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Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, “Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable.” That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational superstructure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety—exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

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Toward a New Restoration Hermeneutic: On the Hermeneutical Relevance of the Old Testament

R. Mark Shipp

Hermeneutical Theory and the Problem with Traditional Restoration Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics—the philosophy of interpretation—has, in recent decades, gone from a primarily doctrinal, historical, or literary model to an existential one. That is to say, hermeneutics has gone from the *dicta probantia* of the late medieval church (where Scripture was used mainly as proof-texts) to the *Hermeneutik* of F. Schleiermacher¹ (where Scripture must mainly be understood historically; “an idea must be interpreted from the life context from which it springs”) to the literary approach of Paul Ricoeur² (where the text is an independent entity, to be understood almost completely within its own literary “world”), to the existential approaches of Stanley Fish,³ Jacques Derrida,⁴ and many others (where neither history nor texts hold meaning, but people who read texts bring their own meaning). In the contemporary relativistic worldview, neither history nor literature provides any necessary interpretive

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977).

² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1976).

³ Associated with the “Reader-Response” theory of interpretation. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1967).

⁴ Associated with “Deconstruction.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

controls, since the locus of meaning resides in the individual reading the text or studying the history.

Contemporary existential models of interpretation present a challenge to a traditional Restoration hermeneutic, which depends upon both a reliable textual tradition and a reliable reconstruction of historical events. Indeed, the Restoration approach is beside the point to existential hermeneutics, since marshaling historical and textual evidence is simply pitting one subjective approach against another.

At the same time, Restoration hermeneutics has relied upon a heavily dispensational approach to scripture and theology. Previous dispensations (especially the Mosaic) are superseded by later ones. The point is to understand scripture as a revelation in history, leading to the current Christian dispensation. What remains of scripture is the latest dispensation (a portion, or all of, the New Testament), which is used as a modified *dicta probantia* for doctrine, organization, and ordinances of the church. While this approach makes sense if one is asking “What should the practices of the church be?”, the Old Testament and conceivably the Gospels as theological witnesses can be largely ignored.

Given the challenges of contemporary hermeneutical theories and the limitations inherent in a dispensational approach, it is time for a new Restoration hermeneutic. This Restoration hermeneutic will be both literary and historical, and will recognize as well the constructive criticisms of existential hermeneutics (that the reader *does* bring meaning to a text).

Restoration Hermeneutics as a Philosophy of History

A new Restoration hermeneutic will understand the importance of historical inquiry. Biblical scholarship has emerged from an era which over-emphasized the importance of history, to one in which historical inquiry into the world behind the Bible is deemphasized. A new Restoration hermeneutic will realize that “God made flesh” necessarily means that God has entered into the messy realm of human history and that history requires interpretation. It will recognize that historical events have been mediated to us by writers most often long removed from the events they describe; much of Scripture is “sermonic history,” taking events of the past and making applications

for the present. But God's saving acts in history must not be collapsed into "God's saving narratives in literature."

The problem with a traditional Restoration philosophy of history is the tendency to collapse "story" into "history": all narrative texts which are "history-like" are assumed to be historical reports, subject to the canons of historical analysis. The losers in this collapse are the marvelous literary masterpieces which demonstrate complex and beautiful structures, imagery, poetics, and plot and character development.⁵

The question of literary genre comes into focus here. Not all passages in the Bible are intended to be read historically. Wisdom literature, such as the book of Proverbs, is overtly composed of admonitions, proverbs, and maxims which transcend any particular historical period. They are "wisdom for the ages." Likewise, parables and many psalms and songs are difficult to analyze historically. Their primary interpretive locus is their poetics and imagery, not a putative, reconstructed history.

Other types of narrative prove more difficult to determine genre and thus the beginning point for interpretation. Is the meaning of the book of Job dependent upon the historical facticity of the characters and events? Or is Job better understood as a complex, poetic morality play in dialogue form, dealing with the suffering of the innocent?⁶

Nor should historical narratives be understood in terms of modern history-writing. For example, the synoptic histories of Joshua–2 Kings and Chronicles are selective concerning which accounts are included, and those accounts are interpreted according to the theological and literary scheme of the

⁵ Take, for example, the "Primeval History" of Genesis 1–11. It is difficult to imagine historical, scientific inquiry into the Garden of Eden—a realm where God "walked about"—though many have tried! The same may be said about other texts in Genesis 1–11 (take, for example, the "sons of God and the daughters of men," Gen 6:1–4), where a purely historical approach may not be the most fruitful.

⁶ One could raise a similar question about Jonah and to a lesser extent Esther. Questions about the historicity of the books of Jonah and Esther ought not to invalidate the message of the books. Does the book of Jonah make historical claims about Nineveh's conversion, or is it better understood as a theological indictment of xenophobic, post-exilic Jews, who could not understand or accept God's purposes for and mission to the Gentiles?

compilers. They are “sermonic history” and should be understood as historical sermons delivered by prophetic preachers.

The sermonic nature of Old Testament historical narratives has implications for the reconstruction of historical events. On the one hand, the narrator is writing history, and should be considered a theological historian. On the other hand, details of synoptic histories can differ remarkably (for example, was Abijah/m a good or a bad king?),⁷ raising questions to many about the historicity of the event. On the other hand, the prophetic preacher is not in the business of creating history, but selecting, interpreting, and preaching it.

For a Restoration hermeneutic, historical narratives ought to be considered historical, in the sense that they are events selected for their coherence with the prophetic preacher’s theological agenda, unless there is reason to believe that an account found in that narrative should be understood parabolically, allegorically, as poetic metaphor, etc. Restoration hermeneutics affirms that God revealed his will through events and people in human history, but the recording of those events and the theological reflection on them is specific to a variety of literary genres.

Furthermore, since revelation happened in history as well as literature, salvation history is necessarily progressive. This means that it was only in the fullness of time that God revealed his ultimate will and purpose in Jesus Christ, and that other events and writers along the way only revealed God’s purpose “through a glass darkly.” If biblical texts truly represent the cultural milieus which produced them, they will reflect the and world views of those cultures. This is what “revelation in history” means: that God spoke to real human beings in real historical settings and communicated to them in *their* idiom. This is why there are cherubim (winged lion sphinxes), the “firmament,” the chaos waters, and many other time and culture-bound terms in the Bible. According to Peter Enns, who refers to this as “incarnational theology,” the words and deeds of God are enfleshed in human cultures in spe-

⁷ Compare 2 Kgs 14:31ff with 2 Chron 12:16ff.

cific times and places, still a stumbling-block to believers and unbelievers alike.⁸

Restoration Hermeneutics as a Philosophy of Scripture

The American Restoration Movement has always believed that Scripture is fully inspired and is the fountainhead for the church's theology and practice. How the Scriptures should be read, and the interpretive philosophy that informs that reading, are therefore critical. In this section I will discuss the Old Testament as theological witness, the relationship between the testaments, and the New Testament and doctrinal theology.

The Old Testament as Theological Witness: We have always believed that "all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable..."⁹ What this has meant in practice, however, is that while "all Scripture is inspired by God," some Scriptures are "more equal than others." That is to say that the New Testament Scriptures¹⁰ are alone the "constitution" for the church, and alone the guide to doctrine and godliness.¹¹ In practice, the Old Testament has often been marginalized or even deemed an unworthy theological witness to God's redemptive activity.

A new Restoration hermeneutic must begin with the re-affirmation that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching..." In Paul's letter to Timothy, the Scripture being referred to is without question the Old Testament. The problem that immediately arises, however, has to do with which elements of the Old Testament are continuous, and which are discontinuous, with the New Testament.

⁸ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, 10th anniv. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015).

⁹ 2 Timothy 3:16.

¹⁰ In its extreme form, only Acts 2 and following are allowed as authoritative witnesses to the contemporary church.

¹¹ Although Campbell would never say it this way, in his writings he gave primacy of place to the book of Genesis, which is foundational for some of his doctrinal formulations, but then spent the bulk of his time in the New Testament. See *Millennial Harbinger* New Series vol. 4ff, in which in the section on "Family Culture" he discusses at an ostensible family table the accounts of Genesis. In the Index volume there are more references by far to Genesis in the *Harbinger* than any other Old Testament book.

A Restoration hermeneutic should deal with the function of the Old Testament in the life of faith, but should also recognize that some Old Testament texts are contextually bound to the eras which produced them.¹² It is my contention that all texts of Scripture are theological; that is, they teach us something important about God, the community of faith, the nations, or creation. Not all Old Testament texts can be translated into our context and appropriated for church doctrine,¹³ but all Old Testament texts may be understood and appropriated theologically. Perhaps it is here where the “traditional hermeneutic” applies. “Command, example, and necessary inference” is a workable hermeneutic for what it is intended to do: to sift the Scriptures for church doctrine and practices. The problem with this hermeneutic is that most texts of the Old Testament, and many of the New, slip through the interpretive sieve. How does one affirm, however, the progressive nature of revelation and its embodiment in the ever-changing panorama of history, and affirm as well that “all Scripture is inspired ... and profitable”? Jesus himself addresses the issue of scriptural continuity and discontinuity in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said... But I say to you...” Relative to some of these antitheses Jesus reaffirms the Old Testament text, to some he adds to their force and application, and others he abrogates.¹⁴

The Relationship between the Testaments: Our understanding of the relationship between the testaments has everything to do with our philosophy of biblical interpretation. Most believers for the past 2000 years have accepted the canonical status of the Old Testament as well as the New. Accepting the canon, however, is not the same as understanding how the testaments relate.

¹² This suggests, of course, something similar to Walther Eichrodt’s “cross-section” method of understanding Old Testament theology (*Theology of the Old Testament* vol. 1 [Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961], especially 27) or perhaps Wilhelm de Wette’s “pure” (*rein*) and “true” (*wahr*) theology (*Biblischen Dogmatik: Alten und Neuen Testaments* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1831], 2, 6, etc). The “pure” theology is not bound to a particular age or culture, as the “true,” but transitory, theology is. A Restoration hermeneutic must deal with the diachronic (“across time,” time bound and progressive) as well as the synchronic (doctrinal) nature of the text of Scripture.

¹³ I think in this regard of Old Testament ritual texts (Leviticus 1–7 in particular), purity laws (Leviticus 11–15), many of the case laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and many poetic texts which use imagery completely foreign to our cultural understanding (e.g., Psalm 114 and Psalm 82).

¹⁴ Matt 5:21–48.

Many models have been advanced over the millennia regarding how one should read the two testaments. Something has been said already about the medieval *dicta probantia*, Scripture as doctrinal proof-texts. Another common theory is the prophetic function of Old Testament texts relative to the New, that is that the Old Testament is prophecy and the New Testament is its fulfillment. From Antiochene fathers, and more recently suggested by Gerhard von Rad, is the typological model, where the Old Testament provides types for the New Testament antitypes. Of course, the most common perspective undergirding Campbell's philosophy of interpretation is a dispensational approach. In general, Churches of Christ have adopted an "economic" dispensational model, where the various covenants are "economies" wherein God worked his will in a temporary fashion. With the advent of a new economy, the prior one is abrogated.

While there is some utility, and some truth, in this model, there are also pitfalls. There is no indication that the Noachic covenant, a covenant with all flesh, was abrogated by God's covenant with Abraham or by the covenant at Sinai.¹⁵ Likewise, this "constitutional," economic model could not deal well with the covenant with David, an "eternal covenant," alongside of and assuming the Sinai covenant. Indeed, Christians should still affirm the validity of the Davidic covenant, since we still serve a king in the line of David! One can also make the case that in Romans 9–11 Paul affirms two kinds of Christians, Jewish and Gentile, and that Jews embody the "natural plant" and may still keep the demands and traditions of *Torah* as believers in Christ.¹⁶ The economic model of progressive revelation through the covenants is tricky and problematic indeed.

The New Testament and Doctrinal Theology: Our focus has always been on the New Testament as the witness to the latest, and final, economy. In Campbell's constitutional model, the New Testament functions as the constitution for the church and as such includes propositions for the ordering, maintenance, and discipline of the church. In practice, however, there have always been texts which have generally been ignored or dismissed as culturally specific and not relevant to us. I think in this regard of women wearing veils, the

¹⁵ Some have made the connection of the Noachic covenant with the instructions of the Jerusalem council to Gentiles in Acts 15.

¹⁶ See Acts 21:20.

holy kiss, and other first century practices not observed by most churches today. Because the New Testament writers did not give us the details of each and every practice of the early church, we are bound to have differences of opinion and interpretation regarding these things.

Rather than the constitutional model, perhaps it is better to go with the New Testament's own assessment of the nature of the church: an "organic" model. The church is the body of Christ in the world. As body, we must remain in him in order to live, and we must function together with the other parts of the body in order to be healthy. Other aspects of the ordering of the body are not inconsequential, however, but must take their place behind the doctrine of Christ, succinctly given in 1 Cor 15:3–6 and embodied in the Apostles' Creed.¹⁷

Toward a New Restoration Hermeneutic

Given the progressive nature of biblical revelation through history, and the difficulty of extracting church doctrine from the texts of the Old and New Testaments, what should a Restoration hermeneutic look like? Let us look first at the Old Testament and then at some propositions related to the relationship between the testaments.

It is best to affirm the essential, theological nature of the Old Testament: all Old Testament Scriptures are inspired and teach us something about God. It is also best to affirm one of the basic tenets of interpretation: texts *must* mean something first to those original recipients, and secondarily to us.¹⁸ This means all Old Testament texts, including cherished prophetic texts, must first be understood as having meaning and application in the world of the author.¹⁹

This affirms the theological nature of the text in the culture and thought world of the ancient author, which distances the text from us culturally and linguistically. Many texts of the Old Testament are indeed difficult and ig-

¹⁷ See Keith Stanglin's article in this issue.

¹⁸ See Rom 4:23–24, which affirms the temporal priority of the original writer and his audience, and secondarily its application to us. Compare also with Heb 1:1–2.

¹⁹ This means even such famous messianic texts as Isaiah 53 must first have application in the world of the author and the exile of Judah to Babylon in the 6th century B.C.

nored in the functional canons of many church people. Most preachers do not preach, and most congregations do not dwell on, such books as Obadiah and Nahum, which call on God to smite the Edomites (Obadiah), or rejoice at the demise of the Assyrians (Nahum). On the other hand, these books are critically vital in that they record God's application of justice to evil and unjust nations, causing Israel and other oppressed nations to rejoice. Surely this is still a contemporary concern!

I commend a hermeneutic of theological recovery for those Old Testament texts which resist the immediacy of application, in that our culture, language, or historical situations may not resonate with those of the authors. Thus, even such resistant texts as the purity laws of Leviticus 11–15 deal with purification of the believer and preparation for worship, and Old Testament sacrificial laws have functional analogs in Christian worship today.²⁰

Perhaps the most difficult texts for Christians to appropriate are those which deal with the specifics of corporate Israel and the laws and rituals pertaining to their national identity.²¹ These texts, of course, do not immediately translate into practices of the church. On the other hand, most Pentateuchal laws are simply commentary—concrete applications—on the ten commandments, and therefore are important for individuals and governments in our day, once one has seen past the cultural specifics of kingship, sacrifices, and other culturally specific phenomena.

In terms of what the church must *do* relative to Old Testament texts, perhaps it is best to revisit Eichrodt's "cross-section" method of separating time-bound from timeless theological truths: some texts accurately portray the thought world of the ancient writer, and teach us something about God and his dealings with the covenant community, but are not "pure" theology in the sense that the stated practice does not or cannot translate into our

²⁰ The letter to the Hebrews already makes such a move with the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

²¹ I think of the Royal Psalms—the psalms of Davidic kingship—and their ideology (psalms 2, 72, 89, 110, 132, etc.), as resistant to immediate application in our context. Likewise, purity and sacrificial, and festival laws are foreign to the thought world of most Christians and require explanation and the application of theological principles for appropriation in the church.

churches today. This applies to the sacrificial and purity laws of Leviticus,²² the Law of the King in Deuteronomy 17,²³ and many others. On the other hand, on some texts rest the entire “Law and the Prophets.” These texts, or their principles, are assumed by or restated in the New Testament. It is difficult to imagine anyone suggesting “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and strength” (Deut 6:5) as no longer binding on the Christian!

The following is offered as a non-exhaustive summary of propositions related to how the Old Testament relates to the New:

- 1) There are no “non-theological texts” in the Old Testament. The entire Old Testament bears witness to the God of creation and covenant, some texts more directly than others.
- 2) The Old and New Testaments together form one Holy Bible, each incomplete without the other. We cannot do better than Hebrews 1:1:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

This text does not abrogate the relevance of the Old Testament for “doctrine, reproof, correction in righteousness,” but it does set the testaments in temporal and theological sequence: “God spoke” in the past through the prophets; that message is still relevant and important. “In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son”: the final word of God is through Jesus the Christ, who fulfills in himself the history and prophecy embodied in Old Testament texts.

²² Temple sacrifice is no longer possible even for modern Jews, so the sacrifices of Leviticus 1–7 are a good example of rites which served for atonement in the ancient world, but have been subsumed into the sacrifice of Christ once for all for the Christian and the reading of *Torah* for the Jew.

²³ The same applies to laws regarding the behavior of kings. Americans do not live under a monarchical system, therefore the principles of righteous kingship in the Bible must first be filtered through our own governmental systems before they can be appropriated by most moderns.

- 3) There is a historical, theological, and literary continuity between the testaments; each is incomplete without the other. But this does not mean that all texts translate immediately into church doctrine. For those texts which are time-bound in terms of their imagery, or reflect laws or rituals specific to Israel's political or religious organization, a hermeneutics of theological recovery may be applied. We may recover difficult texts for church theology through the principles of analogy and functional equivalent, not unlike what the writer of Hebrews does in recovering the theology of temple sacrifice for the Christian in Christ's role as both sacrificer and sacrifice.²⁴
- 4) The hermeneutical principles of command, example, and necessary inference are not abolished, but are relegated to their proper role: they are best suited for determining practices of the early church, information found mainly in the Epistles, and searching for grounds for visible unity based upon these practices.
- 5) Which applications we derive from Old Testament texts has much to do with what questions we ask of it. As I stated at the beginning of this article, many approaches have been brought to bear on the Bible over the past two thousand years: doctrinal, historical, literary, and existential, each approach yielding somewhat to substantially different applications for a given text. All of these questions are legitimate and should be employed in a new Restoration hermeneutic, but none of these should be elevated to exclusivity over the others. Perhaps these questions, and this model, may be helpful for us as we, the servants of the Word, struggle to understand and apply it: 1) What does the text say? (What is the form, movement, and structure of the passage and its literary contexts?); 2) what claim does the text have on church doctrine? (what is the theology of the passage, and how should the church respond doctrinally?); 3) what is the thought world of the author and the passage, insofar as it is possible for us to recover it? (what is the history behind the text, i.e., the historical contexts of the author and the historical setting implied by the text?); and 4)

²⁴ See Hebrews 10:10—Christ is the sacrifice—followed by 10:12—Christ is the sacrificer!

what claim does the text make upon the life of the Christian, and how should the Christian see the biblical story as his or her own story? What should the Christian hope for in this life and the next? (What moral and eschatological claims does the text make upon the life of the Christian?).

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