Bible - Interpretation

What is the 'Hermeneutic of Trust' and Why Is It Dangerous?
By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Part two of a series. Read part one.

Reputedly conservative churches and educational institutions are embracing a counterfeit hermeneutic that is a prescription for doctrinal anarchy.

In the first article of this series, we described sound principles for interpreting Scripture — principles based on the Word of God itself. As neo-liberalism has infiltrated reputedly conservative institutions during the past few decades, many seminaries and churches have abandoned these principles.

"Big Tent" Interpretation

What has replaced them? Recent developments involving Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church provide an example that answers this question. The OPC's Committee to Study the Views of Creation delivered its Report to the denomination's 2004 General Assembly. After a three-year effort, the committee drew no definite conclusion about the meaning of the word "day" in the Genesis creation account. This result was not surprising, given the makeup of the committee, which included advocates of a literal day, days of unspecified length, the day-age view, the framework view, and the analogical view.

According to this spectrum of opinion, the Genesis day may have been twenty-four hours long or it may have been billions of years.

While the result was not surprising, it is deeply disturbing. In reaching its decision to be inconclusive, the committee not only abandoned sound principles for the
interpretation of Scripture, but embraced a radically revisionist hermeneutic instead. The committee said that a wide range of views are acceptable, because what is important is not the word "day" in the book of Genesis but the doctrine of creation "in the space of six days" in the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter 4, part 1).¹ "Rightly understood," the committee asserted, "Confessions encourage theological creativity by establishing the conditions under which exegetical and theological investigation can take place."² Therefore, the committee said, "we believe that the doctrine of six-day creation can be preserved through different permissible understandings of the word, 'day'.... It is the judgment of the Committee that none of the five different views expressed in this report necessarily entails a denial of the integrity of the system of doctrine of our standards."³

There was no acknowledgement of the fact that only one interpretation can possibly be right.

Note carefully the principle of Biblical interpretation that this official committee of the OPC has endorsed: Men of the church can all be said to embrace the same "doctrine," even if they differ radically on the meaning of its words, even if they differ radically on the principles and methods of interpretation used to arrive at the meaning of those words, and even if they arrive at conclusions that are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, no one has the right to say that the position he holds is the truth, to the exclusion of all others. Men holding widely varying views about the meaning of the words of Scripture - even diametrically opposing views - can all fit under the same "big tent" as long as they can recite the words of the Confession together.

The "Hermeneutic of Trust"

How did the committee justify such a position? The OPC Report calls this radical departure from sound principles of interpretation a "hermeneutic of trust."⁴
The term "hermeneutic of trust" is not new, and the concept originated not in the field of theology but in the secular field of language philosophy. The "hermeneutic of trust" was popularized by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) in his books *Truth and Method* and *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Gadamer, though not a theologian himself, was a close associate of the existentialist theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), a main spokesman for modern liberal/skeptical methods of Biblical interpretation. It was Bultmann who championed the idea that the Bible must be "de-mythologized" — points unacceptable to postmodern man such as Jesus' virgin birth and miracles must simply be removed.

Gadamer asserted that the hermeneutic of trust applies to any area of society, not just theology. Gadamer denied the existence of objective truth. Correctly interpreting a text, he asserted, does not mean correctly understanding the original intention of its author. Rather, Gadamer argued, interpreting any text — whether it is a piece of literature, a nation's constitution, or the Bible — involves what he termed a "fusion of horizons." In this "fusion," a "community of interpretation" made up of scholars and other so-called experts decides what that community's view of the "truth" will be. Each participant contributes his perspectives to this mix. According to this bankrupt philosophy, a community standard of "truth" is the best that men can hope for. There is no objective truth.

The false principle of the hermeneutic of trust has been widely taught for many years in liberal mainstream academia, and has influenced many elements of society — none for the better. In the field of law, this hermeneutic underpins the pernicious practice of "legislating from the bench" — interpreting constitutions and laws in ways that ignore the framers' intent and run roughshod over the plain meanings of words to suit any agenda. The hermeneutic of trust facilitates the proliferation of nebulous (and ever looser) "community standards" of morality that vary from one jurisdiction to
another and have no basis in a transcendent moral code. In the field of medical ethics, the hermeneutic of trust is behind treatment protocols based on "community standards" that permit the denial of medical treatment to the elderly and handicapped, euthanasia, and the administration of behavior-altering drugs to school-age children without parental consent.

**Prescription for Doctrinal Anarchy**

In addition to its pernicious secular influences, the hermeneutic of trust has also become a buzzword of heterodox Biblical interpretation in liberal Protestant, Jewish, and Roman Catholic circles. Interpretation of Scripture is governed by the multiple perspectives of the participants in various "communities of interpretation" rather than by fixed principles derived from Scripture itself. Each "community" develops its own interpretation of Scripture, and each interpretation is to be considered valid in principle. This is the hermeneutic of trust endorsed by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The 2004 General Assembly commended the creation committee's *Report*, which is based on this radically revisionist hermeneutic, to its presbyteries and sessions. The hermeneutic of trust is a prescription for doctrinal anarchy.

The creation committee *Report* is the OPC's most public endorsement of the hermeneutic of trust by that name. But this no-rules method of interpreting the Bible while twisting the words of secondary doctrinal standards such as the *Westminster Confession* is not new to the Reformed church. The OPC committee observes that the hermeneutic of trust has helped keep peace in the denomination for many years:

The OPC has experienced doctrinal controversies through its history, and some of them have been serious enough to prompt individuals and churches to leave. But none of them escalated into a confessional crisis. The OPC...has cultivated a community of interpretation that has sustained confessional integrity among its
Moreover, the Report credits Westminster Theological Seminary with a vital role in maintaining this artificial unity:

The most important factor in establishing and maintaining this community of interpretation has been the function of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia as the OPC's de facto denominational seminary. In training the vast majority of the early ministerial membership of the OPC, Westminster Seminary did not devote excessive attention to the days of creation nor to the Westminster Standards. But what WTS accomplished that averted a creation or confessional crisis was inducting Orthodox Presbyterian ministerial candidates into a culture of interpretation. The effect was to cultivate a hermeneutic of trust within the church, as ministers had confidence in the training of their colleagues, even if they differed in their views. Westminster performed that function ably.  

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**No Rules, Just Right?**

Notice two important things about the hermeneutic of trust. First, it is not a fixed set of principles or a defined methodology for the interpretation of Scripture. It is thoroughly postmodern. In postmodern thinking there are as many legitimate interpretations of Scripture as there are communities of interpreters. The only absolute, certain, or fixed principle is that there are no absolute, certain, or fixed principles — only varying but allegedly equally legitimate interpretations.

As the creation Report says, the OPC with the aid of Westminster Seminary "has cultivated a community of interpretation" in which the restraints of grammatical-historical interpretation (what the OPC Report calls "over-exacting standards") are
cast off. In such a self-contradictory and irrational atmosphere, whatever "principles" of Biblical interpretation one may choose to hold are in fact merely the preferences of the community of interpreters in which one chooses to participate. There are no fixed rules having their sure foundation in the Word of God. The result is artificial confessional unity without fidelity to the Word of God, facilitating "big tent" interpretations of Scripture that allegedly permit churches to accept doctrinal deviancies that are unacceptable to the God of the Word.

**A Clever Sleight-of-Hand**

Second, notice that the primary focus of the hermeneutic of trust is not on correctly interpreting the words of Scripture at all. It focuses instead on interpreting the words of the church's confessional standards, and on construing them in ways that are elastic enough to permit diverging doctrinal views under one big confessional tent.

The hermeneutic of trust employs a clever sleight-of-hand to take the focus off inspired Scripture. In the case of the creation committee *Report*, the focus is not really on understanding what God meant by the word "day" in Genesis 1 at all. The focus is on what the framers of the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms* and the so-called church fathers may or may not have meant by the words, "in the space of six days." So the hermeneutic of trust is at least one step removed from Scripture. It focuses not on Scripture itself but on human perspectives on Scripture. This is key, as we shall see later in this series.

**Next: What Happens When Churches Employ the "Hermeneutic of Trust"?**

**References:**


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