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Table of Contents

- 3 **Adult Christian Education and Theological Hermeneutics**
By Charles Ringma
- 13 **Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field**
By Larry Caldwell
- 37 **The Relevance of a Liberation Theology Hermeneutic for Filipino Theology**
By Jenni Craig
- 53 **Themes in Old Testament Law (Part II)**
By Russell Stapleton
- 79 **Book Reviews**
Sent Out! Reclaiming the Spiritual Gift of Apostleship for Missionaries and Churches Today and Missions and You by Larry Caldwell
Reviewed by Neville Carr
Catch the Wind by Charles Ringma
Reviewed by Adonis Abelard Gorospe
Resist the Powers by Charles Ringma
Reviewed by Lee Wanak
- 88 **Abbreviations**

phronēsis 3 • 1 (1996) 13-35

BY

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Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field[♦]

Introduction

The newly arrived missionary to the Cotabato Manobo of Mindanao, Southern Philippines, 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

[♦]This article was originally presented as a paper at the 1995 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Chicago, Illinois. It has been completely rewritten for *Phronēsis*.

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

The persons involved in the dialogue made use of one of the four major hermeneutical methods by which the Cotabato Manobo interpret their own vast oral literature. They followed the familiar method of the *peligad*—figurative speech that is interpreted according to what it symbolizes. Without first understanding this hermeneutical method, it was impossible for the missionary to grasp what the conversation was all about.¹

Understanding the Third Horizon

Interpreting the Bible within one's own cultural situation is already difficult. To interpret the Bible in a cross-cultural situation is even more difficult. This is because cross-cultural interpretation involves interacting not only with the horizons of the text and the interpreter, but also with the horizon of the receptor culture. The complexities of the first two horizons, that of the text and the interpreter, are well-known to most western Bible interpreters, primarily through the works of A. C. Thiselton (1980 and 1992). The *third horizon*, that of the *receptor culture*, is less popular and less understood.

In recent years, most western Bible interpreters, drawing from the insights of anthropology, have seen the need to make biblical interpretations more receptor-oriented in any cultural context. This concept has been popularized by words like *contextualization* and *ethnotheology*. C. H. Kraft (1979) applies the dynamics of the cross-cultural communication process to theology done in cross-cultural situations. In doing this, he draws from dynamic-equivalence translation theory as applied to the Bible. As Kraft writes, a *dynamically equivalent translation* is one where

... translators ... attempt to produce translations that do not require the readers to supply ... additional understanding or expertise. They aim to produce translations that are so true to both the message of the source documents and the normal ways of expressing such a message in the receptor language

that the hearers/readers can, by employing their own interpretational reflexes, derive the proper meanings (Kraft 1979, 269).

In like manner, *dynamic-equivalence biblical theologizing* requires the same kind of sensitivity to the receptor culture. It attempts to produce a theology for the receptor culture that is both true to the message of the source document (the Bible) and true to the normal ways of expressing such a message in the receptor's culture. This is the task of *ethnotheology*. It aims to *develop culturally specific "ethnic" theologies that are both true to the Word of God and truly understood in the receptor culture*.²

The New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics

While the concepts of contextualization and ethnotheology have been very helpful to the cross-cultural communication of the gospel, they have not gone deep enough into the receptor culture. For those attempting to interpret the Bible in cross-cultural situations, *ethnohermeneutics* is needed. This is *Bible interpretation done in cross-cultural contexts, primarily using dynamically equivalent hermeneutical methodologies, with the primary goal of interpreting the Word of God in ways that will be understood by the receptor culture*.

Ethnohermeneutics takes the principles of contextualization and ethnotheology one step back. In fact, it is foundational to developing both relevant contextualizations and an understood ethnotheology. With *ethnotheology*, one seeks *dynamically equivalent theologies*. With *ethnohermeneutics*, one looks for *dynamically equivalent hermeneutical methodologies* already contained in the receptor culture. Unfortunately, most western cross-cultural Bible interpreters in the past have had little knowledge of, nor interest in, the hermeneutical methodologies already existing in the target culture.³

The Limitations of the Western Hermeneutical Methodology of the Two Horizons

An adequate concern for the receptor, and the receptor's culture, is precisely where western theologians in the past have not gone far enough. Thiselton is singled out for two reasons. First, his

perceptive ideas have vast influence in western theological circles. Second, his overall philosophical approach underlies many western hermeneutical presuppositions.

The Fusion of Two Horizons

The goal of Thiselton's hermeneutical model is the "fusion of horizons"—the first horizon of the biblical text and the second horizon of the modern interpreter. A. B. Mickelsen explains what this fusion entails:

By fusion of horizons Thiselton simply means that you cannot articulate: 1) Meaning in the original historical context; 2) Meaning in later contexts; 3) Meaning today in our times in a mere successive manner. You must see the *then* and *now* in terms of meaning to be conveyed in two diverse historical situations, how that meaning transcends both, and yet the degree and constancy of verifiable meaning (his stress) (Mickelsen 1990, 7).

The two horizon model appears plausible enough, until it is moved out of the realm of philosophy and placed under the more scrutinizing lens of anthropology. From the perspective of anthropology, it appears that what Thiselton is trying to fuse is not really two horizons. It is two cultures—the original Bible culture of the Old and New Testaments and the culture of the modern day interpreter.⁴

To put it differently, Thiselton's model attempts to merge the worldview of the individual author of a particular biblical text with the worldview of the modern day exegete who is examining that text. Theoretically, this will enable the modern interpreter to better communicate the results of his or her exegesis to a particular audience in his or her culture. As a result of this fusion, the interpreter's communication is hoped to be very similar to what the original Bible author meant when he addressed his words to his original audience.

A Critique of Thiselton's Two Horizons

There are some inherent weaknesses in Thiselton's model of the two horizons.

First, it assumes that the modern day interpreter can understand sufficiently the Original Bible Culture (OBC). Even with the stupendous insights of historical criticism over the

last two hundred years, to understand totally the OBC is almost an impossible task. Fig. 1 helps to illustrate the weakness of Thiselton's first assumption.

The biblical writer of the OBC (symbolized by the square box on the left) is assumed to have effectively communicated the normative truth of God to the audience of his day⁵ (represented by the solid lines going to the similarly shaped smaller square boxes). Now, in the "fusion of the two horizons" (represented by the solid line connecting the two boxes), Thiselton assumes that the interpreter in his or her *Interpreter's Culture (IC)* (represented by the square box on the right) will communicate

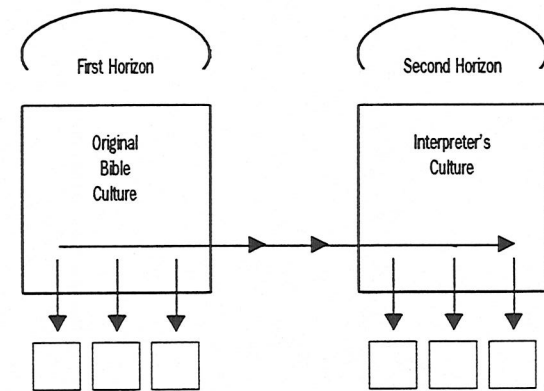


Fig. 1 Idealized Reality Concerning the Two Horizons

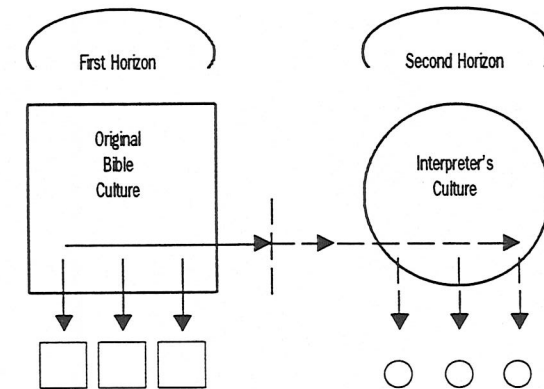


Fig. 2 Incomplete Reality Concerning the Two Horizons

the results of the process to his audience in a similar way (again represented by solid lines to the smaller square boxes).

Worldview theory, however, shows that the OBC and the IC are not identical. Fig. 2 reflects this reality. The OBC (square) and the IC (round) are represented with different shapes in order to reflect the real worldview differences between them. The "difference" depends on how far removed the IC is from the OBC. For example, in the case of western interpreters examining Old Testament texts on sacrifice, this difference will be highly accentuated. However, if a tribal group—one that still practices sacrificial rites—examines those same Old Testament texts, there will be less dissimilarity.

Because of these worldview differences there is always an incomplete understanding of the OBC by the interpreter in the IC. This incomplete understanding is represented in Fig. 2 by the slash mark and the dotted lines. In addition, the degree of incomplete understanding varies according to the biblical text being examined.

We can learn an infinite amount of information about the biblical writer and about his text and its particular context, but we can *never* recover with absolute certainty what he was originally thinking. We can affirm what we believe he was thinking—highly educated and informed affirmations to be sure—but mere affirmations nonetheless.⁶ Thiselton himself acknowledges that a *complete fusion* based upon his model is not possible:

The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter's own horizon is reshaped and enlarged. In one sense it is possible to speak, with Gadamer, of the goal of hermeneutics as a "fusion" of horizons. In practice, because the interpreter cannot leap out of the historical tradition to which he belongs, the two horizons can never become totally identical; at best they remain separate but close. Nevertheless the problem of historical distance and tradition should not give rise to undue pessimism. ... there is always progress *towards* a fusion of horizons (his stress) (Thiselton 1980, xix).

A more realistic understanding of the fusion process involving the aspect of "progress towards" is illustrated in Fig. 3.

In spite of the real worldview differences between the OBC and the IC (represented by the different geometrical shapes),

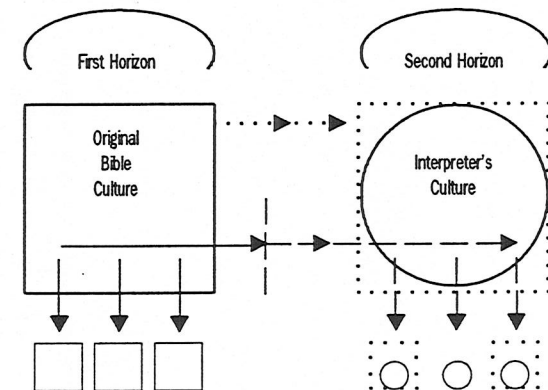


Fig. 3 Reality Concerning the Two Horizons

some *fusion* is still possible. The interpreter's own horizon can be indeed reshaped or enlarged. This phenomenon is reflected in Fig. 3 by the figure of the square (representing the OBC) being superimposed over the circle (representing the IC). However, the superimposed square is depicted in broken lines to show that complete understanding can never be achieved. As a result of this reshaping of the interpreter's worldview, many in the IC will indeed understand the Bible in the same way as those in the OBC (although not completely), as represented by the small squares in broken lines superimposed over the small circles. Yet there are those who will not understand and these are represented by the lone circle.

How does this reshaping of the interpreter's worldview happen? There are various factors. The use of the historical-critical tools and the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the life of the interpreter, as he or she studies the biblical text, are at least two of the factors.⁷ It is possible, then, for the interpreter to communicate the message of the OBC to his own culture-bound audience. However, even though this "progress towards" model is indeed helpful, the communication process is even more complicated. This leads us directly to Thiselton's next assumption.

Second, Thiselton's model assumes that the worldviews of the interpreter and that of his or her audience are essentially the same. This implies that the interpreter will be able to communicate to his or her audience with a minimum of difficulty. D. A. Carson⁸ explains this process:

If the second horizon of understanding is that of the reader or interpreter of Scripture, that horizon of understanding will be at least roughly similar to that of the interpreter's colleague in his own culture; so that when the interpreter has fused his own horizon of understanding with the first (that of the text) so effectively as to have facilitated a true transfer of meaning, he becomes capable of learning to think through the meaning of the text in his own language and cultural framework; and then it is a *relatively small step* to communicate these findings to his colleague (my stress) (Carson 1987, 251).

We have seen in our brief survey of receptor-oriented communication that this assumption ignores communication theory and the complexities involved in even monocultural communication. For even if the interpreter and the audience are of the same cultural background, the complexities of their different worldviews mean that it is unlikely for them to think the same or that the interpreted message will be communicated clearly. Fig. 4 illustrates the difference between the assumptions of the two horizons hermeneutical model as opposed to the reality of the hermeneutical situation.

In Fig. 4, the interpreter communicates his or her fused message to the receptor audience (broken lines downwards), which is made up of individuals with different worldviews (represented by the different shapes of the smaller symbols). This image illustrates more accurately the wide diversity found in most cultures today, even in the western world.

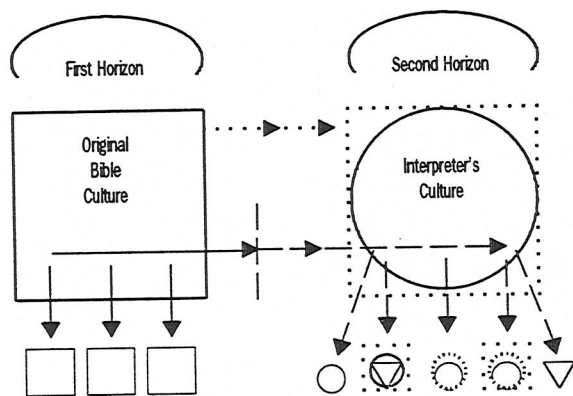


Fig. 4 A "Truer" Fusion of the Two Horizons

A portion of the audience will understand the interpreter's fused message (represented by the doubly superimposed square and circle on one of the smaller symbols). A few will not understand the OBC at all, but will to some degree grasp the IC (represented by the superimposed circle). Still others, despite the interpreter's best efforts, will not be able to understand and have their worldviews reshaped by the fused message (represented by the lack of any superimposed image).

Given the cultural complexities of this modern world, even western culture itself has a multiplicity of various cultural mixes in any given audience. How much more is this true in the non-western world! As a result, Thiselton's hermeneutical model is incomplete.

The Third Horizon in Cross-Cultural Interpretation

Despite its obvious shortcomings, Thiselton's influential two horizons model is still an excellent starting point. Unfortunately, his work is essentially limited to those who are primarily involved in monocultural interpretation. He fails to deal with problems involved in cross-cultural interpretation by neglecting a crucial third element in his model, the *third horizon*. Both western and non-western interpreters need to see that, in the cross-cultural interpretation process, there are not two but *three* horizons:

- the culture of the biblical text (Original Bible Culture);
- the culture of the interpreter (Interpreter's Culture); and
- the culture of the recipient (Receptor's Culture).

Carson explains the relationship between these three horizons:

If this interpreter now wishes to communicate the truth he has learned to a person of *another* culture, of course, he faces the third horizon, that of the "target" person or group. To communicate accurately the substance of what he has learned, the interpreter, now a witness or preacher of sorts, must fuse the horizon of his own understanding with that of the hearer—for a start, he must learn a new culture. The truth he wishes to convey must then be passed on in the words and actions and parameters of that language and culture (his stress) (Carson 1987, 251).

In a cross-cultural situation, the attempt to fuse the various horizons is extremely complicated. For communication to happen,

there should be the fusion of *three* horizons, a *tri-fusion* as it were. Once again, the burden for this tri-fusion rests upon the interpreter. Aside from fusing with the OBC, the interpreter must also try to fuse with the *Receptor's Culture* (RC).

Fig. 5 illustrates the ideal relationship of the three horizons for western interpreters:⁹

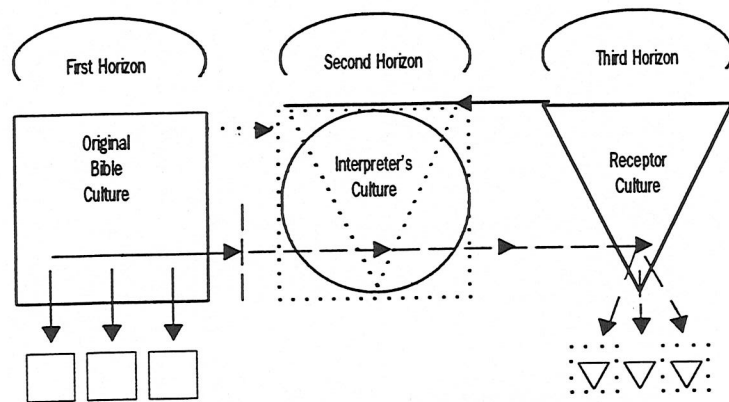


Fig. 5 The Three Horizons in Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: The Ideal

In Fig. 5, the shape of the OBC (square) and that of the RC (triangle) is superimposed on the shape of the IC (circle) in broken lines, to depict the *fusion of three horizons*. This tri-fusion in the IC is communicated through the RC (note the bottom broken line leading from the IC to the RC) to different individuals in that culture (represented by the small triangles). This results in the approximate understanding of the Bible's message by most of the individuals in the RC (represented by the square in broken lines superimposed on a few of the small triangles).

As can be seen from the diagram, the burden falls on the interpreter to fuse the three horizons and to communicate this fusion to the receptor's culture. In most cases, however, it is the receptor who receives the burden of modifying his or her worldview in order to understand the interpreter's message. Thus, what often happens is that the receptor has to enter into the culture of the interpreter and think more like the interpreter instead of the other way around.

Fig. 6 illustrates what often happens in real-life cross-cultural encounters.

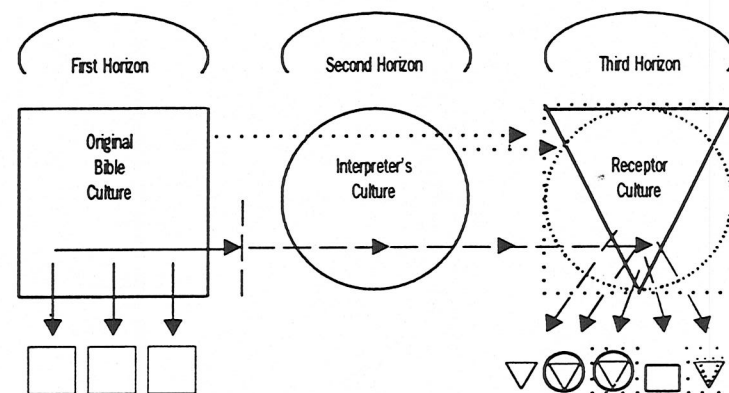


Fig. 6 The Three Horizons in Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: The Real

If the interpreter has done a good job in the tri-fusion process, some in the RC will at least approximately understand the interpreter's fused message (shown by the broken square and triangle superimposed on one of the smaller triangles). But if the interpreter has not done an adequate job at tri-fusion then two things may happen. First, the receptor may indeed understand what the interpreter is trying to say. However, the strength of the interpreter's own culture may overshadow the receptor's understanding to the extent that he or she may receive the message primarily in terms of the interpreter's own culture, instead of his or her own culture (represented by the superimposed square and circle on one of the triangles). Second, because of the strength of the interpreter's own culture, the receptor may miss the OBC entirely and understand everything in terms of the IC (depicted by the circle superimposed over the triangle). Or the receptor, especially those whose worldviews are in the minority in the receptor culture, may not understand the interpreter's message at all (symbolized by the rectangle).

Given the complex reality presented in Fig. 6, D.J. Hesselgrave sums up the crucial importance of understanding this "third horizon" in the text when he says:

... we have witnessed a growing sensitivity to the importance of contexts—those of the text, the interpreter and/or communicator, and the respondent. A heightened awareness of the importance of the horizons of both the text and the interpreter has had a profound effect on hermeneutics resulting

in, among other emphases, the "new hermeneutic." In similar fashion a heightened awareness of the importance of the horizons of both the communicator and the respondent has a profound effect on cross-cultural communication resulting in, among other emphases, the new concern for "contextualization." Contextualization in some form (not necessarily the word but the practice) is a natural outgrowth of taking increased cognizance of these horizons, particularly the "third horizon" or cultural matrix of respondents in the third world (Hesselgrave 1985, 454).

Few would criticize Hesselgrave's point concerning the third horizon and contextualization today. People are recognizing the need for cross-cultural Bible interpreters to contextualize the biblical message to better meet the needs of individuals in the third horizon. The emphasis on ethnotheology and dynamic-equivalence, over the past two decades, has made them more aware of the receptor audience. Thus, most western cross-cultural interpreters of the Bible are attempting to contextualize their message, generally with good results.

Unfortunately, most of these attempts are incomplete. A crucial element is missing from their cross-cultural hermeneutical methodology. The complexities of the tri-fusion nature of cross-cultural biblical interpretation demand that *culturally appropriate hermeneutical methodologies in the receptor culture* be utilized. This involves *communicating the truths of the Bible in that culture using a dynamically equivalent hermeneutical methodology*. This is what the discipline of ethnohermeneutics is all about.

Toward the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics

The Goals of Ethnohermeneutics

Ethnohermeneutics calls not only for the development of a receptor-oriented contextualization of the gospel message in the third horizon, but also for a *prior* attempt at *the construction of a truly receptor-oriented, dynamically equivalent hermeneutical model specifically designed for the third horizon*. Without sensitivity to the hermeneutical methodology of the third horizon, attempts at contextualization are still founded, methodologically speaking, upon the trappings of the second horizon. Using a truly receptor-oriented hermeneutical model

will help better to insure that the gospel message, from beginning to end, is actually contextualized.

There has been little work done in this area. C. R. Taber first rang the clarion call for the need for receptor-oriented hermeneutical models when he writes,

I ... wonder about the relationship of our whole approach to hermeneutics to other, also culturally conditioned views. For instance, the New Testament writers used a hermeneutic in relation to many Old Testament citations which was derived from rabbinic interpretation but was at the opposite pole from what we would consider legitimate today. In our terms, some of the Old Testament passages cited are clearly taken out of context, so that "X is the fulfillment of Y" may seem to us to mean scarcely more than "X reminds me of Y." In other words, we today radically reject rabbinical hermeneutics of the first century; on what grounds? I am aware of various attempts to get around this uncomfortable fact: that those writers were inspired, so that they could get away with associations of ideas that we would not permit in our students today; that there are two or more applications of these passages; and so on. But the fact of the matter is that what they considered proper hermeneutics was part and parcel of their cultural heritage, while what we consider proper hermeneutics and exegesis is part of our western cultural heritage. ...

When we begin to consider the potential use and/or abuse of Scripture in a host of different non-western cultures, a really disturbing question suggests itself: if we can do this—i.e. adopt a style of hermeneutics which differs radically from that used by biblical writers in their time—why can't people in other cultures do the same thing? Cognitive anthropology, studies in mythology, and other types of anthropological studies are beginning to highlight the fact of quite divergent hermeneutical modes in different cultures. What is to prevent Africans, Asians, and others from using their culturally conditioned methodologies in the interpretation of the biblical texts, just as we do? If we want to insist that our approach is universal, we must justify the claim: what is it that might give our particular style transcultural validity? Why should we be in a privileged position? (Taber 1978, 8-9)

Five years later, Taber reiterated his thoughts on this matter:

This ... raises with new urgency a trio of questions, the first two of which have been extensively, but not exhaustively, explored by Western biblical scholars, but the third of which has not been fully recognized, let alone dealt with: 1) Is a

single hermeneutical approach appropriate for every kind and type of biblical text? 2) Is a single hermeneutical approach appropriate for the use of the Bible in all biblical texts regardless of their respective differences of context? 3) Is a single hermeneutical approach appropriate for the use of the Bible in all contemporary contexts? The day is long past when answers to these questions can be given by fiat of either prelates or scholars working exclusively from within the Western tradition (Taber 1983, 240).

Few today have chosen to explore the implications of Taber's keen observations.¹⁰ But his perceptive questions directly concern what ethnohermeneutics is all about.

The Assumptions of Ethnohermeneutics

The basic premise underlying the entire discipline of ethnohermeneutics is this: *God is working through each culture in order to draw individuals within each culture to himself.*¹¹ This is a simple premise, but one that has profound implications.

Many evangelical theologians and missionaries agree with this assumption. Knowing that this is how God works in the receptor culture, they acknowledge the need to look for culturally-sensitive ways to present the gospel. Consequently, they contextualize their message as much as possible to make it receptor-oriented.

However, 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 the typical western hermeneutical model, usually using the historical-critical tools, is sufficient for any culture.¹² However, the typical western hermeneutical model is not necessarily appropriate or relevant for all cross-cultural settings.¹³

God does not only work through the culture, hence the need to communicate the truths of Scripture in culturally relevant forms, but *he also works through the hermeneutical processes inherent in each culture.* This can be seen in the works of the New Testament writers who, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, used their own hermeneutical methodology in communicating Old Testament truths to their particular audiences.¹⁴

In like manner, Westerners who are tasked with communicating the truth of the Bible cross-culturally, must

seriously consider using hermeneutical methodologies appropriate to their target culture. Not to do so may indicate paternalism of significant magnitude.¹⁵

The Methods of Ethnohermeneutics

To do ethnohermeneutics, one must ask the following questions:

- What kind of hermeneutical methodology is employed by this culture?
- How can I develop and use a dynamically equivalent hermeneutical model?
- How will I communicate the truths of the Bible in this culture, using their own hermeneutical methodology?

Consequently, cross-cultural Bible interpreters need to be involved in the following processes:

- to gain knowledge of the hermeneutical methodology which the people in the target culture are using;
- to discover the hermeneutical tools which are appropriate for this methodology; and
- to communicate the message of the Bible in relevant cultural forms, using a dynamically equivalent hermeneutical methodology.

This hermeneutical approach generates acceptable biblical interpretations which are understood by the receptor culture.

All cultures have hermeneutical methodologies which they use to interpret their own sacred traditions. Oral cultures have elaborate unwritten methodologies for interpreting their sacred records.¹⁶ Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim cultures, for example, have hermeneutical methodologies that they employ when they interpret their sacred writings, some of which are as old, or even older, than those found in the New Testament.¹⁷

Yet how many western missionaries devote time and effort in studying the underlying hermeneutical methodologies of Hindus who interpret the *Upanishads*, or of Muslims who interpret the Koran? How many try to learn the oral traditions of tribal cultures and how they are interpreted by the leaders of the tribe?

Westerners often bring in a hermeneutical methodology that is as foreign to the non-western culture as they are themselves. The typical western model of hermeneutics may generally make sense to most Westerners, or to non-western

cultures strongly influenced by western thought and culture.¹⁸ But in the vast majority of non-western cultures around the world there still remains the need to examine the dominant hermeneutical methodology as perhaps a key to making the Bible more relevant in those cultures.

The Limitations of Ethnohermeneutics

I purposely used the word "perhaps" in the previous sentence. While I recommend an examination of all cultures and their hermeneutical methodologies, I am not saying that all the "uncovered" hermeneutical methodologies will necessarily be appropriate for interpreting the Bible in that culture. What is true in the western world is also true in the non-western world: some methodologies will obviously be more appropriate than others. I am not supporting a new kind of hermeneutical relativism.

In the final analysis, *the Word of God must always take precedence over any one culture's hermeneutical methodology*. Any methodology which does not treat God's Word as authoritative and infallible Scripture must ultimately be rejected, no matter how receptor-oriented it is. These important disclaimers, however, should not keep us from undertaking the task. After all, hermeneutical methodologies should not be used to *prove* the truth; rather, they should be viewed as merely human tools to help us better arrive at and *present* the truth.

What I am saying about western missionaries applies likewise to the growing number of non-western missionaries worldwide. It is imperative that both western and non-western missionaries seek out and be sensitive to the hermeneutical methodologies of their target culture. Nevertheless, the good news concerning non-western missionaries is that oftentimes, they come from cultures where non-western hermeneutical methodologies still operate. In effect, the *potential* is there for non-western missionaries to discover the hermeneutical methodologies of the receptor culture far more easily than western missionaries who do not have such background. This cannot simply be assumed, however. Both western and non-western missionaries should be aware of the need to look for possible hermeneutical methodologies already at work in the receptor culture.

An Example of Ethnohermeneutics from the Cotabato Manobo

There are very few examples of ethnohermeneutics being done by western or non-western missionaries today. The western hermeneutical methodology is too dominant worldwide. Nevertheless, there are some that are beginning to come to light, one of which is given below.²⁰ One must keep in mind, however, that the understanding of the hermeneutical methodologies of this culture is very much in process.

This article began with a cross-cultural illustration from the Cotabato Manobo of Mindanao, a tribal people with an enormous store of oral tradition.²¹ The illustration shows how, in the course of the conversation, the hermeneutical methodology 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 methodology of *peligad* made the conversation understandable to both speaker and hearer, but not to the missionary outsider who knew little about this methodology. 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 methodology? 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 Cotabato Manobo helps the interpreter 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 symbolize growth. The conclusion can then be made that this figurative language is symbolizing the kingdom and its growth. Using the methodology of the *tertium comparationis* or the *peligad* helps the interpreter arrive at the same basic conclusion. In this case, the *peligad* is a more appropriate hermeneutical methodology for the Cotabato Manobo culture.

The *peligad* methodology is but one of several Cotabato Manobo hermeneutical methodologies. Others include the *tegudon* (the re-telling of historical doctrine from legends in the past that teach Cotabato Manobo what they should believe today); the *telaki* (simple stories that end with an application designed to teach young people the Manobo ideals and values in life); and the *duyuy* (the expression of emotion through stylized singing). Like the *peligad*, these other hermeneutical

**“Only the Bible
is inspired,
not our hermeneutical
methodologies”**

methodologies 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 Cotabato Manobo through the use of their own hermeneutical methodologies. 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 Cotabato 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 Cotabato Manobo culture). The authority behind the one who uses the methodology 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 Cotabato 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 beginning of developing a Cotabato Manobo ethnohermeneutical methodology. The use of the different hermeneutical methodologies mentioned is just beginning to be implemented in various degrees by the few missionaries currently ministering among the Cotabato Manobo. It is a humble start, but a good one.

This example from the Cotabato Manobo reminds those of us—who are steeped in the study of written material—that oral cultures (including non-reading peoples in written cultures) differ in regard 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.²²

Cross-cultural missionaries among the Cotabato Manobo are trying to overcome this inadequacy today. May their work bear fruit. It may be that the hermeneutical methodologies of the Cotabato Manobo Christians, and other non-western cultures like theirs, may one day have an important role in the hermeneutical task of the worldwide church.

Conclusion

Hermeneutical methodologies, especially those that consider the needs of the target audience as primary, must be used to make the communication of biblical truths truly receptor-oriented. The gospel should be communicated in ways that the audience can understand. This means communicating biblical truths in culturally relevant forms and with a dynamically equivalent hermeneutical methodology that will make sense when those cultural forms are introduced. God's communication to humankind always was, and still is, receptor-oriented, including the employment of the culture's own hermeneutical methodologies.

Lastly, the task of ethnohermeneutics must be undertaken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We should remember that only the Bible is inspired, not our hermeneutical methodologies.

NOTES

¹This example has been adapted from a paper submitted by one of my former Asian Theological Seminary students, Mila Gultiano Cagape (1994). The hermeneutical methodologies of the Cotabato Manobo will be discussed in greater depth in the last section of this article.

²The generic phrase, "western theology," then, is but one "ethnic" theology that communicates well to western cultures. But even western theology itself is made up of a multitude of smaller "ethnic" theologies: evangelical, mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, and so on. See Kraft (1979, 403) for further discussion of the intricacies of ethnotheology.

³For more in-depth information on the discipline of ethnohermeneutics see my forthcoming *Ethnohermeneutics: The Bible in Culture: Reclaiming the Receptor-Oriented Hermeneutical Methodologies of the New Testament for Cross-Cultural Bible Interpreters in the Third Millennium*. It is indeed encouraging to see that recent works on hermeneutics by evangelical theologians are beginning to address the complexities of cross-cultural Bible interpretation. See, for example, the monumental work by Osborne (1991); cf. also Erickson (1993) and Kaiser and Silva (1994). Unfortunately, Kaiser, in chap. 10, when analyzing the field of ethnohermeneutics and my contributions to it, fails to understand that the underlying premise of ethnohermeneutics is to discover the hermeneutical methodologies in the receptor culture itself, not to elevate the receptor culture over the biblical text.

⁴When I use the phrases "Bible culture" and "culture of the modern day interpreter," I am simplifying things for convenience. In reality, there are different "Bible cultures" which underlie the different contexts of Old and New Testament texts. Likewise, in reference to the modern day interpreter, I am referring to the overall cultural assumptions inherent in the specific culture to which the interpreter belongs.

⁵However, as the biblical evidence well attests, even the audiences of Jesus (oftentimes his own disciples), as well as the audiences of the New Testament writers, did not always understand the messages given. Furthermore, no matter how receptor-oriented the communication of the message to the target audience, that audience can still choose to reject the message. There should, therefore, really be a dotted line connecting at least one of the smaller squares with the Original Bible Culture square. But since Fig. 1 represents the idealized reality, it is symbolized accordingly.

⁶I am following M. J. Erickson here and his use of the word "affirm" (cf. his 1993, 23 and 31).

⁷I would hasten to add that the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the life of the interpreter is immensely more important than the historical-critical tools. Unfortunately, it is the tools that receive an inordinate amount of attention in the formal training (Bible college and seminary) of today's ministers and missionaries. The Reformers call of *sola Scriptura*, their fervent belief in the "priesthood of all believers," and their emphasis on translating the Bible in the vernacular language were all done with a view toward trusting the common person to understand the Scriptures without ecclesiastical or academic interference. Today, we would do well to reclaim these tenets of the Reformation and more diligently seek the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual Christian as he or she interprets the Bible. I elaborate on this in more detail in my *Ethnohermeneutics*.

⁸Although D. A. Carson has clearly shown that he is a critic of the terminology, he is honestly grappling with some of these complex issues. Perhaps he is not as opposed to the concepts underlying ethnotheology and dynamic-equivalence as his writings make him appear.

⁹Cf. Nida (1960, 33-58), Conn (1984, 188-190), and Carson (1984, 17-20).

¹⁰The exception to this is Kaiser: cf. Kaiser (1985, 234) and Kaiser and Silva (1994, especially chap. 10). For in-depth analysis of the hermeneutical methodologies of the New Testament writers in the first century and the implications for cross-cultural Bible interpreters today, see Caldwell (forthcoming).

¹¹Cf. Kraft (1979, 113-115).

¹²The typical hermeneutical model used by most western evangelical interpreters of the Bible has been simply entitled the two-step method: cf. Mickelsen (1963, 55-57), see also Ramm (1970). Step one of this model attempts to understand what the Bible originally meant using a thorough understanding of the original socio-cultural background of the text combined with in-depth textual analysis (exegesis). Step two of the model attempts to apply what was discovered in step one to the modern world of the interpreter and his/her audience (application). For further in-depth analysis of this typical western model, see Caldwell (forthcoming).

¹³I am following Taber (1978 and 1983) here.

¹⁴I examine the hermeneutical methodologies of the New Testament writers at length in Caldwell (forthcoming).

¹⁵Let me cite just one example from the Philippines, where I serve as a missionary. Most missionaries 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 contextualization. However, although they are now better trained to enter Filipino culture, they do not necessarily have acquired the skill 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. And very 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 methodologies will work in the culture. That assumption is seldom, if ever, questioned. Such an assumption 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.

¹⁶For example, Klem (1982), Vansina (1985), and Graham (1987).

¹⁷See Samartha (1991, 36-49), Davis (1993, 114-127) and Adams (1987, 50-52) for examples from Asia; Tarr (1994) from Africa; cf. also Sugirtharajah (1991) and Smart and Hecht (1982).

¹⁸Caution needs to be exercised here, however. For even in non-western cultures heavily influenced by western culture, the underlying worldview assumptions are still non-western.

¹⁹Here is where evangelicals who support historical-critical hermeneutical methodology need to be careful since the very foundations of that methodology are anti-God and anti-supernatural. See especially Linnemann (1990); cf. Maier (1977) and Stuhlmacher (1977). I address this subject at length in my *Ethnohermeneutics*.

²⁰I am in the process of collecting examples of these hermeneutical methodologies from my students worldwide.

²¹Cf. H. J. Wrigglesworth (1981). Although her excellent work is based upon the *Ilianen* Manobo group rather than the *Cotabato* Manobo, it nevertheless gives good evidence for the vastness of all Manobo oral tradition.

²²Cf. Hollenweger (1989, 10-11).

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