

# Grammatical-Historical Interpretation and the Authority of Scripture

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In every age there is the need for solid and orthodox Bible interpretation. The church, throughout history, has suffered for the errors of her expositors. Too often, their assumptions and methods of hermeneutics were not true to Scripture. Too often, erroneous claims of truth or false methods adapted from the society around them have informed interpretive methods. This is true whether we look at the church in the early centuries and the allegorical interpretations of that age, or the 20<sup>th</sup> Century church and the influence of Barthianism.

In setting forth the proper method of interpretation, one taken from the Bible itself, our Confession of Faith notes two important principles. First, is Scripture's self-interpretive sufficiency: *...when there is a question about the true or full sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly (WCF 1.9).* Second is a clause which asserts Scripture's interpretive exclusivity, denying to all outside sources of authority the settlement of Biblical questions: *The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be none other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture (WCF 1.10).* Together these clauses set forth the internal self-sufficiency of the written Word of God. There is within the pages of Scripture, sufficient material to inform the reader as to its meaning. The grammar, and the various shades of meaning for words in their usage, are self-revealing. Furthermore, the culture is sufficiently described and the history adequately related in the pages of Scripture to inform the proper interpretation. In short, nothing is lacking. Nothing need be added to the Scripture to arrive at the correct understanding.

This is not to say that the correct understanding, available from the pages of Scripture, might not be supplemented by outside material. Certainly Josephus' description of the destruction of Jerusalem, for example, helps us to a fuller understanding of those events. But the discernment of the meaning of those scriptures related to the event as predicted by Christ and the Apostles, is not suspended upon the presence of a secular history. It was ascertainable by orthodox exposition without such history. Now, in just the same way cultural factors are sufficiently revealed in the pages of Scripture. So also is the relevant historical material. Whatever supplementation we allow, must always be subservient to the ascertainable meaning of Scripture taken from the text. And this is the only way that the authority of Scripture can be maintained.

Modern orthodox expositors have identified their method of interpretation as Grammatical-Historical, a name probably originating with Karl A. G. Keil in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. It is the thesis of this paper that the name is unfortunate - and the method, as taught by leading teachers on the subject, is contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is contrary to the Confession on the important points of self-interpretative sufficiency, and interpretive exclusivity.

As soon as we introduce the word *historical* into our interpretive label, we have an important question to answer: *Where are we getting our history from?* If we are getting it from the Bible, then the word *historical* is not particularly descriptive of the thing we are doing. The old phrase *Scripture interprets Scripture* is a much better catch word - and the method would be better named *Scriptural-Grammatical* or something similar. Moreover, to the extent that expositors are not self-conscious about getting their history from the Scripture itself, the term is counterproductive. For it uncritically suggests that any source of history might do. As we will see, this is exactly what Grammatical-Historical expositors are doing when it comes to passages that are the source of controversy. On numerous occasions, the difficult text is solved by some fact of history found outside the Bible. History, then, becomes the definitive element in ascertaining the true meaning of the text, and we are left dependent upon the secular historian, geologist, archeologist, anthropologist, and philosopher.

An amusing example of this comes from the Health-Wealth-Prosperity hucksters. I once heard such a man preaching in exposition of the text of Mt 19:24: *..It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.* My friend explained that the ancient cities all had various gates, and one of these gates was called the needle - so called because it was low and small. For a camel to go through the eye of the needle - he had to stoop down very low - and thus a rich man must humble himself in order to enter the kingdom. Note how the definitive issue used in exposition is the *needle* - an historical fact without source or citation. This fixes the meaning of the text - it is supposedly about humility - and it is therefore acceptable to seek riches as the blessing of God, so long as you are humble. Of course the exposition is opposed to the sense supplied by the context, particularly vs 25 and the disciples amazement: *Who then can be saved?* Nevertheless, we see here how *history* becomes the ringer - the factor that definitively changes the meaning of the text.

Turning now to orthodox men who teach Grammatical-Historical exposition, we see this same error. Chief of the historical errors concerns the creation account. We must never forget that the evolutionary theories that stand behind every attempt to modify the sense of Genesis 1&2 are *historical*. Men begin with what they know to have happened in history. They know it because Scientists have definitively determined the earth's age through empirical analysis and uniformitarian logic. The whole world stands in agreement that this is the case. So that, as expositors, these men know history first, and then come to the Bible to make it fit.

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<sup>1</sup>Biblical Hermeneutics, Milton S. Terry, pg101.

Bernard Ramm explains: *It must be kept in mind that Genesis 1 is in outline form. Contemporary works which endeavor to sketch the salient facts of the universe run up to five hundred pages. Genesis sums up creation in thirty-four verses (Gen 1:1 to 2:3). The extreme brevity of the account must temper all our exegesis of it. Trying to read too much specific detail into this sketch can cause needless conflict with science. It is always problematic to go from the let there be of Genesis to the modus operandi... It is the province of the sciences to fill in the details of what is in outline form in the Bible. Science should not preempt to itself the first principles of the biblical account, nor should theologians endeavor to dictate to the scientists empirical details..*<sup>2</sup>.

Ramm's method, giving factual priority to history outside of Scripture leads him to conclude: *The Bible is errant in historical, factual, and numerical matters which do not affect its faith and morals.*<sup>3</sup> Such a view is the end result of his methods, and men willing to be more consistent with his presuppositions will recognize that his stopping point is only arbitrary.

Louis Berkhof is faithful to Scripture on his view of Genesis. In his Systematic Theology, he is willing to insist that the record in the first two chapters is historical, as over and against the claims of science. Still in his hermeneutic procedure, he has not adequately distinguished between the legitimate and illegitimate use of history. Many of his statements could be taken as affirming the legitimacy of secular history as *necessary* to understanding the text. For example: *It is impossible to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against the proper historical background*<sup>4</sup>. Or, *...On turning from the Old Testament to the New, the interpreter encounters a situation for which he is entirely unprepared, unless he has made a study of the inter-testamentary period*<sup>5</sup>. This again raises the question as to the source of historical background. To his credit, Berkhof does clearly send us to the Scripture: *The principal resources for historical interpretation of Scripture are found in the Bible itself*<sup>6</sup>. Yet, at the critical point in interpretation of a difficult text he is willing to cede interpretation to secular history: *The great significance of historical knowledge is brought to him when he encounters a passage like 1Cor 15:29, referring as it does to a custom of which we have no certain knowledge*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, Bernard Ramm, pg212.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid pg 201.

<sup>4</sup>Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Louis Berkhof, pg 114.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid pg 122.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid pg128.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid pg 124.

We should dwell on this example for a minute. 1Cor 15:29 reads: *Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?* Berkhof has given up on the internal exposition of Scripture at this juncture. He is saying that the answer to the Scripture's meaning lies somewhere in historical knowledge - a knowledge that is not available to us or to him at the present. In the context, the Apostle is arguing for the truth of the resurrection of the dead, from the doctrine of Christ's own resurrection. At vs 29 he shifts the argument, affirming this practice of baptism for the dead as another testimony of the resurrection's truth. It is clear in context, that whatever the practice is, the Apostle is affirming it in some way. Now if we concede the issue - that it refers to a custom of which we have no certain knowledge - then we expose ourselves to the corrupting influences of uninspired history, geology, archeology, anthropology, philosophy, or anything else that comes down the pike.

Imagine now that some Jesuit, working in Africa discovers evidence of a colony there, dated to the mid first century, where there was a practice of proxy baptism<sup>8</sup> on behalf of dead relatives. The obvious conclusion is that the practice was much more widespread than we might otherwise have believed - why Paul referred to this in his letter to the Corinthians. Here is a practice which is clearly, thus, biblical - and is similar in principle to the practice of issuing indulgences on behalf of dead relatives. Rome's errors, may thus be bolstered by the method.

The truth of the matter is this: on such a principle of interpretation - where the definitive meaning of a difficult text is ceded to secular history - we don't know what we will end up with in conclusion. It is a Pandora's Box of heretical possibilities.

Greg Bahnsen practices the same approach in his taped presentations on hermeneutics. After a brilliant analysis of the Book of Revelation, illustrating the grammatical approach to exegesis, in the next tape he turns to illustrating historical method. Bahnsen chooses for his illustration the difficult text of 1Cor 11:1-16, and the issue of head covering. His conclusion is that the text mandates well set hair for the women of the church. The idea is that women should not come to church disheveled - because in so doing they look like prostitutes. The critical feature in this analysis is an historical fact - that in the first century, prostitutes were punished by having their heads shaved. There is no source cited for this historical fact, and yet this becomes definitive in determining the meaning. Once again, an unspecified outside source for history has supplied the critical material for making a definitive interpretation of a difficult text. The Bible is, thus, made subservient to history. Here I can add, that not only is there no source for this, but Scripture's internal evidence mitigates against such a conclusion. The Pharisees proposed execution for the woman caught in adultery, and that is clearly the punishment in the law. Moreover the example in Scripture of women shaving the head is Deut 21:10-13, which concerns captive women coming under authority of a new husband. We ought rather to look here, than outside of Scripture.

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<sup>8</sup> Proxy Baptism is Bernard Ramm's term see Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, Bernard Ramm, pg105. In his comment on this text, Ramm perceives the problem his method creates, and so he warns: Paul's reference...is so enigmatic to us today that no doctrine should ever be built upon it.

The class from which Greg Bahnsen's tapes were taken was required to read two books: Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: the Search for Meaning; and Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton's Let the Reader Understand. Both works are by men who consider themselves Grammatical-Historical exegetes, both works use history in the way we are discussing, and both are also heavily influenced by Existentialism, and the problematics it raises.

Kaiser & Silva's work moves beyond simple historical ringers in weaving a tangled web of assumptions based upon supposed historical and cultural details: *Attention to the historical setting also includes sensitivity to the cultural background of the parables. Western readers in the twentieth century have their own set of assumptions, which do not always correspond with those of Jesus' hearers. Inevitably, we tend to lose some of the nuances. For example, the request of the son - Give me my share of the estate - would likely have been interpreted as a wish for his father's death. In any case, the incident would create a rift between the son and his family (and even the town as a whole) much more severe than would be the case if the same words were spoken in our society.*

*Another interesting detail is the fact that the elder brother, in that situation, would have been expected to do all he could to reconcile his brother to the father. Not only does he fail to do that, but he even accepts his own share of the inheritance. In other words, from the very beginning of the story the elder brother is put in a bad light. He actually shares in the sin of his brother, and that gives us a better perspective with which to understand his self-righteous indignation at the end of the story.*

*Finally, when we read about the father running to meet the younger son, we view that merely as an expression of joy. In the Middle East, however, particularly in rural areas, a mature man is expected always to walk slowly and with dignity. It is likely that the father in the parable runs to protect the son from the children in the town, who might decide to meet him with stones. In doing so, however, the father humbles himself and becomes a powerful picture of the God of Grace<sup>9</sup>.*

They go so far as to say: *In other words we have to read between the lines so as to reconstruct the historical context. For this reason some people may object to our emphasis on historical interpretation. They will argue that this approach injects too much subjectivity into the process, since different scholars will come up with different reconstructions<sup>10</sup>.*

That is quite an admission. Here, they are sensible that their interjection of history is not duplicatable - different scholars will come up with different results when we read between the lines. There is little difference between this and James Jordan's Interpretive Maximalism.

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<sup>9</sup> An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: the Search for Meaning, Walter C. Kaiser & Moises Silva, pg 113.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid pg 126-127.

Notice also, this is not some difficult text solved by reference to history outside the Bible. This is a familiar parable of Jesus. These men are coming up with novelties significantly affecting the meaning. Like magicians pulling rabbits out of their hats they seek to woo and awe the audience.

McCartney and Clayton also consider themselves to be a part of the Grammatical-Historical school. However, their main concern is to introduce a new motif: *We do not wish to deny the value of grammatical-historical exegesis; indeed we believe it is crucial, but we deny that it should be ultimately grounded on human reason, or that it is totally adequate. It is rather best grounded on the NT writers use of the OT, which is itself based on the principle of the consistency of redemptive history. God's revelation in the historical events of the OT really does look forward to the Christ*<sup>11</sup>.

The approach they propose to introduce would be called Redemptive-Historical Interpretation. It is influenced by the Kantian Philosophy and the Modernism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Their treatment of the history of interpretation at this point is quite amazing: *Up until Kant, readers generally assumed that there was an objective content to a text, and this is what is directly perceived by the interpreter. But Kant's dialectic which set human freedom and understanding over against nature as object had introduced a gap between the interpreter's understanding of a text and its scientifically describable character. One of the great contributions of Schleiermacher was to think through some of these matters...*<sup>12</sup>

*Schleiermacher thus identified two sides to the process of understanding a text: an objective side, which focused on the text itself, its words, grammar, and such, which he called grammatical interpretation, and a subjective side, which attempts to step out of one's own frame of mind into that of the author... Essentially, Schleiermacher laid the methodological groundwork for grammatical-historical exegesis as it is practiced today...*<sup>13</sup>

The mind of the author McCartney and Clayton ultimately impose is a redemptive-historical mind. That is, the existential meaning of the text is derived from relating the words or events to this history of redemption. The by-product of this approach, or perhaps its original motivation, is that it trumps debate over *Theonomy*, in Christian ethical norms. *Biblical law is subordinate to biblical redemptive history.*<sup>14</sup> *The Law is thus not abrogated or reduced in importance, but it is bound up with redemption... the first principle in interpreting a legal or ethical passage in the Bible is to place it in its redemptive historical context. This identifies in what way the passage*

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<sup>11</sup> Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible, Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, Pg 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid pg 99.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid pg 99-100.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid pg 213.

now relates to the church.<sup>15</sup>

McCartney and Clayton have a few rabbits themselves. Now, however, the errors in making history authoritative in the interpretation of texts, have a new focus: *redemptive history*. Furthermore, just like as with Kaiser and Silva, it is not merely some difficult text that is the object of manipulation - but the entire text of Scripture is to be recast in terms of the methodology:

*Occasionally, knowledge of the social situation shows how a seemingly miscellaneous event in the OT relates to God's redemptive activity. Remember when Elisha made the axe-head float (2Ki 6:4-6)? This seems to us to be a rather unnecessary miracle. But two things in the text are stressed: that the axe-head was iron, and that it was borrowed. This took place right at the beginning of the iron age, when iron smelting was a military secret, and iron axes were extremely valuable. Further, since it was borrowed, the disappearance of the axe-head was for the borrower a sentence of lifetime slavery. The floating of the axe-head was the man's redemption.*<sup>16</sup>

Just how this relates to ethics ought to be considered. The standard interpretation<sup>17</sup> of this text connects it with the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment and the duty of men *...by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others...*<sup>18</sup> It is related to the care that the borrower is to take over borrowed goods as taught in Ex 22:14-15 compared with Mt 19:19. Understood this way, the text exemplifies godly application of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment - and the man's natural reaction was grief over the loss of that which belonged to his neighbor - regardless of the cost of the thing. The redemptive historical hermeneutic dismisses such examples - and turning to history recasts the use of the text in light of what it thinks it finds there. The man's reaction is now motivated by self-interest, a perception and foreshadowing of the need for redemption.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid pg 214.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid pg 146.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Matthew Henry A Commentary on the Whole Bible at this place: They were honest men, and men that were in care to give all men their own. When one of them, accidently fetching too fierce a stroke (as those that work seldom are apt to be too violent), threw off his axe-head into the water, he did not say, It was a mischance, and who can help it? It was the fault of the helve, and the owner deserves to stand the loss. No, he cries out with deep concern, alas master! For it was borrowed, v. 5. Had the axe been his own, it would only have troubled him that he could not be further serviceable to his brethren; but now, besides that, it troubles him... Note, we ought to be as careful of that which is borrowed as of that which is our own, that it receive no damage, because we must love our neighbor as ourselves....

<sup>18</sup> Larger Catechism Question 141.

On the basis of such an approach, every text of Scripture is in play. Furthermore, secular history is available to be mined for all sorts of information that will be used to recast the text. This is indeed the program of Schleiermacher and Karl Barth - the only difference being that the recasting is to be done in order to read redemption and not merely as a result of Kantian epistemology. Without self-conscious controls on the use of history, the possibilities are, thus, endless.

In each of these examples, facts known apart from the Bible are used to place definitive interpretation upon its text. In time, the simple error in methodology gives way to a self-conscious recasting of Scripture's message to bring it in consonance with various philosophies which are imposed upon Scripture. The approach of McCartney and Clayton is still the approach of Modernism, no matter that the conclusions being sought accidentally happen to be more orthodox. It is the approach that is in error - an approach which compromises the doctrine of Scripture's self-interpretive sufficiency and interpretive exclusivity as taught in the Confession of Faith. It is, thus, deadly to the authority of Scripture.

R.L. Dabney, in his *Lectures in Systematic Theology* warns: *...(U)nless the Bible has its own ascertainable and certain law of exposition, it can not be a rule of faith, our religion is but rationalism. I repeat, if any part of the bible must wait to have its real meaning imposed upon it by another, and a human science, that part is at least meaningless and worthless to our souls. It must expound itself independently; making other sciences ancillary, and not dominant over it.*<sup>19</sup>

This quote lays bare the true implications of the methods we are analyzing. It was said in light of the oppositions of science in Dabney's day, but is equally applicable to all that we have seen.

We turn now to the work of Milton S. Terry entitled Biblical Hermeneutics. Terry was a Methodist Episcopal professor and contemporary of R. L. Dabney. He also is of the Grammatical-Historical School, and as we analyze his work, it appears to be free of the errors we have been discussing. In practical terms, Terry's work is the best of the five works on hermeneutics covered in this essay. It is long enough to provide practical examples of the principles he elucidates, so the statement of principle does not hang out there in thin air. Rather, his general discussion of principles is followed by a detailed exegesis of various texts. Moreover, he picks difficult or controversial texts to exposit, so that as a guide, the student is carried through the principles in a way that is practically enlightening. His sense of the Scripture is generally very good, and he teaches a restraint in the use of Scripture, that is refreshing<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Lectures in Systematic Theology, R.L. Dabney, pg 257.

<sup>20</sup> This statement should not be taken as an affirmation of all of Milton Terry's conclusions. He does poorly on the discernment of the meaning of tongues in the Book of Acts, for example. However, the errors he makes in exposition seem to be the failure to consistently apply his own principles.



Terry insists: *(T)hat the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are a world by themselves. Although written at sundry times, and devoted to many different themes, taken altogether they constitute a self-interpreting book. The old rule, therefore that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, is a most important principle of sacred hermeneutics.*<sup>21</sup> In relationship to the use of history Terry says: *Herein we note the import of the term grammatico-historical interpretation. We are not only to grasp the grammatical import of words and sentences, but also to feel the force and bearing of the historical circumstances which may in any way have affected the writer. Hence, too, it will be seen how intimately connected may be the object or design of a writing and the occasion which prompted its composition. The individuality of the writer, his local surroundings, his wants and desires, his relation to those for whom he wrote, his nationality and theirs, the character of the times when he wrote - all these matters are of the first importance to a thorough interpretation of the several books of Scripture. A knowledge of geography, history, chronology, and antiquities, has already been mentioned as an essential qualification of the biblical interpreter. Especially should he have a clear conception of the order of the events connected with the whole course of sacred history..*<sup>22</sup>.

We should note here the primary focus that Terry makes is upon sacred history as opposed to the secular history used by the other writers. He clearly conceives of a subordination of all other materials to the text and statements of Scripture: *It would seem much easier to account for the confusion of tradition on the date of John's banishment than to explain away the definite references of the Apocalypse itself to the temple, the court, and the city as still standing when the book was written*<sup>23</sup>.

What we can say at this point is: conceptually with respect to its practice, Terry's work speaks its agreement with the Confessional Articles as to the self-interpretive sufficiency, and the interpretive exclusivity of Scripture. The work contains two to three times the amount of exegetical example as any of the others, and furnishes no practical examples of the abuses we have surveyed.

However, one further point needs to be made with respect to the use of history, which Terry has not properly discerned. This is evident in his willingness to follow Westcott and Hort's reading of 1Cor 2:7-11, which he justifies in a footnote as follows: *This reading has the strong support of Codex B, and would have been quite liable to be changed to the more numerous supported reading...by reason of a failure to apprehend the somewhat involved connection of thought...*<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>Biblical Hermeneutics, Milton S. Terry, pg 120.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid pg 129.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid pg 137.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid pg 30.

Here, we enter into our final confrontation with history - one that takes us back to the Garden of Eden and to the words of the Serpent to our first parents: Yea hath God indeed said .

That there are textual variations in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament is to be expected, considering the method of copying the text by recitation and hand. The sheer numbers of New Testament texts and fragments, over 5700, also magnifies this problem. Hearing, eyesight, and lighting, were all factors that complicated the quest for a exact copy or copies. On the other hand, Scripture itself indicates that other motives for variant readings might also enter in, warning the potential adulterator of the consequences in Rev 22:18-19. Now with modern means of communication, and scholarship there has arisen a crisis over the question of which text of the New Testament should be considered authoritative. The Byzantine or Syrian manuscripts that stand behind Textus Receptus and the Authorized Version of the English Bible have now fallen into disfavor with scholars, despite the fact that the vast majority of manuscripts concur with their readings. Scholars have taken a preference for the Alexandrian texts and their variant readings, on historical grounds.

This problem came to the forefront with the work of Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, two Anglican Priests who were critical of the Received Text. They eventually published their own manuscript of the New Testament. The theory that they used to justify the need for this work is a historical construct or a story which they wove together, to explain the supposed reasons for variations that could not be traced to simple copyist errors. Their program, as well as the program of textual criticism that has followed in their footsteps is based solely upon speculation. Yet, it is remarkable the level of clarity with which they presume to speak when supposedly analyzing variations in the ancient manuscripts. Speaking with regard to the Byzantine class of texts, Bruce Metzger explains:

*The latest of these four forms of the text is the Syrian, which is a mixed text resulting from a revision made by an editor or editors in the fourth century who wished to produce a smooth, easy, and complete text. This conflated text, the farthest removed from the originals, was taken to Constantinople, whence it was disseminated widely throughout the Byzantine Empire. It is best represented today by Codex Alexandrinus (in the Gospels, not in Acts and the Epistles), the later majuscule manuscripts, and the great mass of minuscule manuscripts. The Textus Receptus is the latest form of the Syrian text. Hort's classic description of the Syrian text is as follows:*

*The qualities that the authors of the Syrian text seem to have most desired to impress on it are lucidity and completeness. They were evidently anxious to remove all stumbling blocks out of the way of the ordinary reader, so far as this could be done without recourse to violent measures. They were apparently equally desirous that he should have the benefit of instructive matter contained in all the existing texts, provided it did not confuse the context or introduce seeming contradictions. New omissions accordingly are rare, and where they occur are usually found to contribute to apparent simplicity. New interpolations on the other hand are abundant, most of them being due to harmonistic or other assimilation, fortunately capricious and incomplete. Both in matter and diction the*

*Syrian text is conspicuously a full text. It delights in pronouns, conjunctions, and expletives and supplied links of all kinds, as well as in more considerable additions. As distinguished from the bold vigor of the Western scribes, and the refined scholarship of the Alexandrians, the spirit of its own corrections is at once sensible and feeble. Entirely blameless on either literary or religious grounds as regards vulgarized or unworthy diction, yet showing no marks of either critical or spiritual insight, it presents the New Testament in a form smooth and attractive, but appreciably impoverished in sense and force, more fitted for cursory perusal or recitation than for repeated and diligent study.*<sup>25</sup>

Keep in mind, these men are looking at nothing other than New Testament manuscripts. There are no records of how the manuscripts were produced or circulated. This is pure speculation. And, upon this basis, they propose to place relative value on one class of texts over another. In fact the program of classifying texts into families originated with them.

Here is one more example of how history in the hands of men, trumps the word of God. But, history in this case is not some fact of history being brought in as a ringer. Neither is it the recasting of an entire sequence of events in terms of historical concepts brought in from the outside. This time we have an *historical construct* that comes to us as a supposed response to the problem of variant readings. But, it is a *construct* that originates in the mind of man, which is then superimposed upon the Scripture. Its domain is to sit in judgment upon the written Word of God, as such. And it will speak authoritatively as to what the Word of God shall be. Man, and man's thinking is the final reference point, as he sets himself up in autonomy to preside over settlement of the issue.

Just how closely this corresponds to the events of our first Father's fall is worthy of comment. Cornelius Van Til explains:

*The story of Adam in paradise is familiar... The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was indicated to Adam as a test by which God would bring man to a fully self-conscious reaction to his will. Man was created good... (E)ven so, God would have man become fully and wholly spontaneous and self-conscious in every sense of the word in his attitude toward God. God wanted man to accept God's judgment of criterion as that to which man would gladly and lovingly submit.*

*At the instigation of Satan man decided to set himself up as the ultimate standard of right and wrong, of true and false. He made himself, instead of God, the final reference point in predication.*

*For the question of knowledge this implied the rejection of God as able to identify himself in*

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<sup>25</sup> The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Bruce M. Metzger & Bart D. Ehrman, pg 177-178.

*terms of himself to man, and with it the rejection of God as the source of truth for man. Instead of seeking an analogical system of knowledge, man after this sought an original system of knowledge. This means that God was reduced with him to the necessity of seeking truth in an ultimately mysterious environment. In other words, it implied that in setting up himself as independent, man was declaring that there was no one above him on whom he was dependent. But man even then knew that he was not ultimate. He knew that he had no control of reality and its possibilities. So what his declaration of independence amounted to was an attempt to bring God down with himself into an ocean of pure contingency or abstract possibility.*

*Moreover, pure contingency in metaphysics and pure irrationalism in epistemology go hand in hand. Abstract possibility in metaphysics and ultimate mystery in epistemology are involved in one another. To this must be added that in ethics this involved the denial of God's right to issue any commandment for man. For the natural man, reality, truth and goodness must be what he thinks they must be. They can not be what Christ says they are.*

*At the fall then, man virtually told God that he did not and could not know what would happen if he (man) should eat of the forbidden tree .... It was therefore by implication a flat denial of God's being able to identify himself...*

*It was thus that man, in rejecting the covenantal requirement of God became at one and the same time both irrationalist and rationalist. These two are not, except formally, contradictory of one another. They rather imply one another. Man had to be both to be either. To be able to identify himself apart from God, man had to distinguish himself as an individual from all relationships of the system of which he is actually a part...*

*It is with this background in mind, frankly taken from Scripture as authoritative, that we can interpret with some measure of intelligence the history of human thought. There are many schools of philosophy... (B)ut all these schools must be seen in the light of the analysis made of them in Scripture. The main question that can be asked about any system of thought is whether it is man-centered or God-centered. Does it make the Creator-Redeemer or the creature the final reference point in predication?<sup>26</sup>*

Note the principles cited by Van Til: In the Garden, God wanted man to accept God's judgment of criteria - man chose to impose his own. At the instigation of Satan man set himself up as the standard of true and false. For the question of knowledge this implied the rejection of God as able to identify himself. Man sought an original system of knowledge. All of this is precisely involved in the program of textual criticism as it has been played out for the last 150 years. Man has sought autonomously to solve the problem posed by variant readings. He sets up his own criteria of judgment, making himself the reference point in judging what is true or false. Then by means of a *historical construct* originating with him, he presumes to identify what is God's Word. Despite formal appearance of seeking God's Word - the program is autonomous to the core.

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<sup>26</sup> A Christian Theory of Knowledge, Cornelius Van Til, pg 47-49.

The comment about man becoming both a rationalist and an irrationalist at the same time also deserves some further comment - because this plays itself out in the work of the textual critic as well. Van Til insisted that the principles of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason were present at the Fall of Man. Man placed the Devil's claims and God's Word to him on the same plane - as if they were both equal hypotheses. In doing so, he assumed that he was surrounded by chance or pure contingency - that God was in no position to know what would happen if he ate the fruit. Thus he saw purely contingent factuality as the metaphysical reality of the world that surrounded him, and posited that God himself was immersed in that same contingency. This is man's assumption of irrationalism. At the same time, man would, prior to empirical experience, by pure laws of logic and reason, found within himself, choose between the two competing hypotheses. He did this as a rationalist. Thus at the Fall of man were introduced the two schools of philosophy that have competed since. But note here, that fallen man is both of these at the same time.

Fallen man, the textual critic is also both of these at the same time. As irrationalist, he refuses any interpretation of the relative worth of a text but his own. All of the facts must remain contingent or un-interpreted until he as a rationalist sits down to impose his own criterion and judgment. This means he picks the evidence he chooses to value. It also means he can simply ignore the things he doesn't like. Exposed at this level, the entire program of textual criticism is seen to be a sham.

Harry A. Sturz summarizes the historical construct of the textual critics:

*Following WH, three main arguments continue to be used in an effort to demonstrate that the Syrian (Byzantine) text was derived from the others: They are as follows:*

*1) Conflate Readings. In the first place it is argued that the Syrian text must be late in its origin and edited in its nature because evidence seems to indicate that it was made from the other two types of text (i.e., the Alexandrian and the Western). The supposed proof of this lies in what WH called conflate readings. WH listed eight instances of conflate readings, four of them from Mark and four from Luke. These involve places of variation in the text of the New Testament where the witnesses to the various readings divide at least three ways. One variant is attested by Alexandrian witnesses, another by the Western witnesses, and the third reading appears to conflate, or combine the two shorter readings into one longer reading in the Syrian witness. The last of the eight examples Luke 24:53 may be taken to illustrate the concept....*

Here one group of manuscripts has blessing God ; another praising God and the Syrian/Byzantine which stands behind the Authorized Version says praising and blessing God . Sturz continues: *Thus, it appears according to the argument, that the Syrian editor(s) had manuscripts of the Western text...and also Alexandrian manuscripts...and since they did not wish to lose anything, they simply combined the two. The longer readings thus appear to demonstrate both a) the earlier date of the non-Byzantine texts and b) the method of the editor(s) that used them.*

2) *Silence of the Fathers.* The second line of evidence advanced by WH to argue that the Byzantine text is later and therefore dependent on the Alexandrian and Western is patristic in nature: the silence of the Fathers. While there are quotations in the writings of the Fathers which are found supporting the Alexandrian text (especially Origen) and many of the early Fathers are found witnessing to the Western text, WH maintained that no church Father is to be found attesting the Byzantine text in quotations of Scripture before the time of Chrysostom, i.e. till the later part of the fourth century. Therefore, because the text was not used or quoted by the early Fathers, the conclusion drawn is that it must not have been in existence in their time.

3) *Internal Evidence.* The third proof is taken from internal evidence of readings. WH contend that when the readings of the Syrian text-type are compared with those of the other text-types, they are found to be not only conflate but inferior in other matters involving content and style, thus indicating an editing process.<sup>27</sup>

Implicit in the line of argument employed is also the dating of manuscripts that are used as sources. The Syrian-Byzantine manuscripts are much more numerous than any of the others, and they are also of later origin. The thinking here was that the literary revision took place toward the end of the fourth century. Without a source of distinctively Byzantine readings in the earlier Papyri manuscripts this was plausible at the time.

It is not my purpose to enter into an elaborate debate over these issues, however several points should be stressed. History is always moving, and the evidence is never complete. In the 1930's some years after the Westcott & Hort theory had been accepted by scholars, there was a discovery of the Chester Beatty Papyri. This was a group of early Codex manuscripts on Papyrus, some of which dated to the second century. This was surprising to scholars at the time, because they did not think that papyrus codex was used widely until the fourth century. Furthermore, because Chester Beatty contained distinctively Byzantine readings in some places, particularly Mark 7:31 and Luke 10:41-42, the scholars were bewildered.

Harry Sturz quotes Francis Crawford Burkitt: *I do not know when or where Lk 10:42a was reduced to one thing is necessary, but it was obviously prior to A.D. 240. I regard this reading as a corruption of the original reading, as I do the addition of the Longer Conclusion to St. Mark; but both corruptions are to be found in texts that go back to something like A.D. 200... I have, frankly, no constructional hypothesis to offer. But a textual theory which is to hold the field must be able to answer all objections...*<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the theory of Westcott and Hort collapses, as soon as Chester Beatty appears on the scene. For if Byzantine readings are as old as the Western and Alexandrian, then we can not

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<sup>27</sup> The Byzantine Text-Type & New Testament Textual Criticism, Harry A. Sturz, pg 25-26.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid pg 57

maintain it was a later revision using the other two. But scholars do not suddenly re-align themselves when their theories are found to be wrong. Rather, they prop those theories up, by restating them with the air that they remain proven (witness Darwin's evolution). This is because, as Van Til pointed out - man is both a rationalist and an irrationalist. He remains committed to his autonomy and the assumption of pure contingency, even when his efforts to organize the facts become shipwreck.

*The modern historical profession is Hegelian in the sense that it assumes that the explanation of history lies within itself. Just as the antithesis lies within the thesis and the synthesis within the relationship between the two, so the meaning of history is thought to be comprehended exhaustively in itself. What the historian is unable to explain must be a matter of defective or incomplete sources or of his own limitations in drawing inferences from them. His failure to acknowledge that the explanation of history may lie outside of history is analagous to the naturalism of the physical and biological sciences, which also sees the whole show in the artifacts of creation.<sup>29</sup>*

Further examination of the Westcott and Hort theory shows that it was bogus from the beginning:

The identification of conflate readings was always a two-edged sword. If for example the Byzantine text was more full, as in the example above taken from Luke 24:53, then it was identified as conflate. If on the other hand, the Byzantine text was shorter and the other texts had the combinations, the Byzantine was considered retracted. In other words, in the view of Westcott and Hort, the Alexandrian or Western texts could not be conflated by very definition - because they were pre-supposed to be older. This is circular reasoning at its very best! But again, Chester Beatty turns the argument around - the evidence is now that WH's texts are retractions.

The silence of the Anti-Nicene Fathers also is an argument that sounds somewhat authoritative. After all, if the Syrian-Byzantine text was as early as the others, then surely when the early Father's quoted scripture they would use its words. *Supporters of the WH theory point out that Chrysostom (who flourished in the last half of the fourth century) is the earliest Father to use the Byzantine text. However, they customarily neglect to mention that there are no earlier Antiochian Fathers than Chrysostom whose literary remains are extensive enough so that their New Testament quotations may be analyzed as to the text type they support.<sup>30</sup>*

Thus, it is only to be expected that the Fathers would quote from the particular text circulating in their region. The evidence had been misrepresented by Westcott and Hort.

Despite the fact that its primary thesis is discredited, the approach spawned by Westcott and

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<sup>29</sup> Idols for Destruction, Herbert Schlossberg, pg 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> The Byzantine Text-Type & New Testament Textual Criticism, Harry A. Sturz, pg 80.

Hort has continued to influence the modern church. A new breed of translators now think it their proper domain to assemble an eclectic text - a text not supported by any one manuscript, but assembled by the scholars as most likely to reflect the original. Once again, history is given free reign. This time, it is not a matter of interpreting the meaning of Scripture. It is rather a matter of identifying what Scripture is. We are ceding to the mind of autonomous man the sitting in judgment upon God's own self-identification.

Thus, as we have seen, the historical side of the Grammatical-Historical method is fraught with conceptual problems and abuses. Any interpretive enterprise which places history in a position of sitting in judgment upon God's Word, ought to be rejected. Whether it is the simple error of allowing some historical knowledge to place definitive interpretation on a text - the narcissism of sophomore magicians impressed with their own rabbits - or the historical construct of a supposedly renowned scholar who studies manuscripts - all of these are an affront to the authority of God's word. All of these are contrary to our Confession of Faith. All of these enshrine the principles of Adam's Fall as the operating principles in Biblical interpretation. Grammatical-Historical exegetes, both Reformed and Evangelical have failed in a self-conscious application of Scripture's internal self-sufficiency when it comes to the use of history. I suspect that the word historical, in the name of the method, has been a contributing factor.

Just how hopelessly mired the entire approach has become may be illustrated by a further examination of McCartney and Clayton, and their use of the word historical in a changing signification.

Milton Terry had defined the historical sense as *that meaning of the author's words which is required by historical considerations. It demands that we consider carefully the time of the author, and the circumstances under which he wrote.* Quoting Davidson he says *Grammatical and historical interpretation, when rightly understood are synonymous. The special laws of grammar, agreeably to which the sacred writers employed language were the result of their peculiar circumstances; and history alone throws us back into these circumstances...*<sup>31</sup>

In McCartney and Clayton's new redemptive-historical hermeneutic, influenced as it is by Existentialism, the historical sense also has to do with meaning. But, they speak of meaning in a dualistic fashion. *Grammatical-Historical exegesis attempts to uncover the meaning a text would have had to its original human author and readers*<sup>32</sup>. *However, grammatical-historical exegesis only establishes the initial base, not the total meaning of a scriptural text, not only because of the historical transcendence of all classic texts, but also and more importantly because history was going somewhere, and scripture speaks of God's gradual unfolding of His*

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<sup>31</sup> Biblical Hermeneutics, Milton S. Terry, Pg 101.

<sup>32</sup> Let the Reader Understand, Dan McCartney & Charles Clayton, Pg 112.



plan.<sup>33</sup> *The divinely intended meaning must in some way or another point to (not necessarily speak directly about) God's redemption of His people in Christ: that is, it must find its place in redemptive history, be christologically focused, and apply to the church.*<sup>34</sup>

Thus, while giving lip service to grammatical-historical hermeneutics as a method, in the end historical becomes a fixed point of meaning. Historical is now what the text meant at one time to the original hearer and speaker. And, we have a greater and divinely intended meaning that is to be derived by application of redemptive historical presuppositions.

Thus, historical does not, finally, refer to considerations within a method by which we arrive at an understanding of the text. It is rather a marker along the pathway to a divinely intended meaning. As a separate meaning its point of reference is the original speaker and hearers.

Once placed in the position of being able to identify divinely intended meaning that transcends the direct import of the text, the sky is the limit. Let's return to McCartney & Clayton's seemingly miscellaneous event in 2Ki 6:1-6 and their redemptive-historical approach. If the floating axe-head is a picture of redemption, then why should we stop there? The axe-head floated on water - Jesus walked on water signifying his divinity and his power over nature. The sons of the prophets were building a dwelling - an early picture of the house of God which would be built by Christ through His prophetic ministry. Moreover, Jordan, beams, and wood may all have some redemptive-historical significance if the methodology is admitted. Thus, in the end, the methodology of imposing an interpretive scheme on Scripture merges into the allegorical interpretations of the early centuries. It makes no difference if the interpretive scheme is Greek or a post-redemption construct from nominally orthodox interpreters, the end result is the same.

Even the lesser error that definitive interpretation of a text may be made through facts of secular history leads us back into darkness. The question we might ask is whose history is more reliable? Shall we value modern historians higher than ancient ones? After all, who would have better knowledge and acquaintance with the culture and history of the biblical era than those closer to it? On this basis we should give priority to the opinions and expositions of ancient writers - a return to the principles of Roman Catholicism.

The answer to these abuses is to return to the principles of our Confession - seeking Scripture for our information regarding culture and history, and limiting ourselves to that material in determining the meaning of a text. We can simply confess: Scripture interprets Scripture - it has a *self-interpretive sufficiency* and an *interpretive exclusivity* that is of Divine origin. When Scripture interprets Scripture it does so making use of all of the details which it reveals: culture, history, and whatever else. Once the meaning of a text has been determined from Scripture, we may then add whatever we know and can learn from secular sources by way of augmenting our

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pg 163.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pg 164.

knowledge. However, prior knowledge of the meaning of the text, deduced from within Scripture, is the only way to preserve its authority and be faithful to our Confession of Faith.

In the same way, Scripture must be self-identifying, and the validity of an *historical construct* emanating in the mind of man must be totally rejected. The principles by which textual variants may be judged are of the same source as those used to interpret meaning - they must lie within Scripture itself. Deliberate variations may be traced to the heresies revealed in Scripture, and the witness of manuscripts taken in their entirety. If as men, we don't know what to do clearly enough, then we can confess that, as we call upon God to give us wisdom. Meanwhile, we ought not to depart from the text that is providentially ours, without biblically sound reasons. Here again, history is no standard - it is the theology of Scripture and the Providence of God which makes for our stability. We then in faith, must seek to discern a Biblical method of solving the problem of variants.

Before illustrating the biblical approach more thoroughly, I want to take up the objections that have been offered to this thesis.

In the first place it is contended that my approach is too simplistic. If all we had to exposit was an English bible in our own dialect then that would be fine. However, because in controversies we are to have reference to the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts which are alone authentic, this involves us in history. Man can not free himself from historical considerations. The answer to this objection is: that what I mean by history and what the objector means by history are two different things. It is a disjunctive syllogism. I am obviously not seeking autonomous criteria of knowledge. I am in fact denying man's autonomy in my argument. Man can no more free himself from history in one sense than he can cease to be a creature. He can be said to be a product of history - in that he is born of a woman, with a genetic line leading all the way back to Adam. The authentic manuscript that he must read and interpret is an artifact of history - it exists now in time and space and is to be read by him. The ability to read that manuscript involves knowledge that must be communicated to that reader through some process of history. Someone had to teach him Greek and Hebrew. But none of this has any bearing upon the point being made.

Noah Webster defines history in his 1828 dictionary as: 1. An account of facts, particularly of facts respecting nations or states; a narration of events in the order in which they happened, with their causes and effects. History differs from annals. Annals relate simply the facts and events of each year in strict chronological order, without any observations of the annalist. History regards less strictly the arrangement of the events under each year, and admits the observations of the writer. This distinction however is not always regarded with strictness<sup>35</sup>.

When I have said history in arguing my point, I am not referring to products artifacts or processes. The word has had reference to facts, causes, and effects. It has reference to fallen man's reliability as a reporter and interpreter of events, practices, and customs of the

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<sup>35</sup>American Dictionary of the English Language, Noah Webster, 1828 pg 101.

ancient world. The evolutionary scientist manipulates the facts of his own observation, throwing out the facts that don't fit his thesis. Westcott and Hort did the same thing with the facts related to the ancient manuscripts. Neither are reliable reporters or interpreters. The fallibility and sin nature that corrupts these enterprises is also present in every other historical record. No other source of information, thus, is to be definitive or authoritative when it comes to bible interpretation. The fallible can not define the infallible - the creature can not sit in judgement upon the Creator.

Pressing the objection a little further, the objector may say: Yes, but, when you go to learn the meanings of words, you are dependent on historical reporting of words in their usages. The answer is: that to whatever extent I am dependent is in the providence of God. That fact does not give me license to jettison the self-sufficiency or exclusivity of the bible in my interpretive work. It is a curious fact that the bible has a way of correcting us, even on the meaning of words.

Secondly, it is contended that I am the only one in history that has ever been confused by the name grammatical-historical. As I have said, I object to the word historical in the name of the method because I think it is confusing. But I am not confused. I am citing the work of nine leading theologians, five book length studies in hermeneutics, four of which were produced since 1970 - all are implicated in the error I am exposing. These books comprise the material used in seminaries throughout the English speaking world. Moreover, I am giving these men benefit of the doubt in believing they have been confused by the name of the method. I am not confused.

Thirdly, it has been asserted that the problem illustrated in the above examples stems from a low view of Scripture, and not from the method of interpretation embraced by the various expositors. I don't consider Louis Berkhof, Greg Bahnsen, or Milton Terry to have had a low view of Scripture. Yet they are also implicated in the error. It is easier to explain the error on their part as a result of the method, than stemming from a self-conscious depreciation of Scripture's authority.

There is another reaction - that of mere outrage without saying anything meaningful in response. If a man simply asserts: The historical-grammatical hermeneutic is not contrary to biblical exegesis. And Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1:9-10 in no way precludes or negates the application of a grammatical-historical principle in interpreting the scriptures - what has he said? Nothing related to the thesis of this paper. That the grammatical-historical method of interpretation has been considered the orthodox method of interpretation for the last 223 years is not in question. Generally speaking, I am not questioning the package of principles employed by that method. What I am calling into question is the use of history. Within the package of principles called grammatical-historical there is a subtle but baneful<sup>36</sup> error. The error involves the use of history, as documented in this paper. That is the problem.

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<sup>36</sup> baneful, *a. Poisonous; pernicious; destructive.* American Dictionary of the English Language, Noah Webster, 1828.

*All idols belong either to nature or to history. The whole creation falls into these two categories, and there is no other place to which man can turn to find a substitute for God. Any idol that is not an artifact of the natural world is an artifact of the social world.<sup>37</sup> Western civilization, in keeping with its Christian underpinnings, has always valued history highly. But as it has departed from the faith, that value has been transmuted. Rather than the arena in which providence and judgment meet the obedience or rebellion of man, history is now seen as the vehicle of salvation....it places salvation within the institutions of history and thus fulfills the biblical definition of idolatry. The idolatries of history exalt an age (past present, or future), or a process....and make it normative<sup>38</sup>.*

If we close our eyes to a biblical critique, being unwilling to admit that we may have been in error in our process or the statement and understanding of our principles - instead insisting this is the right way and we have always done it this way, we commit this idolatry. God is no respecter of persons - not of us - nor of the men and processes of history in whom we would place salvation. God rather brings men into confrontation with the past and past errors: ...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments (Ex 20:5-6). Judgment and mercy are simultaneous realities.

It is not enough for me to identify the problem, as I have, without also trying to show a way out of it. To this end, I offer the following comments.

What is needful, in the first place, is humility in the expositor. Virtually every work on hermeneutics mentions this as a prerequisite for orthodox exposition. It is not only needful in the preacher, but needful in the seminary professor teaching hermeneutics as well.

Whenever we are in the position of having men look to us for answers - it can stir up pride. If you have ever witnessed to the man on the street you know how this goes. At some point in the conversation, usually when you are pressing the claims of Christ, the guy asks: Are you a preacher? If you answer yes, he then begins to ask you every question he has ever had about the bible. He gets all these theoretical questions answered - you seem very well versed in the bible's truth - the conversation is very stimulating - and you never again get to press the claims of Christ with him. This is because you were more interested in showing how bright you were, than in staying focused on the gospel. So, when we have men looking to us for answers, that is when we are in the most danger. If we choose to exalt ourselves - we miss the mark. Perhaps this is what has happened in the first place.

When Louis Berkhof says that 1Cor 15:29 refers to a custom of which we have no certain knowledge - what is he saying? He is saying, first, that in his field of expertise, the bible, he has a

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<sup>37</sup>Idols for Destruction, Herbert Schlossberg, pg 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pg 13.

text that he does not understand - that is an admission. Secondly, however, he is also saying that he can not be expected to understand this text - because he does not have the historical information to which it refers. We certainly can not fault him for that. We expect him to be an expert in the bible, not to be an expert in history. So there is a bit of face saving here.

Now if I come along, and insist on the Scripture s internal self-sufficiency, and exclusivity, at the same time I take away this excuse. I am saying that he should know - or at least might have know, if he was a better expositor. Here is where humility really comes in. When the expert answer man can turn to you and say: boys, I should know - I m sure it is here somewhere - but I can t see it then you have a humble man. The 1599 Geneva bible at 1Cor 11:10 reads:

Therefore ought the woman to have power on her head, because of the Angels. The footnote reads: *what this meaneth, I do not yet understand* . This comment I take as a worthy example of humility and something that ought to be emulated in us all. At the same time it is a hopeful comment. The man believes that there is a good answer, and trusts that he has the material with which to find it. The word *yet* signifies this. The word *understand* communicates the expositor s own felt limitations, and does not blame the text for his lack of understanding.

The second thing we need, is a high view of Scripture and confidence in it, that leads us to simply reject this historically mired approach. Part of the reason we don t see, is that our sights are set too low. Whereas if we came back to scripture admitting our ignorance, and in confidence that it contains all of the answers, we might be led to see.

R.L. Dabney s comment about rejecting human science (or history) in interpretation, was more than mere rhetoric. It was practice with the man who spoke it. And something of the glory that might await us may be gleaned from his writings in other areas:

#### Baptism for the Dead 1Cor 15:29

The instructive and almost exhaustive treatise of Dr. Beattie upon 1 Cor 15:29 suggests still another explanation which readers may compare with those recited by him. I first heard this from that devout, learned and judicious exegete, Rev. J.B. Ramsey, D.D. of Lynchburg, VA. He advocated it, not claiming originality for it. This explanation supposes that the holy apostle refers here to the Mosaic law of Num 19:11-13, which required the Hebrew who had shared in the shrouding and burial of a human corpse to undergo ceremonial uncleanness seven days, and to deliver himself from it by two sprinklings with the water of purification containing the ashes of the burned heifer. This view is sustained by the following reasons:

1) We know from Mark 7:4, and Heb 9:10 ( as the washing (baptisms) of cups and pots, brazen vessels and of tables and divers washings (baptisms) and carnal ordinances ), that both the evangelist and the Apostle Paul called the water purifications of the Mosaic law by the name of baptisms. Thus it is made perfectly clear that if the apostle designed in 1 Cor 15:29 to refer to this purification of people recently engaged in a burial, he would use the word baptize.

2) This purification must have been well known, not only to all Jews and Jewish Christians, but to most gentile Christians in Corinth; because the converts from the Gentiles made in the Apostle's days in a place like Corinth were chiefly from such pagans as were somewhat acquainted with the resident Jews and their synagogal worship. This explanation then has this great advantage, that it supposes the apostle to cite for argument (as is his wont everywhere) a familiar and biblical instance, rather than any usage rare, or partial or heretical, and so unknown to his readers and lacking in authority with them.

3) This view follows exactly the exact syntax of the sentence. The apostle puts the verb in the present tense: Which are baptized for the dead. For we suppose this law for purifying persons recently engaged in a burial was actually observed not only by Jews, but by Jewish Christians, and properly, at the time this epistle was written. We must remember that while the apostle firmly prohibited the imposition of the Mosaic ritual law upon gentile Christians according to the apostolic decree in Acts 15, he continued to observe it himself. He caused Timothy to be circumcised, while he sternly refused to impose circumcision upon gentile converts. He was at Jerusalem going through a Nazarite purification and preparing to keep the Jewish Passover, when he was captured by the Romans...

4) Dr. Ramsey's explanation is faithful to the idiomatic usage of the Greek words in the text. He correctly supposes that the apostle's term, *baptized*, describes a religious water purification by sprinkling, founded on biblical authority; and here, perhaps, is the reason why expositors with immersionist tendencies have been blind to this very natural explanation; their minds refuse to see a true baptism in a sprinkling, where the apostle Paul saw it so plainly. Then Dr. Ramsey uses the word *the dead* (*nekron*) in its most common, strict meaning of dead men; and that in the plural; not in the singular, as of the one corpse of Jesus. He also employs the preposition *for* (*hyper*) in a fairly grammatical sense for its regimen of the genitive case; on account of the dead.

5) Lastly, the meaning thus obtained for the apostle's instance coheres well with his line of logic. If there be no resurrection what shall they do who receive this purification by water and the ashes of the heifer from the ceremonial uncleanness incurred on account of the corpses of their dead brethren and neighbors which they have aided to shroud and bury? If there be no resurrection, would there be any sense or reason in this scriptural requirement of a baptism? Wherein would these human corpses differ from the bodies of goats, sheep, and bullocks dressed for food, without ceremonial uncleanness? Had Moses, inspired of God, not believed in the resurrection, he would not have ordained such a baptism as necessary following the funeral of a human being. His doctrine is that the guilt of sin is what pollutes the human being, the soul spiritually, and even the material body ceremonially; that bodily death is the beginning of the divine penalty for that guilt; that hence where that penalty strikes it makes its victim a polluted thing (*herem*). Hence even the man who touches it is vicariously polluted.....<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Discussions Vol 5, R. L Dabney, pg 184-187

Dabney is expositing the hard enigmatic text that the teachers on hermeneutics have not understood. He does this upon the principles which I am defending here. Instead of looking at history he is looking within the pages of Scripture. The first time I read this I remember repeating over and over to myself: Of Course, of course, of course!!! Of course that is the solution - a solution so simple I am really ashamed that I didn't see this myself.

Note also how the historical material taken from scripture is an integral part of Dabney's exposition. Not only was the Jewish practice of baptism for the dead seen by Gentile converts in Corinth, it also was practiced lawfully by Jewish converts to Christianity. These historical details are woven together with the grammar to make an impressive display. His construction of what was going on fits exactly the grammar and syntax. I would add the fact that the chapter is a defense of the resurrection. The fact that there were Jewish converts to Christianity in the church at Corinth is an important point. For, Jewish converts may have been of any of the sects of the Jews, including the Sadducees who denied the resurrection. It is most likely the case here, that Paul is confronting converts to Christianity from the Sadducees, who have held on to their prior theological ideas, while also embracing Christ as their savior. It is a case of men who are not self-conscious in their ideas. Moreover, such men would likely be the very ones who continued to practice the purifications of the Ceremonial law to which Paul refers. Paul's argument brilliantly seizes upon that fact. The practice they themselves embrace, is an Old Testament rite testifying the truth of the resurrection.

I offered this as an example of the right way to include biblical historical material in the exposition of a difficult text. Now let's note the results. In the first place a difficult text is solved and the argument makes perfect sense. We also have a solution that shows the poverty of an approach that looks outside of Scripture for the answers. Secondly, look at the theological significance of this argument. Dabney noted why immersionist expositors are blind to the meaning. But what can they say when the true exposition is pressed? It may just be, in the Providence of God, that the divisions in the Christian church will be healed when we all stop looking at secular history, and seek our meaning in the pages of Scripture. What if Baptist immersionist expositors had been taught not to cede the meaning of difficult texts to secular history? Consistency might bring them to a startling realization. Thirdly, I never before read Num 19:11-13 in this way. Somehow it just did not catch my attention. But now when I view the Ceremonial Law I have new insight - and the next time I preach on that text - the meaning will be full and vital. Finally, even the errors of language and definitions handed down by the my Greek teachers undergo a correction. How many bible dictionaries insist that the definition of *baptismo* is fully whelmed or immersed. Such errors can not stand the internal self-interpretation of the text itself.

In closing, I want to speak pastorally, to the men to whom this essay comes - to pastors, theologians, and doctors in the Christian church. I know I am challenging you on something you may have done. In the end, we have to say it was sin. A sin of ignorance, yes. We were all just doing what we were taught. Maybe we did misunderstand the name of the method. It might have been pride, or maybe we were impressed with some fact of secular history. Whatever the case may be - please don't perpetuate this error. I know this may be big. There are recorded sermons,

printed essays, books and other writings. God's word and his church are more important than our reputations. And the damage that this will do to future generations is truly catastrophic in proportion. Remember the words of scripture: *He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy* (Pr 28:13).

The good and godly man is the man who repents of his errors, and comes clean. I do not think that repentance will ultimately tarnish a man's reputation even as a scholar. It is rather pride that brings on shame. St. Augustine is remembered by history as an honest and good man, despite the fact that he wrote his confessions of error. The same will be true in the legacy of the man who honestly repents.

*If our whole interpretive enterprise is not to sink to the bottom of meaninglessness, and rest under the curse of God at that, it must be made to rest upon him who said: I AM the way the truth and the life.*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Conflict in Theology Cornelius Van Til.



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