

Can We Overcome Theological Fragmentation?
A Way Forward

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Introduction

Two titanic theological storms have buffeted, bruised and yet burnished the Advent Christian Denomination.

One turbulence blew in early July of 1860, when the Arian Christian Connexion people pollinated the Millerite movement and took flower in the formation of the Denomination.

Connexion theology became a majority position at the beginning of our history. Consequently, Arianism officially took root in our movement. Non-trinitarianism would (officially) vex the Denomination into the present era, a position accommodated in our official Declaration of Principles. The adoption of the NAE Statement on the Trinity at the June Triennium brought an end to 157 years of ambiguity on the nature and deity of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit and their coequality with the Father.

The embedded Arianism in Connexion theology reveals the failure of the founders to establish the Denomination on a sound hermeneutical foundation. I reference this issue to illustrate that interpretive presuppositions and methods are antecedent to doctrinal formation, orthodox or not. Theological polarities within this movement have often been the result of a defective hermeneutic in Advent Christian DNA.

A second storm nearly split the Denomination in two. At the General Conference in Montreat in 1964, the delegates considered the question of the inspiration of Scripture. The controversy had been brewing for several years, primarily from within the theological faculties of Aurora College and Berkshire Christian College.

That cleavage became intense at “The Cleveland Conference” held in March of 1962. Dr. Moses Crouse and Dr. Oral Collins presented papers which delineated the differences. Crouse advocated a dynamic, “incarnational” view of inspiration, while Collins held that the inspiration of the Bible meant that it was authoritative and infallible in all that had been written by the authors, down to their very words.¹

Concurrently, debates over the doctrine of inspiration raged between the publication and Christian education arms of the Denomination. The entire issue came to a head in Montreat due to complaints from the Eastern and Southern Regions about the content of Sunday School curricula. The solution to the controversy led to the adoption of an amendment of the Declaration of Principles, Article 1 which formerly read:

Article I: We believe that the Bible is the Word of God *containing* a revelation given to man under Divine supervision and providence; that its historic statements are correct, and that it is the only Divine standard of faith and practice (emphasis added).

The amended Article adopted at Montreat read:

Article I. We believe that the Bible is the *inspired* Word of God, being in its entirety a revelation given to man under divine inspiration and providence; that its historic statements are correct, and that it is the only divine *and infallible* standard of faith and practice (emphasis added).²

¹ A very helpful treatment of the Inspiration controversy at Montreat is found in Chapter 6 of a book written by Robert Mayer entitled *Adventism Confronts Modernity: An Account of the Advent Christian Controversy over the Bible's Inspiration*, (Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR, 2017). His book is available here: https://smile.amazon.com/Adventism-Confronts-Modernity-Controversy-Inspiration/dp/1498295266/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1488719914&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=Adventism+Confronts+Modernity+Mayer

² <http://acgc.us/wp-content/uploads/PDF/Publications/This%20We%20Believe.pdf> (accessed 2/2/17). The new statement itself was a compromise in that a proposal to insert the word “inerrant” in the first part of the statement was deleted. See Mayer, chapter 6.

Officially, at least, the doctrine of inspiration was settled even though there were significant remaining tensions given that nerve endings were exposed and sides were drawn, inevitably so, considering what was at stake. Whether minds were changed, however, is an entirely different matter.

The point again is the importance of the meaning of biblical writers as a matter of first importance before we draw up our statements of faith or systematic theologies. With these two theological conversations virtually settled, it is clear that the challenge facing us in re-establishing our churches is not about the *nature* of Scripture but the *meaning* of Scripture. It is this issue to which we now turn.

Be of the Same Mind

But settling back in satisfaction at this historic shift to orthodoxy risks papering over theological fragmentation that challenges the health of our local churches and the fraternity of church leaders.

When I was invited to write this paper, there was a discussion about the possibility of coming to “one mind” about any issue in the AC churches. Is this possible? We all know that if three Advent Christians have a debate, the outcome is four opinions--at least!

Yet, Paul exhorted the Philippian church to “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2). So what did he mean? Was his encouragement meant to create absolute binding theological precision on matters of doctrine and practice? Yes and no.

The terms he uses, “the same mind” and “one mind”³ might suggest in the first instance that we consciously work toward a sweetness of fellowship devoid of conflict, or perhaps he may have in mind an ethos of common hermeneutical judgement, a mutual understanding or a shared wisdom as a foundation for thinking alike.

One suggestion blends the two--he asks them to think in a similarity of mind and spirit, sort of a blending of soul and sentiment in the truth. In Ephesians, the Apostle famously suggested that theological fragmentation could be overcome by “speaking the truth in love.” Thus, “we are to grow up in every way unto him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15).

Surely, Paul is not suggesting that our thinking should be content light, but rather that we should work hard to corporately unite in thought and feeling. Why? Because of our common relationship to Jesus in community and because we are mutually informed by “the Gospel of Christ” (1:27) “for the sake of Christ” (1:29). This one-mindedness, he declared, is already ours by virtue of our union with Christ:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus (2:5).

³ “τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε **φρονέω**^a: (derivative of the base φρον, ,thoughtful planning,” 26.15) to employ one’s faculty for thoughtful planning, with emphasis upon the underlying disposition or attitude—‘to have an attitude, to think in a particular manner.’” Louw-Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (2 Volume Set.)* United Bible Societies 1865 Broadway, New York, 1989.

and «σύμψυχοι. **σύμψυχος** *súmpsuchos*; gen. *sumpsúchou*, masc.–fem., neut. *súmpsuchon*, adj. from *sún* (4862), together, and *psuché* (5590), soul. Joined together in soul or sentiment, unanimous (Phil. 2:2).” It signifies community of life and love.

Thus, we do not create one mindedness as much as we are to embrace it and appropriate it in the humility modeled by the Lord (2:5-11). At once, Jesus is the content and focus of our worldview as well as the source of power to implement all that He teaches us through the Apostles.⁴ On this basis we could work toward one-mindedness.

Paul goes on to exhort the Philippians to “work out their own salvation” (v. 12). I take him to mean something like this: the community of faith (in this case the church in Philippi), energized by the resurrected Christ living among them and the Gospel in terms of its all-encompassing worldview, now has the responsibility to apprehend His truth and appropriate His power to live by it in their historical situation. In other words, the church must work out theological solutions in her cultural context.

So, if we are to recover our mission in these post Christian times, we must seek biblically principled solutions to 21st century challenges in New England. We must work out our solutions informed by prior principles.

How do we do that? I suggest we begin with a fresh look at the meaning of the Bible, followed by hard wrestling with the significance of the truth applied in this post-Christian witches brew we know as American culture. That is the hermeneutical challenge facing the Advent Christian churches and their leaders.

Right here, however, we should be clear about the heavy lifting of interpreting. Before standing in the pulpit or conducting a small group study, a leader should dedicate

⁴ For a valuable resource on the matter of apostolic intent in the New Testament and the writings of Luke in particular, see “Acts: The Questions of Historical Precedent,” chapter 6 of Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*.

himself to explicate the meaning of the words of the biblical authors. In other words, what we can know about an author's purpose can only be accessed in what was written in the canonical books. Words in context are the only conveyors of truth. Thus, one cannot know the purpose of the passage (what was fully in the mind of the author) if the author does not write it down.⁵

Meaning and Significance

Dr. Walter Kaiser Jr., the now retired president of Gordon-Conwell, is a famous exponent of determining the meaning of the text directly from the author. He wrote:

*"No definition of interpretation could be more fundamental than this: To interpret we must in every case reproduce the sense the Scriptural writer intended for his own words. The first step in the interpretive process is to link only those ideas with the author's language that he connected with them. The second step is to express those ideas understandably (Kaiser's emphasis)."*⁶

To many pastors, this may seem axiomatic, but let's not be hasty. Postmodern linguistic theory disconnects the author from his meaning and assigns it to the reader or hearer.⁷ To do so makes meaning relative by throwing the truth intentions of the author over the side in favor of a "dynamic" reading. It was this impulse that fueled the crisis over inspiration in Montreat in 1964.

⁵ For a helpful treatment of the difference between an author's purpose and an author's meaning, read Norman L. Geisler, "The Relation of Purpose and Meaning in Interpreting Scripture," *Grace Theological Journal* 5.2 (1984) 229-245.

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/05-2_229.pdf Accessed 9/20/19.

⁶ Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," chapter five, taken from *Inerrancy*, edited by Norman L. Geisler, copyright 1979 by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p. 118.

⁷ Robert McQuilkin analyzes this problem in "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics" in *JETS* 40/1 (March 1997) 69-82.

Throughout Kaiser's work he gives credit to E. D. Hirsch for engaging in the modern battle to restore the author to his intention statements. Hirsch made a distinction between meaning and significance.

*"Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception of a situation."*⁸

Our present task is to let the Apostles speak through their own words before we develop implications, design strategies and develop "task forces" for implementation. This is why it is advisable to take a fresh look at the Bible through a hermeneutic driven by the truth intentions of the Bible's authors/ Author before we attempt to move forward to plant, establish and re-establish churches or undertake any ministry in the name of the Lord Jesus for that matter.

Kaiser builds off Hirsch's basic insight. He suggests three rules to follow if we are to be "valid interpreters."⁹

First, the Bible is to be interpreted by the same rules as other books--before the postmodern takeover of linguistic theory.

A text should not be liberated from its author. I was privileged to be in the last class of students taught by Dr. James Nichols. He was famous for telling us to "take the Bible as it reads." What he meant was at once simple and profound: the figures of speech, the

⁸ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p. 8.

⁹ Ibid, p. 119. These rules apply to general interpretation of all texts. For example, the current battle over the appointing of a justice to the Supreme Court is being fought over the meaning of the Constitution.

genres, the poetry, and the various literary devices were employed by the writers to convey an intended meaning. That truth intention can be discovered by ordered analysis. The Bible is unique in that it explicates the truth of God, but it should be approached as any other book in terms of how that truth is to be understood. That it is inspired does not uncouple its authors from the meaning of their own words.

Second, the principles of interpretation are as native and universal to man as is speech itself.

While the Bible is the revelation of God to man, He chose to convey His meaning to us through the conventions of ordinary language. By design we are created to receive ideas and truth through speech and conversely to convey our thoughts by the same means. This is simply part of the design built into our nature as human beings. What proper hermeneutics does is simply study and assemble the underlying conventions of speech and shape them for the purpose of study and reflection. Thus, we need grammars, lexicons and the like to get as close to the original language of the writers (they would be needless had we been born at the time Scripture was written.) Why? Because interpreting is something we all do. We just do it better in our native language.

Third, our personal reaction and application of an author's words is secondary to the meaning of her/his words.

There is, of course, a relation between what an author writes and what her/his readers understand. We come again to the difference between meaning and significance.

Assigning significance is the responsibility of the reader(s) in that he/they must decide how the author's meaning is to be applied in cultural contexts.

I remember a discussion about the tagline “The way of Christ and his Apostles” borrowed from Roland Allen, the former missionary to China in the first half of the 20th century. There were loud objections on the part of some over the use of “the.” To them it seemed narrow and limiting. The debate surfaced the tension over meaning and significance in interpretation.

I think the book of Acts is a test case for interpreting the author’s meaning. Did Luke lay down first principles for basic strategies for church planting (and establishing) for the centuries ahead or did he simply report a history of first century church only? Roland Allen’s thesis was that Luke and the Apostles explicated THE way of church planting and establishing as embedded markers in Luke’s two books.¹⁰

If not, then Luke meant us to understand that Acts was the history of “A” way of Christ and the Apostles. By that understanding Luke-Acts is primarily descriptive, not prescriptive.

There is a big difference. And it is exactly because of issues like this that we would be wise take a fresh look at our hermeneutics in this 500th year celebration of the Reformation.

Consider the exhortation of Dr. Kaiser:

“I affirm with all the forcefulness I can muster, that our generation needs a whole hermeneutical reformation. The current crisis regarding the doctrine of Scripture is directly linked to poor procedures and methods of handling Scripture. This crisis has shown little regard for traditional ecclesiastical or theological categories, for it has spread like a plague among liberal and evangelical scholars alike. As a partial corrective for this astonishing situation, I urge that talk *about* the Bible

¹⁰ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, 3-9.

be modified to this extent: that evangelicals in particular get equally busy identifying the *meaning* of the text itself—the meaning the original writer of Scripture intended—before we go on to name the relationships between the meaning and ourselves, our country, our day and our conception of things; that is, before we consider the *significance* of the text for us.¹¹

Conclusion

There is no need to rehearse the rules of interpretation here. I suggest we immerse ourselves in the model exemplified by Dr. Kaiser.¹² I believe the same crisis he identified nearly 40 years ago is still with us in spades.

Is it time for Eastern Region leaders to take a fresh look at the meaning of the Bible? If so, let it be with the goal of determining the intent of the original authors, especially in the context of our postmodern/post-Christian culture. If we focus on the meaning of the Bible, perhaps Paul's exhortation to "be of the same mind" can be achieved.

There has long been theological fragmentation in our movement. Several issues come to mind that need a "fresh look" in light of the eclipse of truth in culture.

Should we take up this challenge, the Region could emerge from the swamps of theological fragmentation to expand our witness with new determination empowered by the Lord Himself.

Appendix 1: Discussion questions

1. Do you think it is possible for the local church to achieve "one-mindedness"? Why or why not?

¹¹ Kaiser, op. cit., p. 147 (emphasis his).

¹² See Appendix 2 for articles by Kaiser that lay out his interpretive approach to the Bible.

2. Is there a difference of intention between the author of a book (Moses) and the Author of the Bible (the Holy Spirit)? If so, how do we determine that difference?
3. Do you see evidence of theological fragmentation in our churches? Why do you think this condition exists?
4. Identify 3-5 issues facing the church that need a clearer biblical resolution.
5. Do you think local believers for the most part are able to interpret the Bible? Explain why or why not.
6. Do many church problems go unresolved because we do not know the truth? Is the problem more that people do not want to obey the truth? Is there another explanation?

Appendix 2: "THE ESSENTIAL KAISER"

"The Single Intent of Scripture" by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., chapter nine taken from *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, edited by Kenneth Kantzer, copyright 1978 by Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee.

"The Need for Reformation in Hermeneutics," delivered by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. at the 1997 BILD International Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, February 20, 1997.

"The Theology of the Old Testament" by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., taken from *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 1, Introductory Articles*, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, J. D. Douglas, Associate Editor, copyright 1979 by The Zondervan Corporation Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"Theological Analysis," chapter six, taken from *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., copyright 1981 by Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"Putting It All Together: The Theological Use of the Bible," chapter 11, taken from *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, copyright 1994 by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Moisés Silva, published by Zondervan Publishing House, Academic and Professional Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"The Task of Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament Today," chapter 3, taken from *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., copyright 2003 by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"The Art and Science of Expository Preaching," chapter 4, taken from *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., copyright 2003 by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

“Legitimate Hermeneutics” by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., chapter five, taken from *Inerrancy*, edited by Norman L. Geisler, copyright 1979 by the Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

*Compiled by BILD International.

Suggested works dealing with hermeneutics

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