled for us in the Bible itself, where the very roots of ethnohermeneutics are found. The New Testament writers, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, used their own culturally-relevant hermeneutical methods in communicating Old Testament truths to their particular audiences.⁸ As a result, the discipline of ethnohermeneutics places a renewed emphasis upon the New Testament's use of the Old Testament for the purpose of discovering some of the hermeneutical methods employed during the first century AD. By discovering these methods it can be shown that the hermeneutical milieu of that time period directly influenced the hermeneutical methods of the New Testament writers as they interpreted the Old Testament text for their various audiences. This implies that what the New Testament writers wrote is inspired, but *not* their specific hermeneutical methods. And this fact is terribly significant for all Bible interpreters today. Why? Because it means that no one hermeneutical method is inspired; each and every method simply emerges from its own unique hermeneutical milieu. The dominance of one particular method does not necessarily show God's favor or a Spirit-filled universal method. Rather, it shows that there were other factors that gave rise to its predominance.

Ethnohermeneutical methods are also found throughout church history. Consequently, the discipline of ethnohermeneutics places a renewed emphasis upon the history of Bible interpretation over the last two thousand years. A study of church history shows that a multiplicity of hermeneutical methods were used in Bible interpretation that arose directly from the hermeneutical milieu of the various time periods. Examining the hermeneutical methods of church history reinforces the

⁸ For extended examples of how the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament, see Caldwell, pp. 140-241.

fact that there is no one universal method. For example, allegory ruled hermeneutics for a thousand years. It arose out a cultural milieu that favored its use and, through a number of factors, was made the dominant hermeneutical method throughout Christendom. But most theologians today would agree that it was not an inspired method to be universally used in and by all cultures for all time. In the emerging hermeneutical milieu of the Renaissance and Reformation the allegorical method was increasingly ignored because different cultural factors were now at work. Rather than ridiculing allegory, as many do, we would do well to understand how it functioned within its hermeneutical milieu and how it helped to bring gospel truths to largely illiterate cultures; indeed, allegory may again prove to be an appropriate method for the non-reading masses of today.

Each hermeneutical method of the New Testament writers, as well as each method used throughout church history, was an *ethnohermeneutical* method. Each arose out of a specific time period and cultural framework. In other words, the various hermeneutical methods of the New Testament and of church history were culturally-relevant methods: they made sense both to the interpreters as well as to the receivers of the interpretation. During the past two millennia God, in His infinite wisdom and creativity, has chosen to work through the hermeneutical processes inherent in each time period to make His word clear and understandable. He used the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD to impart His inspired message through the New Testament writers. He did the same during the thousand years of the Middle Ages through allegory. To Americans in the twentieth century His word is made relevant through the hermeneutical methods of the twentieth century western world, including historical criticism. In like manner, He uses, or would like to use, Filipino hermeneutical methods to reach Filipino audiences, or Thai methods to reach Thai people, and so on. God uses the hermeneutical methods that are appropriate for each culture. Again, the Bible alone is inspired, not the hermeneutical methods that are used to interpret the Bible. As a result, both westerners and non-westerners who are tasked with communicating the truths of the Bible must seriously consider using hermeneutical methods appropriate for their target culture. To not do so may indicate a paternalism of significant magnitude.

Let me cite just one example from the Philippines that illustrates my point concerning paternalism. Most missionaries (including most

western theological educators) who have arrived in the Philippines in the last decade or so have had at least some initial training in cross-cultural studies, oftentimes including instruction in contextualization. However, although they are now better trained to *enter* Filipino culture, they have not necessarily acquired the skills necessary to *analyze* that culture. The reason for this is that most missionaries who come to the Philippines have little understanding of Filipino animism or Filipino folklore. Most of them have never studied Filipino Catholicism, let alone any tenets of the Catholic faith. And few first-year language and culture requirements include these topics. It is not surprising then that most missionaries in the Philippines are not aware of some of the basic hermeneutical systems underlying Filipino culture. Most missionaries simply assume that the outward western facade of Filipino culture presupposes that western hermeneutical methods will work in the culture. That assumption is seldom, if ever, questioned. Such an assumption, in my estimation, may work with educated Filipinos at the Bible school and seminary levels, but not necessarily at the level of the average Filipino, urban or rural. Such an assumption should be questioned to free the Filipino church from the oftentimes irrelevant theological tyranny of the western world. Filipinos must search for and use the hermeneutical methods from within their culture(s) which may help the Bible to have more relevance for their own people. And what is true for Filipinos is likewise true for other Asians.

IV. AN EXAMPLE OF ETHNOHERMENEUTICS FROM THE COTOBATO MANOBO

It is appropriate at this juncture to look at a specific example of ethnohermeneutics. Time constraints limit me to but one brief example of an indigenous Filipino hermeneutical method. This example comes from the Cotobato Manobo people of Mindanao.⁹ The Cotobato

⁹ There are very few examples of ethnohermeneutics being done today. The western hermeneutical method is too dominant worldwide. But there are some examples beginning to come to light, one of which is given here. One must keep in mind, however, that the understanding of the hermeneutical methods of this Cotobato Manobo culture is very much in process. This example has been adapted from a paper submitted by one of my former Asian Theological Seminary students, Mila Gultiano Cagape, "The Indigenous

Manobo have four major hermeneutical methods by which they interpret their own vast oral literature: *peligad* (figurative speech that is interpreted according to what it symbolizes); *tegudon* (the re-telling of historical doctrine from legends in the past that teach Cotobato Manobo what they should believe today); *telaki* (simple stories that end with an application designed to teach younger Cotobato Manobos the Manobo ideals and values in life); and *duyuy* (the expression of emotion through stylized singing). Let's look at a concise example of the *peligad* and how it may be a hermeneutical method that can be used by the Cotobato Manobo to interpret the Bible.

This example involves a newly arrived missionary to the Cotobato Manobo who heard the tribal leader speak the following words while in dialogue with another man:

My friend, a poor man from a far village, about eight mountains away, together with his family, has hiked the long mountain trail bringing with them a precious rice seedling. They are hoping to find a fertile field. Now, outside are the twenty-feet-that-walk waiting to be given as a gift if he is allowed to plant his precious rice seed in somebody's field. And if it is well with you and your family he wants to plant it in your fertile field.

When the missionary heard these words she did not know what to think. She became even more puzzled when the man joyously answered the leader:

I am privileged and honored to be chosen among the many fields. Yes, tell the poor man to do as he pleases and that I will gladly receive his gift. Expect us when the moon first appears in the eastern sky.

The missionary later found out that the conversation was about a wedding arrangement. The poor man was the father. The "rice seed" was the young man for whom the father wanted to find a wife and the "fertile field" was the young maiden who was the daughter of the man to whom the leader was talking. The "twenty-feet-that-walk" were five

Hermeneutical Methodology of the Cotobato Manobo: How Does It Apply to Bible Interpretation?" (an unpublished class paper for Ethnohermeneutics; Manila: Asian Theological Seminary, 1994), who has worked as a missionary among the Cotobato Manobo for many years.

horses (the bridal price). The receiving of the gift and the promised visit meant that the man accepted the proposal and would later bring the bride to the groom's village for the wedding.

This cross-cultural illustration from the Cotobato Manobo illustrates how, in the course of the conversation, the hermeneutical method of *peligad* was used: figurative speech which is dealt with according to what it symbolizes. In this case, all of the wedding arrangements were made without mentioning the specific details; the conversation was understood by the speaker and hearer because they both knew the meaning of the figurative speech. Awareness of the hermeneutical method of *peligad* made the conversation understandable to both speaker and hearer, but not to the missionary outsider who knew little about this method. The fact that both Manobos knew the hermeneutical rules made the ending of their conversation successful.

What literary genre from the Bible lends itself to the *peligad* hermeneutical method? The parables of Jesus come to mind. While western interpreters struggle for the main point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) for many of these parables, the *peligad* of the Cotobato Manobo helps the interpreter to arrive at basically the same exegetical conclusion. For example, in Mark 4:30-32 (cf. Matt 13:31-32), Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God and a mustard seed. Looking for the main point of comparison drives the interpreter to see a direct connection between the kingdom of God and the mustard seed: the growth from insignificant to significant. The *peligad*, when applied to this same parable, clearly brings out the interpretation by understanding the parable as figurative language that is dealt with according to what it symbolizes. In this parable Jesus, in speaking of the kingdom, uses the figurative language of the mustard seed from initial seed to fully-grown tree. The references to the small mustard seed and the large tree are figurative language that symbolize growth. The conclusion can then be made that this figurative language is symbolizing the kingdom and its growth. Using the method of *tertium comparationis* or the *peligad* helps the interpreter arrive at the same basic conclusion. In this case, the *peligad* is perhaps a more appropriate hermeneutical method for the Cotobato Manobo culture.

It is clear from this example that missionaries to the Cotobato Manobo need to take the time necessary to sufficiently understand the Cotobato Manobo culture and the hermeneutical methods found therein. With that kind of understanding the missionaries can then

encourage the Christian leaders among the Cotobato Manobo to use their own hermeneutical methods in relationship to the Bible, methods that they are already thoroughly familiar with, rather than only, or primarily, teaching them rudimentary western hermeneutical methods based upon historical criticism. And what is true for the Cotobato Manobo may be true for many other Asian peoples as well.

As was already mentioned, the *peligad* method is but one of several major Cotobato Manobo hermeneutical methods. Like the *peligad*, these other hermeneutical methods will not necessarily lend themselves to the interpretation of all of the various literary genre found in the Bible. However, at least several genre can be of benefit to the Cotobato Manobo through the use of their own hermeneutical methods. The *tegudon* may lend itself naturally to the interpretation of historical narratives in scripture. The *telaki* may help them interpret many of the stories of Jesus, especially his parables. The *duyuy* may aid in the understanding of the psalms and wisdom literature.

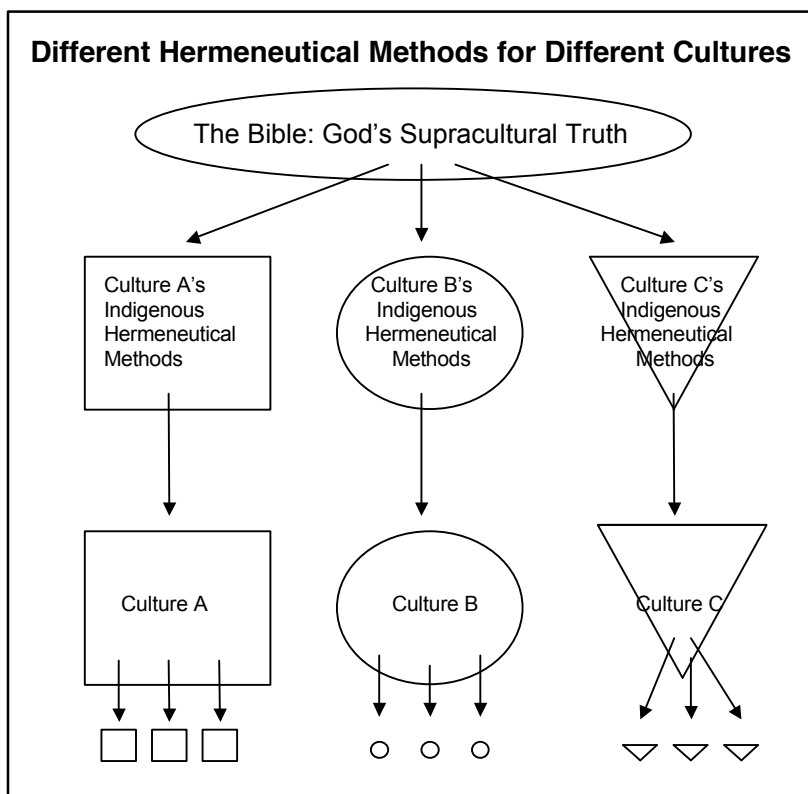
Several cautions are to be applied here. The stories of the Cotobato Manobo are sometimes rooted in fiction. Therefore, the cross-cultural Bible interpreter must make clear that the Bible is not fiction (fortunately not a difficult task in the Cotobato Manobo culture). The authority behind the one who uses the method may also pose a problem. For instance, a *tegudon* is said to be a revelation from God to the teller (usually the priest) through a dream. The western understanding of biblical revelation through the illumination of the biblical writers does not necessarily rule out dreams as a source of God's revelation. But the agency of dreams is not the only way by which God reveals himself. The Cotobato Manobo understanding of dreams as the only source of divine revelation must, of necessity, be expanded. Again, I must caution that we are only at the initial stage of developing authentic Cotobato Manobo ethnohermeneutical methods. The use of the different hermeneutical methods mentioned is just beginning to be implemented to various degrees by a few missionaries currently ministering among the Cotobato Manobo. It is a humble beginning, but a good one. It may be that the hermeneutical methods of the Cotobato Manobo Christians, as well as other non-western cultures like theirs, may one day have an important role to play in the hermeneutical task of the worldwide church.¹⁰

¹⁰ This example from the Cotobato Manobo reminds those of us, who are steeped in the study of written material, that oral cultures (including non-

Again, searching for receptor-oriented hermeneutical methods is the heart of ethnohermeneutics. Why? Because all cultures have hermeneutical methods that they use to interpret their own sacred traditions. As we have just seen, oral cultures similar to the Cotobato Manobo, have elaborate unwritten methods for interpreting their sacred records. Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim cultures, likewise, have hermeneutical methods that they employ when they interpret their sacred writings, some being as old, or older, than those found in the New Testament. Yet, how many missionaries and theological educators attempt to learn the oral traditions of tribal cultures and how these traditions are interpreted by the leaders of the tribe? How many devote time and effort in studying the underlying hermeneutical methods of Hindus who interpret the *Upanishads*, or of Muslims who interpret the Koran? Unfortunately, all too few. To the contrary, most of us have imported, or have used imported, hermeneutical methods that are generally foreign to the non-western culture in which we minister. western hermeneutical methods may perhaps make sense to most westerners, or to non-western cultures strongly influenced by western ideas and media.¹¹ But what we must realize is that western hermeneutical methods themselves are ethnohermeneutical methods for westerners. As such they may help westerners in interpreting the Bible but they may or may not be helpful for other non-western cultures and peoples. In the vast majority of non-western cultures around the world, and especially in Asia, there still remains the need to look for existing hermeneutical methods that may help to make the Bible more relevant in those cultures (Figure 2).

reading peoples in written cultures) differ in regards to how they interpret their traditions and literature. However, a great portion of the biblical text was first communicated orally. The words of Jesus and the writings found in the gospels especially lend themselves to a serious study of oral hermeneutical methodologies. Our western academic hermeneutical techniques still need to develop adequate oral theologies.

¹¹ Note that western methods may indeed be appropriate in certain non-western cultures where western influence has been strong and the people really do think in comparable western thought forms. Caution needs to be exercised here, however. For even in these non-western cultures that, on the surface, seem to be heavily influenced by western culture the underlying worldview assumptions may still be very non-western.



(Figure 2)

V. THE REFORMATION AND ETHNOHERMENEUTICS

Sola Scriptura! This was the rallying cry of the Reformers as they battled against the hierarchy and dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Sadly, this cry is seldom heard in Protestant circles today. This cry has instead been drowned out by a new hierarchy and dogma, much of it perpetuated in our training schools. Of course all of us as Protestants would quickly give intellectual assent to the idea of *sola Scriptura*, but in reality our teaching and our curricula belay the fact. "The Bible alone" is in our creeds but not necessarily in our practice. We have come to rely instead upon the hierarchy of the critical scholars and the

dogma of the historical-critical method. As a result, the cry of “the Bible alone” is seldom heard in our seminary classes.

Another rallying cry of the Reformers was the idea of the priesthood of the believer. The Reformers believed that the average Christian did not have to rely upon the Catholic priest to be his intermediary or to interpret the scriptures for him. This is the reason that one of the very first acts of the reformed Luther was to translate the Bible into German, and not into the high German of the intellectuals but rather into the low German of the common people. The Reformers truly believed that common ordinary people, because of a belief that all Christians were filled with the uncommon Holy Spirit, were able to understand God’s word and to interpret God’s world for themselves. Once again, today the idea of the priesthood of the believer has largely been lost as most Protestants rely upon their pastors and the scholars, who have had the necessary expertise and training, to interpret the Bible for them. And this is the model that is perpetuated in most of our seminary training.

These references to the Reformation, I believe, are an appropriate way to end this paper on the new discipline of ethnohermeneutics. How so? Precisely because I believe that today we need a new reformation in our approach to hermeneutics and Bible interpretation if we are to effectively reach the vast numbers of Asians who are still unreached with the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, I am convinced that we are not going to see large breakthroughs for the gospel among the Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim peoples of the Asian context unless we reform our understanding of how to interpret God’s word and how to teach others how to interpret God’s word. The dual concepts of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of the believer ripped across the European continent almost five centuries ago and forever changed the course of Christianity. I truly believe that a recapturing of the incredible ramifications of these two concepts can help change the course of Christianity in Asia in the third millennium. It is imperative that we theological educators in Asia equip Asians to be able to discover and apply the truths of the Bible to their daily lives without having to rely upon either the interpretational dogma of Protestant scholars and/or upon a scholarly priesthood trained to interpret the Bible for them.

Most of us in this room have had extensive training in Bible interpretation. We have had courses in Old and New Testament backgrounds, Greek and Hebrew, exegesis and so on. And I dare say

that not many of us have seriously questioned the need for all of this extensive training. We bought into the system. We merely assumed that it was the way we should learn to better interpret the Bible. But my point is that it is imperative that we do indeed question the appropriateness of such extensive training, not only for our own lives but for the lives of our students who will minister in the Asian context. Yes, some of us will need to be scholars, and some of our students will need to be scholars. And yes, our students will need to be aware of some of the complexities of the biblical text and consequently will need a basic familiarity with the tools that can help answer those complexities. But the bottom line question comes down to this: how many and how much? *How many* of our students need to be able to exegete a text in Greek and/or Hebrew? *How much* Greek and Hebrew needs to be required for ministry purposes? *How many* need to be able to write library-based papers comparing and contrasting the views of several commentators on a particular text? *How much* emphasis should be placed on the mastery of the viewpoints of professional scholars? Yes, a small percentage of our students will need to learn a lot of this information. But not everyone; in fact, not many at all. What *everyone* really needs, and this is crucially important in our Asian context, are the tools, resources and training that will equip them to relevantly interpret the Bible in the complicated context that is Asia. If we do not properly equip them, how will Asia truly be reached with the gospel?

These are difficult questions, to be sure. But I believe we must ask these questions if we truly desire to make our Asian students the most effective pastors, church workers, and missionaries that they can be, in Asia. Perhaps it is especially appropriate in light of the Centennial celebration year just ended that the member seminaries of AGST-Philippines re-examine their dependency upon western hermeneutical methods and look instead for Asian methods in our approaches to studying the Bible that truly meet the needs of our Asian students who will be doing ministry in the Asian context. I challenge the AGST-Philippines seminary faculty gathered here today, especially the national faculty, to seriously consider some of the issues I have raised. My overall desire in all of this, as I know is all of yours as well, is that we be as effective as we possibly can be in training Asians for Asia.

VI. CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with a few suggestions in relationship to ethnohermeneutics for seminary faculty in Asia.

6.1 For Biblical Studies Faculty

It is critical to help students better understand their own particular culture's hermeneutical methods and how to reconcile what they are learning in seminary with these methods that they may already be familiar with. As biblists seek to help the students better interpret the Bible for themselves and their churches and ministries, they need to help them also to wrestle with how to better interpret the Bible for the non-Christians that they will encounter, especially those non-Christians in the Asian contexts of animism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. It is necessary to require them to do some preliminary study on the hermeneutics found within these major religious systems and struggle mightily in trying to figure out how one attempting to interpret the Bible with non-Christians in such contexts can succeed.

6.2 For Systematic Theology Faculty

Systematic theologians, especially, need to understand the religious milieu of the various Asian audiences and how the theology of your students will relate to the non-Christians within that Asian milieu. This is not just for classes in apologetics; I am not talking about a theological defense of traditional Christian theology. I am talking about understanding the theological underpinnings of the average animist, or Buddhist, or Hindu, or Muslim, so that one can better equip his or her students to present the gospel in theologically relevant ways. It is, therefore, necessary to make sure that the theological systems that one teaches are not only appropriate to the "Asianness" of the Christian students but also relevant to the Asian religious systems in which they will be doing their theology.

6.3 For Practical Theology Faculty

By the very nature of the word "practical," one needs to help the students best apply the ethnohermeneutical principles that they have

learned to actual preaching, teaching, evangelism, and missions situations. If the biblical studies and systematic theology faculties have done their ethnohermeneutical homework properly, one can effectively build on what they have already begun. The emphasis needs to be on helping the students discover possible ethnohermeneutical methods in their target audiences, peoples and cultures so that they may preach and teach and evangelize and do missions work in the most relevant ways. Here failure to address some of the ethnohermeneutical issues, especially at the level of the receptor culture,¹² may result in responses to the gospel that might be less than what they could have been had the students known how to do the ethnohermeneutical field work necessary for their particular target audiences.

The new discipline of ethnohermeneutics gives us all much to think about. It raises a whole host of questions that have yet to be adequately answered. But the questions are indeed worth asking. And the answers that we find may help us to better bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the peoples of Asia in the third millennium.¹³

¹² For discussion involving the complexities of communicating the Bible message to receptors, see Larry W. Caldwell, "Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field," *Phronesis* 3/1 (1996), pp. 13-35 (15-24).

¹³ For more in-depth information on the discipline of ethnohermeneutics see my forthcoming book, *The Bible in Culture. Toward Ethnohermeneutics: Interpreting God's Word in Today's Multi-cultural World*.