

UNDERSTANDING AS APPLICATION IN GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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INTRODUCTION

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), in his *magnum opus*, *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, argues that experience, tradition, culture, and preunderstanding render the modern quest for objectivity impossible. Along with that startling claim, he proposes a philosophical hermeneutics that examines the very nature of and the conditions for one's understanding of a text.¹ Concerning the nature of understanding, he writes, "Understanding (*Verständnis*) is first of all agreement (*Einverständnis*). So human beings usually understood one another immediately or they communicated (*sich verständigen*) until they reach an agreement. Reaching an understanding (*Verständigen*) is thus always: reaching an understanding about something."² To understand (*verstehen*) something necessarily implies, therefore, a "dialogic" conception of knowledge. For Gadamer, understanding "is primarily coming to an understanding with others."³

Gadamer's insistence on the contingency of all interpretation strikes at the very heart of evangelicalism's long-held regard of the

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¹Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1975); English translation, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989). Hereafter cited as *TM*. For helpful secondary literature on Gadamer, see Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge, 1980); Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Dan Stiver, "Theological Method," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149-69; and Eric Adams, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 477-78. Adam's essay includes a key bibliography on Gadamer studies.

²*Ibid.*, 158.

³Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, 4.

Bible as objective truth.⁴ If he is correct in denying interpreters of ever transcending their preunderstandings, prejudices, and traditions (or interpretive communities), then any hope of reaching an objective interpretation of Scripture would be a mere delusion. Indeed, the function of interpretation in practically relating the biblical text to today's world is a critical issue. The question of the role of language, especially the language of the Bible and its relationship to the modern reader, is responsible for the emergence of the "new hermeneutic."⁵ This label was first associated with the writings of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, but it is now used more broadly to include Gadamer. As a representative member of this school of thought, Gadamer's influence on hermeneutical debates in theology has been immense.⁶

Finding its roots in the nineteenth century, philosophical discussions of hermeneutics shifted from the classical formulation of rules for correctly interpreting texts to the basic question of the conditions for the very possibility of understanding. The new hermeneutic, which is characterized by its rejection of classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology, emphasizes present application rather than a search for a "right" method of biblical interpretation.⁷ The distinction between Kantian epistemology and hermeneutic philosophy lies in the way in which they understand experience. For Kant, "experience" refers primarily to the reception of empirical impressions, which then must be formed by the categories of understanding. Hermeneutic philosophers, however, view "experience" historically as

⁴Here, I concur with D. A. Carson's definition of "objective" as "having extra-mental reality or validity." Cf. *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 120.

⁵*Ibid.*, 65-72. See, also, Anthony Thiselton's essay, "The New Hermeneutic," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 308-33; Paul Achtemeier's volume, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); J. I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John Woodridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 340-44; and Royce G. Gruenler, "New Hermeneutic," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 829-31.

⁶For helpful discussions on the nature of these debates, which include hermeneutics in Barthian theology, Bultmannian theology, Heideggerian existentialism, and liberation theologies, see Packer, 354-55; and Gruenler, 829-30.

⁷Randy Maddox's article, "Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies," *Religious Studies* 21/4 (December 1985): 517, summarizes two problems which hermeneutic philosophers have with traditional epistemology: (1) disagreement with the reduction of the entire cognitive process to a single model (empirical observation) drawn from the natural sciences; and (2) rejection of the ahistorical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known and imposes meaning upon it.

the accumulated knowledge of a tradition.⁸

Philosophical hermeneutics, as represented by Ebeling, Fuchs, and Gadamer, stresses the tremendous gulf between the linguistic tradition of the Bible and contemporary languages that are actually spoken today. This reality creates a problem because the modern interpreter or hearer is placed at the end of a long tradition of biblical interpretation. This tradition, in turn, molds the reader's own understanding of the biblical text and their own attitude toward it. The reader's attitude may be either positive or negative, and their controlling assumptions may well be unconscious ones. The Bible is thus interpreted today within a particular frame of reference which may radically differ from that which the text first addressed its hearer. Hence, simply to repeat the actual words of the Bible today may well be to say something different from what the text itself originally said. Even if it does not positively alter what was once said, it may utter nothing more than a mere tradition, a form of speech, a dead relic of the language of the past.⁹ The question of how understanding affects the practical course of human existence underscores Gadamer's concern with the hermeneutics of history.

This essay seeks to examine Gadamer's concept of application as an integral part of his hermeneutics of history. As such, I will provide an exposition of Gadamer's historicity of understanding, followed by a critical review of the main tenets of his thought, pointing out both positive and negative aspects for evangelical theological interpretation.

THE HISTORICALITY OF UNDERSTANDING

Gadamer's critique of historical consciousness was primarily directed at the so-called "historical school" in nineteenth-century Germany, whose famous representatives were Johann Gustav Droysen and Ludwig von Ranke. These scholars of "Romantic hermeneutics" sought to establish "objective" history.¹⁰ As such, they thought it was possible for historians to completely enter a historical world of which

⁸Ibid., 518. Cf. Gadamer, *TM*, 310-11, 317.

⁹Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 308-09.

¹⁰Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 177.

they wished to give an account without interjecting their personal prejudices or biases into that history.

For Gadamer, however, the primary task of philosophical reflection on hermeneutics is not to develop a so-called scientific method of interpretation, but to clarify the ontological conditions in which understanding takes place by pointing out the historicity of understanding.¹¹ Here, Gadamer recognizes that human experience plays a tremendous role in one's understanding because experience determines and changes the meaning historical events can have for a person. Such experience is dialectical in the Hegelian sense in that the object and one's knowledge of it are transformed.¹² Gadamer's program can, therefore, be rightly described as a hermeneutic philosophy of human understanding. His critique of "Romantic hermeneutics" does not only consider method subsidiary but detrimental, since method is usually guided by objectivist empirical principles. In this sense, his effort is essentially a critique of criticism.¹³ Although he does not totally oppose method *per se*, he believes that considerations of it tend to obscure and hinder the natural capacity of understanding.¹⁴ His goal is to free that natural capacity by clarifying its nature and conditions. Understanding, viewed in this way, is more of an ontological rather than an epistemological issue, as people acknowledge our human finitude and situatedness in history.¹⁵ What are some implications for Gadamer's historicity of understanding?

The Issue of Preunderstanding

The first implication of Gadamer's historicity of understanding, which is key in interpretation and understanding, is the tension between that which is preunderstood and that which is presented for understanding.¹⁶ That is, the interpreter must recognize both aspects of

¹¹Gadamer, *TM*, 263.

¹²Warnke, 27.

¹³Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152-53.

¹⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 230.

¹⁵Vanhoozer, 152.

¹⁶Maddox, 522. Cf. Palmer, 181-84. The concept of preunderstanding (*Vorverständnis*) was first introduced by Rudolf Bultmann as an unknowing knowledge (*ein nichtwissendes Wissen*), and "man has a preunderstanding of all things, because deep down he is all things, including God"

this tension so that hidden preunderstandings may be brought to the surface.¹⁷ Gadamer is convinced that hidden preunderstandings obscure the interpreter's understanding of the language that speaks to us through tradition.¹⁸ Like Bultmann, Gadamer does not believe in presuppositionless interpretation or exegesis.¹⁹ In fact, the Kantian understanding of interpretation, where the interpreter is free from all prejudices, is an impossible phenomenon in Gadamer's estimation. In essence, Gadamer repudiates the relationship between the interpreter and the text where the interpreter is active subject and the text is passive object.²⁰

So, how can interpreters distinguish their preunderstandings from the message of the text? Gadamer's answer to this question is that the valid interpretation is self-awareness of one's own preunderstanding and openness to the claims of a text. This kind of awareness is neither neutrality in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the inclusion of the contrasting awareness of one's own fore-meanings.²¹ In other words, if understanding is viewed in terms of experience rather than knowledge, a different perspective may be gained, according to Gadamer. He would concur with Fuch's assertion that interpreters must allow the text to interpret them before they attempt to interpret the text.²² It is now the object, which should henceforth be called the subject matter that put the subject in question.

Gadamer calls attention to the interpretation of legal and theological texts to illustrate his point. In these cases the interpreter

(Andre Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Richard Strachan [New York]: Doubleday, 1971], 15). Thiselton, in his essay, "The New Hermeneutic," writes, "there are connexions between the new hermeneutic and Bultmann's discussion about preunderstanding," 312.

¹⁷Examples of studies that demonstrate this awareness include: Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 54; Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), 22-23; and Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), esp. 285-290.

¹⁸Gadamer, *TM*, 239.

¹⁹See Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert Ogden (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), 289; idem, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13 (1957), 409-17.

²⁰Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," 312. The traditional approach of hermeneutics is characterized by a particular model in epistemology, which is rooted in the philosophy of Descartes.

²¹Gadamer, *TM*, 238.

²²Ernst Fuchs, "The Hermeneutical Problem," in *The Future of Our Religious Past*, ed. J. M. Robinson (London: SCM, 1971), 277.

does not examine the texts as an object of antiquarian investigation. Rather, the text speaks to the present situation in order to find its relevance. On the one hand, the interpreter's own understanding of the subject matter guides us in our understanding of the ancient text. On the other hand, as the text delivers its verdict on our present situation, the initial understanding is then modified or molded. These two principles constitute Gadamer's "hermeneutical circle." The circle begins when interpreters take their own preliminary questions to the text. However, as interpreters take their limited, provisional questions to the text, the text begins to speak to them. It begins to interpret them and shed light on their own situations and questions. Their initial questions now undergo revision in the light of the text itself, and in response to more adequate questioning, the text itself now speaks more clearly and intelligibly. This process continues and interpreters gain a progressively deeper understanding of the text or subject matter.²³

Temporal Distance and the Fusion of Horizons

The second implication of Gadamer's historicity of understanding is the concept of temporal distance. For Gadamer, interpretation is not the negation of the present and a positioning of oneself totally in the past. Rather, he argues for the key to correct interpretation as the preservation of the distance between the past text and the present interpretation.²⁴ Gadamer calls this a "fusion of horizons." He defines a "horizon" as follows: "A horizon represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.... The working out of the hermeneutical situation means the achievement of the right horizon of inquiry for the questions asked by the encounter with tradition."²⁵ This description refers to the interpreter's attempt to bridge the historical gap between text and interpretation, yet without denying the situatedness of their respective historical contexts. This is possible, Gadamer argues, because both the interpreter and the text exist within a tradition of human discourse. Interpreters first presuppose that they stand in a different horizon from every historical

²³Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," 316.

²⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 264-66.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 269.

experience, which presents a fundamental problem for hermeneutics. They also acknowledge their own perspectives as radically different from the viewpoints of the authors of the past. Consequently, they realize that their understanding cannot, therefore, be conceived as the simple assimilation of objective historical facts into one's own self-consciousness. Authentic understanding must be able to maintain the full historicity of both the interpreter and the subject matter arising from the tradition.

At the starting point of an interpretative event, the two moving horizons of a past and a present interpreter are recognized in their distance from each other. The shortcoming of traditional or classical hermeneutics is that it does not acknowledge such a temporal distance, according to Gadamer. Traditional interpreters inappropriately step outside of their own present horizon in an attempt to achieve simultaneity with the historical object through empathetic reconstruction. However, Gadamer does not view the problem of history as a gulf to be bridged. Rather, it is the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted. Drawing from Heidegger's concept of time, temporal distance provides positive and productive possibilities for understanding.²⁶ The facilitation of temporal distance for hermeneutical understanding has benefits in three ways: (1) historical distance allows an event to appear as a whole, gaining self-contained quality analogous to a literary text; (2) distance in time provides more assured criteria for the interpretation of an event; and (3) as a consequence of the foregoing, temporal distance serves as a filtering process by allowing prejudices of a limited and particular nature to die away, but causes those that bring about genuine understanding to clearly emerge.²⁷ Gadamer is, thus, emphatic about the importance and usefulness of temporal distance. He maintains, "it is only temporal distance that can solve the really critical question of hermeneutics, namely of distinguishing the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand."²⁸

Human understanding viewed as a fusion of horizons is, therefore, a flat repudiation of the ideal of knowledge as objective, historical

²⁶Ibid., 264. See, also, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

²⁷Gadamer, *TM*, 264-66. Cf. Palmer, 184-85.

²⁸Ibid., 266.

facts.²⁹ In contrast, Gadamer's historicity of understanding is an ontologically shared meaning, the truth of being, which is shared by both text and interpreter in an event of understanding. No single horizon is adequate in and of itself to encompass all of culture and history. However, tradition and culture are themselves the constituent parts of the single horizon that is capable of embracing everything contained in historical consciousness.³⁰ Understanding, viewed as a fusion of horizons, has the capacity to overcome the particularity of the horizons of the text and the interpreter in a shared, higher universality, which recognizes that the two horizons share in truth and meaning in the midst of the genuine historical tensions between them.³¹ Furthermore, while Gadamer insists that truth is wholistic, human finitude does not make possible, however, the universal assimilation of the truth of being a reality in human existence. Therefore, human understanding within the temporal horizon may be regarded at best as partial glimpses of truth because the whole always exceeds the horizons of any aspect of human discourse.

The Question of Authorial Intent

The third implication of the historicity of understanding questions whether one can ascertain the authorial intent of a text. The temporal distance and the historicity of understanding suggest that the task of hermeneutics is to understand the text rather than the author. When an interpreter comes to an understanding with the text, no relationship between persons is involved. The interpreter does, however, participate in the subject matter of the text which reveals its meaning. According to Gadamer, the traditional hermeneutical quest for authorial intent is an illegitimate approach. The interpreter's participation in the text does not necessarily imply that we go outside our world, but that the text addresses us in our present world.³² In this sense, hermeneutical understanding is not mere subjectivism, as much as it is a matter of placing oneself in a tradition of a subject matter. The reference point

²⁹John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 83.

³⁰Gadamer, *TM*, 271.

³¹*Ibid.*, 272-73.

³²*Ibid.*, 275.

for hermeneutics is not really the subjectivity of the author nor the interpreter, but the historical meaning itself for us in the present.³³ The meaning of a text is much dependent upon the question asked in the present, thereby making it impossible for the interpreter to recreate the original understanding of an author. Gadamer argues, restoration, “if made central in hermeneutics, is no less absurd than all effort to restore and revive life gone forever.”³⁴ For Gadamer, the true task of hermeneutics is integration of the text, not restoration of the past.³⁵

UNDERSTANDING AS APPLICATION

Gadamer’s discussion of the historicity of understanding can be further explained by relating it to the aspect of application. Specifically, he contends that “understanding the text is always already applying it.”³⁶ Some immediate questions can be raised here. Does not Gadamer’s equation of textual understanding with application create a vicious circle in logic? Is there no danger in Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle of confusing one’s interpretation of what is personal truth with some criterion as to what is objective truth?³⁷ In other words, is there a danger in Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle, which threatens to become indistinguishable from subjectivistic interpretations? In fact, some conservative theologians believe that a human-centered-relativism is created, if Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle is embraced.³⁸

The Text in the Light of the Present

Nevertheless, Gadamer maintains that application is an integral facet in both juridical and theological hermeneutics because both seek to interpret the text in a way that speaks to the present condition. Gadamer refers to J. J. Rambach’s *Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae*

³³Maddox, 523. Maddox points out that Gadamer’s illustration of one’s interpretation of art raises severe questions about the legitimacy of making authorial intent the standard for the meaning of a text. Gadamer’s main criticism, according to Maddox, is that there is no way to objectively ascertain the author’s intention. Cf. Warnke, 42-72 for a similar assessment.

³⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 159.

³⁵Palmer, 186.

³⁶Gadamer, *TM*, 159.

³⁷Thiselton, in “The New Hermeneutic,” 326, raises this concern.

³⁸See, for example, John Warwick Montgomery, “An Exhortation to Exhorters,” in *Christianity Today* 17 (1973): 606.

of 1723 for an illustration of his argument.³⁹ According to Gadamer, Rambach insists that interpretation must be viewed in its three facets that constitute the whole: (1) *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), (2) *subtilitas explicandi* (explication), and (3) *subtilitas applicandi* (application). These three elements, according to Rambach, are not three different methods or steps in the hermeneutical process. Rather, they are “capacities,” which together constitute the fulfillment of understanding. In contrast to Gadamer’s understanding of application is the Schleiermacherian or Romantic approach to this subject. Typically, it can be said that both Romantic and post-Romantic hermeneutics tend to assert an inner unity of the first two elements, leaving no systematic place for the factor of application. For Schleiermacher and proponents of Romantic hermeneutics, explication is making explicit what is understood.⁴⁰

Understanding, as characterized by Gadamer, is “something like an application of the text to be understood to the present situation.”⁴¹ In other words, understanding, in terms of knowing and explaining, already involves within it something like an application or a relating of the text to the present. Gadamer insists that juridical and theological hermeneutics offer a clearer pattern for grasping the full extent of understanding than the philological tradition, which omits the factor of application. Gadamer states, “Juridical hermeneutics is in reality no ‘special case’ but is suited to the task of giving back to historical hermeneutics its full breadth of problematic. It can reconstitute the old unity of the hermeneutical problem which was [in the eighteenth century] encountered in common by the jurist, the theologian, and the philologist.”⁴²

In essence, Gadamer suggests that juridical and theological hermeneutics may serve as a preferred model for literary interpretation over traditional approaches. Palmer believes this is true for several reasons.⁴³ First, the task of juridical and theological hermeneutics to bridge the distance between a text and the present situation can be a very fruitful endeavor. Second, juridical and theological hermeneutics

³⁹Gadamer, *TM*, 291.

⁴⁰Palmer, 187.

⁴¹Gadamer, *TM*, 291.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 311.

⁴³Palmer, 188-89.

generally provide a more helpful model for interpretation because they seek to determine the ontological relationship between the text and reader rather than to ascertain the author's intention. The interpreter's search for authorial intent is, of course, an illusion of nineteenth-century Romanticism, according to Gadamer. Third, juridical and theological hermeneutics are helpful because they do not generally apply a prescribed method of interpretation. Interpreters of both approaches have to adjust and order their own thinking to that of the text. Rather than being dictated by a method, interpreters risk their own claims or prejudices when they place themselves in the light of the governing claims of the text. Therefore, understanding the text is basically tantamount to making an application "in that it expressly and consciously brings to acceptance the meaning of the text by bridging the temporal distance which separates the interpreter from the text; thus, it overcomes (through application) the alienation of meaning which has befallen the text."⁴⁴

Gadamer's hermeneutical emphases, including the demand for the interpreter to serve the text, the necessity for the interpreter to be governed by the claims of the text, and the demand for the interpreter to interpret the text in the light of the present, are formidable challenges to hermeneutics in general. For one thing, there must be sufficient balance to relate the text to the present without allowing the present to dominate the text. That is, the interpreter must critically hold to the claims of the text and translate the meaning of the claim to the present. This is his notion of the fusion of horizons where the text is actually called into "being" when the interpreter and the text dialectically relate to one another within a tradition.

The Hermeneutic Circle

This notion of understanding, as prejudiced and historically situated as it is, does not preclude, according to Gadamer, the possibility for interpreters to assess the adequacy of prejudices or their ability of revising them in whole or in part. However, one's assessment of the adequacy of prejudices or revisions can no longer appeal to the Enlightenment notion of unprejudiced reason or to the idea of an

⁴⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 295.

unconditional perception of truth or reality. This is due to the fact that the manner in which interpreters undertake this assessment is itself determined by their historical prejudices. The apparent viciousness of this hermeneutical circle is based both on the assumption that interpreters must anticipate or project meaning in order to understand a text, and on the claim that their initial projection can be corrected later in their reading of the text.⁴⁵ As Culpepper explains in his study, the openness of the hermeneutical circle for meaning, occasioned by experiences of understanding, does not allow the circle to plunge into a vicious circle. Rather, this open form of understanding can be best characterized as a “hermeneutical spiral.”⁴⁶

The Rehabilitation of Tradition

Deconstructionists, such as Jacques Derrida,⁴⁷ have questioned the alleged unity of a text in view of its inherent tensions and contradictions. Nevertheless, Gadamer insists on anticipating completeness and openness to the text as ways to overcome the charge of a vicious circle and the means through which one gets at the meaning of a text. Moreover, the idea of openness does not preclude the on-going authority of a tradition for understanding. In fact, it can be said that Gadamer strives for the rehabilitation of tradition in his hermeneutics. Interpreters have to assume that a text is authoritative and has something to teach each time they approach it. Their own critical reflection cannot, however, undermine authority on grounds independent of our prejudices. That is, the notion of authority based upon rational criticism is a mere dogmatic acceptance of authority because it is based on insight into the influence of historical prejudices. Thus, all judgments against authority are always fallible.⁴⁸ The positive recognition of authority is based not on the abdication of reason, nor on its subjugation in the face of overwhelming power, but on a reasoned

⁴⁵Warnke, 82-83.

⁴⁶James E. Culpepper, “The Value of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Philosophy for Christian Thought,” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), 121. Grant R. Osborne’s *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991) offers a helpful exposition of this idea.

⁴⁷Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

⁴⁸Warnke, 134-36.

acceptance of the superiority of the understanding of the other. Gadamer's point is thus clarified. Since understanding is historically situated and interpreters have no concept of rationality that is independent of the tradition to which they belong, the authority of that tradition must not, therefore, be denied.

Other appropriate questions may be addressed at this point. Since understanding is historically situated, can interpreters ever transcend the prejudices of their traditions and evaluate them according to some criteria of reason? Moreover, do all hermeneutical understandings of a tradition necessitate one's agreement with the claims of that tradition? In other words, how can interpreters avoid subjectivism of interpretation or mere apology for the claims of that tradition? Gadamer's answer to these questions is that the views of a tradition are not simply accepted but often modified in accordance with changing historical circumstances.⁴⁹ For the purpose of elaboration, Gadamer points to Aristotle's criticism of Plato's account of ethical knowledge.⁵⁰

The Notion of *Phronesis*

Gadamer's goal in understanding is not merely the mental dissection of an object, but the disclosure of a meaningful relationship with the truth of being that can guide individuals into actualization of the good possibilities they discover. This point is indicative of Gadamer's existential roots. As such, he views understanding as completed only in making one's insights effective in the concrete situation which raised the question behind the hermeneutic experience. He admits that his attempt to work out the implications of existential philosophy received from Kierkegaard led him to Aristotle's *phronesis* (practical rationality), or a knowledge of the moral good.⁵¹ As aforementioned, Aristotle was concerned with the concrete ethical

⁴⁹ Ibid., 92. Warnke notes that Gadamer answers this question by pointing to people's personal understanding as often analogous to the way in which their understanding of art is also representational or situational.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 92-98. According to Warnke, "Aristotle argues against Plato that ethical understanding is a form of knowledge distinct from metaphysics." For Plato, "the good for man" is idealistic and theoretical understanding. Aristotle, however, contrasts an understanding of "the good for man" that has to be concretized in practical situations. Ethical knowledge is more practical than theoretical, a matter that considers knowing how rather than knowing what (p. 92).

⁵¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Science of the Life-World," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 196.

implications of theoretical knowledge. Indeed, he viewed knowledge as incomplete unless and until interpreters find themselves bound by the validity of their viewpoints in practical life. Gadamer, too, shares these convictions and uses Aristotle's distinctions between theoretical and technical knowledge and *phronesis* to clarify his own concept of application.

Gadamer's account of Aristotle's *phronesis* is not merely another way of describing objective knowledge. It is not knowledge of objects that stands over against a knower, but it is a self-knowledge and a knowledge of the moral good that the situation demands of a knower. For Gadamer, Aristotle's practical knower "is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes, but he is directly affected by what he sees. It is something that he has to do."⁵² Only in the particular situation of existence, however, is the knower addressed with the demand for action. Thus, the implication for hermeneutics is clear. Practical knowledge, which seeks the human good, is not known in advance but emerges within the concrete, individual, conditioned experience of understanding.

Phronesis and Objective Knowledge

This discussion of *phronesis* must, however, be distinguished from other concepts of knowledge. In *phronesis* objective knowledge is certainly a component part of the whole. However, Gadamer attempts to distinguish *phronesis* from theoretical, detached notions of knowledge found in Greek concepts of *episteme* and *theoria*.⁵³ There are several objections raised against these so-called forms of objective knowledge. First, objective knowledge is knowledge of what is unchangeable and predictable, whereas practical or ethical knowledge deals with the infinite variety of and unpredictability of human situations and actions. Second, objective knowledge depends on inductive proofs and deductive inferences, but practical moral judgments are made and confirmed through dialogical experience. Third, objective knowledge seeks to establish and explain what exists; its pursuit and attainment are self-contained. Practical or ethical

⁵²Gadamer, *TM*, 275.

⁵³Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," in *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 88ff. Cf. *TM*, 280.

knowledge, however, goes beyond contemplation of truths to the governance of one's actions. Four, objective knowledge intrinsically assumes a distance from the object of knowledge, while practical or ethical knowledge, like hermeneutical understanding, sees that it belongs to an existential situation that has called it into consciousness and in which the knower must act. The end of *phronesis* is not detached deliberation and contemplation. Rather, it is application to an action within a concrete, given situation.

Phronesis and Technical Knowledge

A closer parallel exists, however, between *phronesis* and the Greek concept of *techné* (technical knowledge). In Gadamer's analysis of Aristotle's concepts of *phronesis* and *techné* these concepts differ with regard to the relation of knowledge to its application.⁵⁴ First, one can learn a technical knowledge or skill and also forget it, but one does not learn moral or practical knowledge in the same way. A technical skill has determinate objective components, which one can choose to acquire and to apply at one's pleasure. Practical decisions, however, are already demanded in the immediate situation, and so knowledge and its application cannot be chosen in advance. Practical or ethical knowledge suggests that the concrete situation affects it far greater than it affects technical knowledge. Furthermore, the principles and models to which practical or ethical knowledge look are never application as they stand, but must always be modified to suit individual circumstances. Practical or ethical knowledge is a matter of understanding what a general norm is or what its meaning may be in a particular concrete situation. In contrast, technical knowledge is a matter of fulfilling a general norm or paradigm as best as we can given our material and tools. The difference here is that practical or ethical knowledge affects the norm and paradigm in question.⁵⁵

Second, *phronesis* and *techné* differ concerning the nature of means and ends. Practical or ethical knowledge has no particular, predetermined end, but aims at right living in general. Technical knowledge focuses on the means to an end. One has a clear picture of that which one wants to produce, and simply needs to calculate the

⁵⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 283-89. Cf. Warnke, 92.

⁵⁵Warnke, 93.

most efficient way of producing or at least approximating it. *Phronesis* requires the individual to enter into unending deliberation with oneself over the “rightness” of the end while engaged with the particularity of each situation. There is an inherent uncertainty about the course of moral conduct, and the knowledge of it is itself part of the experience of life.⁵⁶ Practical or ethical knowledge is a matter of weighing various options against a general normative framework that is itself clarified through the options one chooses. For this reason, it can never simply involve the application of a formula but rather requires reflection.⁵⁷

Third, while *techne* has no intrinsic, existential relationship to the being of the craftsman, *phronesis* is aware of itself as determined by and determinative of the moral being of an individual. One can have *techne* and still deliberately do a bad job, but one who deliberately and habitually does what is wrong does not have *phronesis*. The genuine *arete* sought is not what is good for the individual, but what is good for the other person. Practical or ethical knowledge concerns the effects it has on others, as opposed to oneself. Individuals should not impose their knowledge or apply their own experiences to the situations of others. They should seek what is good for the other person involved, not that which might be good for themselves, and are therefore open to differences in experience and situation.⁵⁸ Gadamer cites Aristotle's comment on the crucial importance of “fellow-feeling” and friendship for moral action. Practical or ethical knowledge thus recognizes the importance of the community in its own understanding. Here, as elsewhere, then, practical or ethical knowledge involves an ability to apply general principles to different concrete situations. What is required is both a general understanding of the relevant ethical norms and a sensitivity to relevant differences in circumstances.

Like hermeneutical understanding, *phronesis* acknowledges the new possibility of meaning inherent in every experience. One does not discover the meaning of a text as an objective universal truth, and is

⁵⁶Warnke notes “although Aristotle claims that ethical knowledge is knowledge of the means, ends considered as means to further ends are clearly part of the ethical deliberation as well. The final end of such deliberation is the ‘good life’ in general but, in itself, this notion has no clear content. It is not a life of which we have a concrete image and to which various means can lead. Rather, the means one chooses to attain the good life itself affects what one takes life to be, just as what one understands by courage, honor or the good life in general will affect the means one chooses to achieve any of these” (p. 94).

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

later applied to particular situations. Rather, interpreters seek to understand what this piece of the tradition says to them and to the situation in which they stand. To do this, they can disregard neither themselves and their hermeneutical situation nor the situation of the text. Understanding the text means they will see how to relate the text to themselves, if they wish to understand at all.⁵⁹

EVALUATION

Gadamer's notion of understanding as application represents a significant paradigm shift away from Cartesian epistemology for understanding truth. For Gadamer, the nature of understanding is more ontological because it involves a fusion of the horizons of the text and the reader. Because of their situatedness in history, readers are not neutral, detached observers, and thus occupy a vantage point that limits and conditions what can be known. Gadamer calls a cultural or historical standpoint a "horizon." In other words, interpreters come to the text with certain prejudices or preunderstandings, which condition them in viewing the world in a particular way. At the same time, the text also has a horizon, for it, too, reflects the prejudices of previous interpretations. The act of interpretation is, therefore, like a dialogue in which readers expose themselves to the effects of the text, while the text is exposed to the reader's interests and prejudices. Understanding is a fusion of the horizons of the text and the reader.

Viewed in this way, it follows that a text does not yield a single correct interpretation. Given all the variables involved, there is no need to seek a so-called "correct" method of interpretation. Gadamer's argument stands in stark contrast to Hirsch, who insists that the goal of interpretation is the author's intended message.⁶⁰ For Gadamer, understanding "always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in different ways."⁶¹ In this sense, rationality reflects the interpretive community or tradition in which understanding takes place. Gadamer rehabilitates tradition by arguing that prejudices are conditions of understanding. He states, "Understanding is to be

⁵⁹Gadamer, *TM*, 289.

⁶⁰E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

⁶¹Gadamer, *TM*, 359.

thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition.”⁶² Understanding is not autonomous, but conditioned by one's place and time.

Strengths

Indeed, many evangelical scholars have recognized the overall contribution of Gadamer's philosophical work to theological hermeneutics. Among them, Maddox acknowledges the influence of preunderstanding, the concept of understanding as historically situated in a fusion of horizons, and the interconnectedness of Scripture and tradition as important factors for understanding.⁶³

Moreover, evangelicals are recognizing that there is a considerable measure of truth in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, at least in its critique of modernity, and are incorporating what they learn from him. One contribution of Gadamer's hermeneutical outlook for Christianity is that it stands to reason that science is not the final word on truth. Christian truth does not have to be proved scientifically in order to be true, because there is a truth in art (as Gadamer has so profoundly pointed out) that science is inadequate to reveal.⁶⁴ For example, worship within the Christian tradition is an act, which contains rational and nonrational elements. Similar to art, Christianity contains a nonrational element that is experienced. Christianity cannot simply be reduced to a system of beliefs but is also relational in nature.⁶⁵

Another notable contribution of Gadamerian hermeneutics to theological interpretation is the notion of the fusion of horizons. Many evangelical scholars have rightly acknowledged historical distance between the horizons of the text and the interpreter. Understanding, rightly conceived, is a fusion of horizons. The important question here is whether some accurate transfer of information is possible from the horizon of the text to that of the interpreter, even if it is not a perfect transfer. Undoubtedly, Gadamer denies objective truth. However,

⁶²Ibid., 290.

⁶³Maddox, 526-29.

⁶⁴Gadamer, *TM*, 102; idem, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 95-104.

⁶⁵Adams, 477-78.

Thiselton and others have turned the notion of the fusion of horizons to the service of biblical interpretation without having to sacrifice objective truth.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Osborne has ably demonstrated that this fusion or hermeneutical circle is better viewed as a hermeneutical spiral.⁶⁷

Evangelicals will agree that we treat the Bible as the reference point from which to examine our cultural biases and presuppositions. The results of that examination are then brought back to our interpretation of Scripture. This process or hermeneutical circle continues until the interpreter is satisfied that an adequate understanding has been reached. In this sense, the hermeneutical circle is not logically a vicious circle. Rather, it acts more like a spiral. The preference for a spiral image is that within the circle of presuppositionally conditioned interpretation it is possible for dialogue and critical questioning to develop between the elements in the text that do not cohere with the interpreter's presuppositions and those presuppositions themselves, and for both our interpretation and our presuppositions to be modified as a result.⁶⁸

Lastly, Gadamer's hermeneutics demonstrates the role that tradition plays in the interpretation of texts. The fact that theology is mediated to interpreters as the teaching of a community of believers raises the matter of tradition. In modernity, the subject sovereignly and disinterestedly uses methods to reach knowledge and truth. In the new hermeneutic (and in postmodernity), the priority is for subjects to acknowledge their own situatedness and interestedness. Therefore, understanding is to be thought of as participating in an event of tradition. That is to say interpreters always and only hold points of view from within particular histories, languages, and traditions—that is, horizons. Understanding is a matter of translating the text into the present situation so it can relevantly address contemporary readers. It follows, therefore, that to understand the text properly means to understand it in new and different ways.

Most evangelical interpreters believe, however, that there is a theology that is handed down, claiming to be faithful to and properly

⁶⁶Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, esp. 314-19.

⁶⁷Osborne, esp. 5-15.

⁶⁸Packer, 348.

based on divine revelation.⁶⁹ Although this theology is passed through tradition, it contains, nevertheless, objective truth because Scripture is itself authoritative and stands in hegemony over other sources of theology.⁷⁰ How should evangelicals properly respond to tradition? One, evangelicals need to recognize that tradition is an important component of theological interpretation. It is not to be dismissed lightly. There is, after all, a proper place for catechetical theology. Two, evangelicals should realize that tradition reflects the continuity of revelation in theology. Three, evangelicals need to recognize that tradition can, in principle, be criticized in developing theology and must not be determinative of it.⁷¹ Indeed, Gadamer teaches interpreters to be more aware of their historical, cultural location, and thus engender an increased interpretive sensitivity.

Weaknesses

Despite the many positive contributions, Gadamer's approach is not without its methodological problems. One, Gadamer's presupposition, which is rooted in Heideggerian existentialism, tends to be one-sided. In particular, his criticism of Plato's account of practical or ethical knowledge seems, on the one hand, to provide helpful clarification. Yet, on the other hand, it also seems that he relies too much on Aristotle's argument against Plato that ethical understanding is a form of knowledge distinct from metaphysics. In asserting this point, it is clear that Gadamer's reliance upon existentialism has cast his philosophical hermeneutics in the realm of metaphysics.

Second, Gadamer's reliance on Heideggerian existentialism

⁶⁹See, for example, A. N. S. Lane, "Scripture, Tradition, and Church," *Vox Evangelica* 8 (1975): 37-58; and John Van Engen, "Tradition," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 1211-13.

⁷⁰Not all evangelicals will agree on the objective, propositional nature of divine revelation. For a succinct discussion on the "reformist" or "left-wing" evangelicals, see Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997). In particular, Grenz has attacked the view of propositional, verbal revelation associated with Carl F. H. Henry, and argues for a view of theology as "contextual." Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993); *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1994), 8; and Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001), 16-17.

⁷¹Craig A. Blasing, "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145/578 (April-June 1988): 133-40; and Carson, 126-29.

undermines the objective nature of historical events.⁷² By this, he inherited Bultmann's dichotomy of the Jesus of history (*Historie*) and the Christ of faith (*Geschichte*), and only considered the church's *kerygma* as having existential significance for contemporary culture.⁷³ Moreover, Gadamer speaks of Jesus primarily in terms of his language, and does not accord that language with Jesus' divine status. What Gadamer fails to appreciate is that language does not have independent status apart from the person who speaks, and therefore, cannot be separated from the intentionality of the speaker. As a result, language is primarily viewed for its existential efficacy on the present reader, but without reference to God.⁷⁴ Carson bluntly asserts that the proponents of the new hermeneutic (including Gadamer) hold to approaches that "are too closely allied with unacceptable ideological commitments in which the only absolute is language itself."⁷⁵

Writers have observed a paradox or tension in Gadamer, especially when his view on the immutability of the content of Scripture is juxtaposed with his openness to existential philosophy.⁷⁶ The truth claim of Scripture is not the story about God and mankind, or about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, though these and other stories have a verifiable content. Rather, the truth is the meaning these have for the fate, hope, and expectation of mankind.⁷⁷ Theological hermeneutics, Gadamer writes, "assumes that the word of Scripture addresses us and that only the person who allows himself to be addressed—whether he believes or whether he doubts—understands. Hence the primary thing is application."⁷⁸ The goal of the sermon is "to reach the simple person in such a way that he realizes that he is addressed and intended."⁷⁹

⁷²Adams, 477.

⁷³Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology," 209.

⁷⁴Gruenler, 830.

⁷⁵D. A. Carson, "Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends," *Themelios* 5/2 (January 1980): 20.

⁷⁶According to Culpepper (pp. 132-33), Gadamer holds to a high Lutheran view of Scripture as the Word of God and the doctrine of salvation. Moreover, he claims that Scripture has a privileged "absolute priority over the teaching of those who interpret it (*TM*, 295). Nevertheless, Gadamer insists on demythologizing the NT in order to uncover the existential meaning of the text (*TM*, 295-96). Cf. idem, "Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology," 205-09.

⁷⁷Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Religious and Poetic Speaking," in *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*, ed. Alan Olson (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 92.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, *TM*, 297.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," in *Reason in the Age of Science*, 129.

Similarly, Thiselton concludes that the new hermeneutic is more concerned with how interpreters may understand the NT text more deeply and creatively than how they may understand it correctly. Although the new hermeneutic embodies a one-sided view of the nature of language and is concerned with the “rights” of the text over against the concepts of the interpreter, Thiselton, nevertheless, believes the danger of neglecting the contributions of the new hermeneutic is greater than carrying out its claims too far.⁸⁰ Alternatively, along with others, he has incorporated the positive contributions of the new hermeneutic, yet maintaining a place for objective truth.⁸¹

Especially intriguing in this regard is the approach of Vanhoozer, who uses contemporary linguistics and speech act theory to argue that God’s communication is not merely propositional, but is also illocutionary in its nature. That is, God is not concerned primarily with relaying information but with performing actions leading to effectual results. For Vanhoozer, understanding language according to its illocutions is the key task of interpretation.⁸² Although Vanhoozer maintains a place for objective truth, he is sympathetic to the work by Ricoeur.⁸³ The French philosopher’s work on hermeneutics is impressive, but his insistence on reconciling contradicting perspectives in virtually every domain of inquiry begs the question of whether the apprehension of objective truth is realistic.⁸⁴ This sort of uncertainty is reflected in Vanhoozer’s distinction between meaning at the level of “transcendental conditions” and the variety of meanings at the level of

⁸⁰Thiselton, “The New Hermeneutic,” 323-29.

⁸¹The studies on this subject are voluminous. See, for example, Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*; idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 397-15; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), 283-84; Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 30-31; Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 120-21; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

⁸²Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). Cf. Scott A. Blue, “Meaning, Intention, and Application: Speech Act Theory in the Hermeneutics of Francis Watson and Kevin J. Vanhoozer,” *Trinity Journal* 23/2 (Fall 2002): 161-84.

⁸³Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁸⁴R. D. Geivett, “Paul Ricoeur,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 1033.

the text.⁸⁵

The matter of objective truth is of great importance for the spiritual health and vitality of evangelicalism.⁸⁶ If evangelicalism is defined, in its most basic characteristic, as a movement in which an eternal gospel message is preserved and communicated, then how can that be compatible with Gadamer's claim of the nature of understanding as ever shifting and changing? In addition, Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition or the idea of an interpretive community is appropriate, yet problematic at the same time. If understanding absolutely depends, as Gadamer claims, on a framework that is shared by a community but with few outside of it, then how can one avoid the conclusion that some beliefs may be acceptable for a particular community, but should not be presented as demanding assent outside that community?

The kind of hermeneutic which Gadamer embraces cannot inform the reader what information, if any, comes from the text in the language-event. It is also unable to discern what the text means historically and objectively as a result of grammatico-historical exegesis. In essence, Gadamer seemingly repudiates a clear subject-object distinction in the interpretation of a text.⁸⁷ Thus, Gadamer's denial of revealed truth, concomitantly linked with his rejection of the subject-object frame of reference for knowing God in the Bible renders his philosophical hermeneutic as some form of unbridled relativism.⁸⁸

CONCLUSION

The passing, in December 2003, of Carl F. H. Henry, the "Grand Old Man" of American evangelicalism, was a landmark in the history

⁸⁵Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 148-87, 405-41.

⁸⁶A few valuable essays include: Carl F. H. Henry, "The Priority of Divine Revelation: A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 27/1 (March 1984): 77-92; Gary Percesepe, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being Postmodern," in *Christian Scholars Review* 20/2 (1990): 118-35; Gordon R. Lewis, "Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46/2 (June 2003): 269-98; Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997): 69-82; and Robert Stein, "The Author is King in Biblical Interpretation," *Southern Seminary Magazine* 69/4 (Winter 2001): 16-17.

⁸⁷Packer, 342-44; Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 70; Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 100; Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Tradition," 152-53.

⁸⁸Packer, 344.

of evangelicalism. His brand of evangelicalism was underscored by a strong belief in the objective revelation of God in the Bible.⁸⁹ Although his view of propositional, verbal revelation has been criticized by a newer group of “reformist” or “postmodern” evangelicals such as Stanley Grenz, as a leftover of Enlightenment rationalism, Henry insists that their views will be “also-ran” ideas, questing for new alternatives. According to Henry, postmodern theology, expressed in a “communitarian” vision in particular, is already looking for such alternatives to its failed proposals.⁹⁰ The contemporary denial of objective truth can certainly be traced to the radical hermeneutics of deconstructionism, and ultimately to the new hermeneutic of Gadamer.⁹¹

The purpose of this article is to acknowledge, within an evangelical framework, certain contributions of Gadamer and the new hermeneutic, without adopting their entire program. Interpreters still need to acknowledge the Bible as objective truth, and thus seek to do sound exegesis. The goal of a sound hermeneutics is to capture a pure biblical theology, which is a presentation of the unchanging biblical teachings valid for all times. Biblical theology is simply theology which is biblical. Systematic theology, in turn, must find its basis in biblical theology, if it is to be sound in its presentation of biblical truths. The hermeneutics, then, will determine the system of theology. As Packer observes, “Ever since Karl Barth linked his version of Reformation teaching on biblical authority with a method of interpretation that at key points led away from Reformation beliefs, hermeneutics has been the real heart of the ongoing debate about Scripture. Barth was always clear that every theology stands or falls as a hermeneutic and every hermeneutic stands or falls as a theology.”⁹² Our examination of Gadamer bears this out—that all theology is necessarily hermeneutical and hermeneutics is necessarily theological—and Christian theologians and Bible interpreters need to give careful attention to both. The debate over theological hermeneutics—whether the location of the meaning of the text is to be found in the author-centered approach or the reader-

⁸⁹For example, see his *magnum opus*, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976-83).

⁹⁰Russell D. Moore, “A Conversation with Carl F. H. Henry,” *Southern Seminary Magazine* 69/4 (Winter 2001): 3.

⁹¹Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 65-92.

⁹²Packer, 325.

centered approach—will continue to be the most important issue for evangelicals in the twenty-first century.⁹³ This issue will also prove to become the defining line between liberal and conservative evangelicalism.

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⁹³Stein, 17.

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