"New Hermeneutic"—A Ship Without Anchor?

The church which is married to the Spirit of its Age will be a widow in the next.
—William Ralph Inge

The students in my Law and Morality seminar are blowing my mind! Most of them are culturalists to the core—and the party line they are parroting is just plain scary! In the opening session, I always ask the obvious question: "What is morality?" A lively hour of discussion ranges everywhere from utilitarian practicality (What works?), to majority rule (What do most people accept?), to power politics (Who has the sheer strength to impose their will on everyone else?).

"But is there no higher law, no natural law, no transcendent morality?" I prod. "No," comes the answer from these future guardians of law and order. "Is there nothing that could be described as absolute truth—no universal, absolute standards of right and wrong?" I ask hopefully? Again comes the resounding (and delightfully ironic) answer, "Absolutely not!"
I press on. "How about the question of evil? Is there such a thing as inherent evil?" Again the answer is "No." (In a generation of moral relativism, what other answer should I expect?)

It's then that I bring out my trump card. "Was not the Holocaust inherently evil?" I ask smugly, knowing full well that I've got them locked into an untenable position. After all, everybody and his cat knows that the Holocaust was inherently evil! But to my utter surprise, one student after another shakes his head "No." "The Holocaust was not inherently evil!"

Are they putting me on? No, they're serious—dead serious. And that's not the worst of it. In each of the last two years, even my Jewish students have agreed! If maybe—just maybe—you could understand non-Jews being conned into such nonsense, who ever would guess that Jewish students would join them in taking such an outrageous position?

This year, in my dumbfoundedness, I pressed one Jewish co-ed for a further explanation. "How can you possibly believe that the Holocaust was not inherently evil? Are you not totally outraged by it?" "Oh, sure," she said, "I'm personally offended by the thought of any wholesale slaughter of Jews, and I sure wouldn't want it happening to me or my family, but [hang on, here comes the all-important punch line] I simply can't impose my morality on anyone else!"

For our generation, tolerance has become the highest virtue. [Tolerance, that is, for everything and everyone other than those who would insist on absolute moral standards.] But, again, that should not come as a surprise from a culture which extols relativism and blurs all distinction between right and wrong. If there is nothing that is either inherently good or inherently bad, then we must accept everything as equally valid. If nothing is "right" and nothing is "wrong," then tolerance is our only option.

In addition to the matter of undiscriminating tolerance, it is important to point out that today's students have bought off on a "new morality" that is rudderless. There was a time—call it the "forties" and "fifties"—when everyone knew what was right and wrong. Even if we didn't always do what was right, we were willing to acknowledge that it was wrong. Then came the "sexual revolution sixties" when society's ideas about what was right and what was wrong dramatically changed. Even into the "seventies," it continued to be a time of unstoppable moral decline.

However, morality for today's generation is radically different—not simply by degree, but in kind. In the "new morality," there is no "right" and there is no "wrong." The "new morality" is nothing short of moral chaos, reminiscent of the period of Israel's judges in which "everyone did as he saw fit."  

**Political Correctness Demands a New Hermeneutic**

In the event you have not already heard about it, there is a nation-wide frenzy on college campuses to insure that what is known as "political correctness" (often abbreviated simply as P.C.) "Political correctness" is nothing more than a benign catchphrase for "the liberal agenda." In other words, you and I have to tow the liberal line on issues like abortion, gay rights, and radical feminism, or else be reported to the sensitivity police for being intolerant.

The idea, of course, is to protect and promote minority rights—or at least what are seen to be minority rights. It seems that every vocal group of advocates today—regardless of the morality of their cause—must be accorded minority status, with all the respect that entails. It's the American way, naturally. Who would want to deny minority rights? And you've got to give them credit—they know exactly how to pull on our heartstrings and to capitalize on our better instincts. Who among us wants to be intolerant, or even appear to be?

Enter, then, the matter of religious tolerance. Should we not also be tolerant of all religious faiths? If the campus generation has been convinced that "political correctness" demands tolerance of such illegitimate interests as abortion, gay rights, and radical feminism, "political correctness" could, and should, demand religious tolerance.

But here it's important to remember what is meant by "tolerance" in a relativist society. It doesn't mean what it used to mean: permitting each person the right to believe (or disbelieve) according to his or her own conscience. That would be a respect for religious freedom far too noble for a
secular society bent on the eradication of religious faith. In sharp contrast, today's "tolerance" means having to accept all values, truths, and beliefs (no matter how spiritually or morally bankrupt) as equally valid.

In such a "politically correct" climate, then, who would dare challenge religions which do not honor Jesus Christ? Or speak out against abortion and homosexuality? Or question whether someone's faith in Christ is complete without baptism? Or even mildly suggest that God may have called men and women to different roles responsibilities in the church and in the home? These challenges are simply no longer acceptable. Besides being intolerant, they are anti-intellectual, unsophisticated, and altogether un-American!

And don't kid yourself into thinking that the day will never come when more than the sensitivity police will be enforcing such "political correctness." Liberal "tolerance" (like religious bigotry) has a nasty way of becoming enforced intolerance against all who disagree.

It's alarming enough to see "political correctness" being enforced among non-Christians. It's all the more chilling to witness it among ourselves. In a recent Bible lecturership, one of the more progressive-thinking speakers introduced a fairly novel idea for our fellowship, one which he knew was pretty radical for most in the audience. "Does this thought make you nervous?" he asked. "Then get over it!" he insisted. He might as well have said, "If you don't run along with the rest of us in the fast lane of progressive theology, you will henceforth be considered "politically incorrect."

I only hope and pray that there is not an elite vanguard of influence brokers bent on imposing the latest "political correctness" in the church through "liberalism by fiat." The things that need changing in our fellowship deserve better than enforced conformity.

What all this portends for faith and doctrine should be amply clear. In the climate of "political correctness," even how we understand the Bible is under threat of being radically changed. Any hermeneutic which insists on the authoritativeness of Scripture is, by definition, politically incorrect. It's not sufficiently tolerant. It dares to set one standard above all others, or even to suggest that there are any standards whatever. When it comes to being politically correct, "command, example, and necessary inference" couldn't be more hopelessly outmoded!

And, of course, such a hermeneutic is all the more politically incorrect when it leads us to doctrinal positions which themselves are out of step with what is "politically correct" according to the liberal agenda. For example, what could be more politically incorrect for the cultural church than maintaining the biblical pattern of male spiritual leadership? Surely, any hermeneutic that would lead us to such a "politically incorrect" doctrine can't be right. It is intolerant per se. And that forces some people to but one conclusion: Such a hermeneutic must be gotten rid of!

The call for a new hermeneutic does not arise in a vacuum. It is part of a larger, cultural ultimatum. Whether or not we are aware of it, political correctness is as much a part of the cultural church as it is the college campus. And heaven help us when what we have is the cultural church on a college campus! No prizes for guessing why the call for a new hermeneutic comes most aggressively from some of our own church-related universities, nor that it has its greatest appeal among those of the campus generation.

**Toward a Utilitarian Hermeneutic**

In vain, I keep looking for a definitive model or fully-articulated statement of what everyone seems to be calling the "new hermeneutic." My suspicion is that there is a move afoot either 1) simply to discard the "old hermeneutic" or 2) to address other significant issues only tenuously related to the hermeneutics question itself. Yet if there were a "new hermeneutic" floating around somewhere, I think I have an idea what it might look like.

From listening to my students, I am almost certain that there is a tie between the "new morality" and the call for a "new hermeneutic." That tie is what philosophers might call "utilitarian" morality. "Utilitarian morality" simply asks, "What works?" Nothing more, nothing less. For those who lack religious faith (and, sadly, for many who claim it), if abortion "works" for you, then it is "right." If homosexuality "works" for you, then it also is "right."

For society at large, what "works" is determined either by
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majority rule or something very much akin to it. "Right makes might," the political correctness movement demonstrates.

You might just as easily lose among the older folks who still stand for stringed guitars and drums in the worship. Likewise, gender equality in the church might prevent an exodus of the younger professional women. Even if you have a sufficient power base, then might makes right.

If, to put it mildly, it is an illusion that a "unilateral" hermeneutics represents the thinking of many Christians in the cultural church, where culture has turned from abstract right to wrong, you can be sure that the cultural church is not far behind.

Two examples may help to illustrate what I mean by a "unilateral" hermeneutics. First, the call for New Monasticism is unilateral. So, too, is the approach to new monasticism. Unfortunately, a unilateral approach to Scripture, in most cases, represents thinking of the worst kind. Yet, if we are not careful, we may be led into thinking that a hermeneutical option is all we need.

Second, the reason we have no biblical reason to believe in the resurrection of the body is not because the body is not resurrection, but because the resurrection of the body is not as important as the resurrection of the soul. This is a hermeneutical option. However, it is not a biblical one.

Discussion ended. Case closed.

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The problem, as always, is not whether we should have an approach to Scripture that is based on a particular hermeneutical philosophy, but whether we have a particular hermeneutical philosophy that is based on a particular approach to Scripture. The problem is that we have no biblical reason to believe in a particular hermeneutical option.

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If You Don’t Like the Messenger...

A utilitarian view of the world—or, even more so, morality and doctrine—has devastating consequences. The case with which some would cast aside the “old hermeneutic” is itself a demonstration of utilitarian thinking. If the “old hermeneutic” no longer “works” for us, then obviously it has to go!

But the real question is, Why does the “old hermeneutic” no longer “work” for us? Among those who have joined in the call for a new hermeneutic, the people whose judgment I value most are concerned about an overemphasis on church organization and function and a widespread neglect of teaching about sin and salvation and our spiritual relationship with God.

The greater concern at this point has to do with those in the cultural church who are demanding a new hermeneutic for all the wrong reasons—those whose interest in finding a new hermeneutic is more self-serving than theological. Call me suspicious, but I can’t help but wonder at the timing of their interest in the hermeneutics question. Its current connection with one issue in particular is just too obvious for there to be mere coincidence. If you haven’t already guessed from the many previous references, that issue is the so-called “women’s issue.”

Without the “women’s issue,” the question of a new hermeneutic would never have become so vital to some among us. At least not at this time. At least not in the way that it has. Undoubtedly, the spirit of the age eventually would have prompted a break between the cultural church and the authority of Scripture, and it is likely that more scholarly concerns about “the old hermeneutic” (which predate the “women’s issue”) eventually would have surfaced anyway. But it is the specific issue of the role of women that has provided the immediate catalyst and popularized the issue. Other issues, like the resurgent interest in instrumental music, are also part of the cultural church’s hidden agenda, but none of them has the same capacity to be the driving engine behind the movement for radical change.

The “women’s issue” is a perfect catalyst, because it combines utilitarian practicality, current notions of political correctness, and an obvious case for tolerance—all in one neat package. Madison Avenue could hardly wish for a more marketable product! And here is its connection with hermeneutics: Those who support a wider role for women have little choice but to get rid of the “old hermeneutic.” Taking “command, example, and necessary inference” seriously would mean having to accept the well-documented biblical principle of male spiritual leadership at face value.

Hardly any biblical principle is more clearly established than the principle of male spiritual leadership. It begins at Creation, with Adam being created before Eve—a preview of the responsibility for leadership which would later be thrust upon all firstborn sons. As first created, Adam became the prototype husband, father, and family leader. Even in the consequences attendant upon their sin of disobedience, Eve is told: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

As we move to God’s covenant with Abraham—a covenant to be shared by all his descendants, both male and female—we see God choosing as a symbol of the covenant the most exclusively male symbol possible: circumcision. It was also God who instructed Moses regarding what was to be an all-male priesthood for the people of Israel. Even when a woman, Deborah, led Israel as one of the judges, her message was one of rebuke, aimed at the men of Israel who had reneged on their leadership responsibility.

Jesus, too, brought a message in his appointment of twelve men as apostles, despite the obvious availability of capable godly women. And the early church followed suit, appointing only men when certain special needs of the church arose.

If there were ever any doubt, all doubt is removed, of course, by the specific teachings of the apostle Paul, who reminds us that “the head of the woman is man”; that wives are to “submit to their husbands as to the Lord”; and that women are not “to teach or to have authority over a man.”

The strength of the overwhelming documentation for the principle of male spiritual leadership is found in the massive effort which has been made to discount male headship teaching—especially the straightforward, clear-cut instructions delivered by the apostle Paul. Despite all the effort, dismissing Paul’s teaching on the basis that it merely reflects
archaic patriarchal notions and first century custom invariably fails, and fails miserably.

Paul makes it clear that male spiritual leadership is neither cultural nor merely patriarchal, but is God-ordained “because of the angels”\(^\text{12}\) (whatever that might mean), because “it was the woman who was deceived”\(^\text{13}\) (whatever that means), and because “Adam was formed first”\(^\text{14}\) (however we might understand that). If there are explanations that challenge our best thinking, nevertheless the basic message is clear: Male spiritual leadership is God’s idea—not man’s.

When the attempt to discredit Paul’s prohibitive instructions proves futile, the alternative tactic is to make Paul out to be a schizophrenic good guy/bad guy. Galatians 3:28 is paraded out in a desperate last-ditch effort to find role equality from Paul’s statement that, in Christ, we are “neither male nor female.”\(^\text{15}\) It hardly seems to matter that the proper context is totally obliterated by many of the same people who are most vocal in their insistence that the “old hermeneutic” wrests individual scriptures out of context in a mad dash to reach desired doctrinal results!

The Sophistication of Cultural Arguments

By contrast with the transparent abuse of Galatians 3:28, a far more subtle argument is being made. Superficially, it has the look of a biblically-based perspective, but it is cultural to the core. As articulated by a leader in one of the more progressive congregations:

Paul regulated (but did not explicitly abolish) slavery and male domination in his own time, and for the very same reason in each instance: so as not to hinder the gospel’s spread by an abrupt break with culture. However, the apostle decisively sowed the seeds which eventually would grow into the abolition of both institutions. It would seem that faithfulness to Paul’s missionary principles now call for a reversal of his actual applications, since moral sensitivities of the larger culture today are offended by both slavery and by the subjugation of women and an insistence on either would tend to hinder the gospel’s credibility and spread.

This sophisticated statement—subtly mixing together both first century culture and today’s culture in one lethal cocktail—is an excellent illustration of the cultural influence that has swayed so many among our number today. But a closer look reveals gaping holes in its logic.

First and foremost, it fails to recognize that slavery as an institution was never commanded, whereas male spiritual leadership is expressly taught and commanded throughout the whole of Scripture. Moreover, the supposed parallel between slavery and gender role distinctions breaks down immediately, considering that regulation of children accompanied the regulations for both women and slaves.\(^\text{16}\) If women and slaves were meant to be in the same category of liberation, are we to take it that, in a culture which increasingly honors “juvenile rights,” children are no longer obligated to obey their parents?

The argument also ignores Paul’s specifically-stated reasons for his teachings on gender distinctions, which have much to do with “Adam being formed first,” and “because of the angels,” but not even a hint of any so-called “missionary principle.”

Of course, there is also the assumption—made through the eyes of radical feminism—that gender role distinctions are a form of “subjugation” (and tantamount to slavery?). If the biblical concept of “submission” bears this connotation, then we must all ignore Paul’s direction that we “submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.”\(^\text{17}\) Use of the word “subjugation” in the place of “submission” demonstrates how even terms are re-defined through the lexicon of culture.

This highly inventive explanation also overlooks other “abrupt breaks with culture” which were never watered down for the sake of missionary success. Consider, for example, the abrupt break with Jewish circumcision and the equally abrupt break with such Gentile practices as the eating of blood, or of food sacrificed to idols. Each of these abrupt breaks with culture could have hindered (indeed, in some
cases, did hinder) the spread of the gospel.

Finally, such a culturally-correct perspective puts the gospel and evangelism at the mercy of "cultural sensitivity." What does that sensitivity suggest for evangelism within a culture which would be offended by any doctrine which might be considered homophobic? If the spread of the gospel is hindered by condemning homosexuality, should we simply abandon the scriptural teaching against it in favor of some greater "missionary principle?"

The cultural argument relative to both the first century and today can look very appealing. But somehow, somehow, we must break through the superficial sophistication of the cultural argument and see it for what it really is: an accommodation to culture first; a faithful response to scriptural teaching only a distant second.

**The Impact on Hermeneutics**

The plain truth is that a careful understanding of Scripture simply will not support gender-role sameness. Virtually from cover to cover, the Bible announces, stresses, demonstrates, and repeats all over again that God has created man and woman equally in his own image—equal in worth, equal in value, equal in service—but with unique role responsibilities in which man is appointed to spiritual leadership. It's almost impossible to miss it!

But, for the moment, it is more important that we understand just how fundamentally the "women's issue" has challenged our way of understanding the Bible. When we consider the principle of male spiritual leadership, we find it taught in the form of "commands" ("I do not permit a woman to teach..."); "examples" (male priesthood, male apostles, even a male Messiah); and "inferences" (such as elders being male, as suggested by the directive that they be "husbands of but one wife")²⁹.

Given the clear weight of evidence against gender-role sameness when the Bible is objectively read through the eyes of "command, example, and necessary inference," the cultural church finds itself in a quandary: The message itself is clear and unequivocal; but the message is not one we want to hear. So what are we to do? Given our cultural commit-

ment to tolerance, utility, and political correctness, we have no other choice. In order to avoid hearing the message, we're going to have to shoot the messenger! And the messenger in this case is the "old hermeneutic."

"Give us another messenger," cries the cultural church. Give us a new hermeneutic that will permit us more freedom. Give us a new hermeneutic that doesn't bind us to legalistic doctrine, inductive reasoning, scientific method, simplistic blueprints, sterile constitutions, or common sense understanding of God's Word. Give us anything that will affirm our commitment to cultural thinking and justify the conclusions we have already reached.

If possible, of course, make it sound spiritual—perhaps a "hermeneutic of the cross." Dress it up in culturally-acceptable terms like justice and equality, and be sure to throw in a generous helping of biblical love. Make it look sufficiently respectable, and maybe no one will notice that what we've really done is to abandon scriptural authority.

So the messenger was killed and the cultural church roared its approval: "The 'old hermeneutic' is dead! Long live the 'new hermeneutic!'"

**Worse Than Simply Weighing Anchor**

Among the many criticisms of the "old hermeneutic" is that it tends to have a "leveling effect" on the whole of Scripture. That is, it tends to overlook any distinction between the core message of the gospel (Christ's death, burial, and resurrection) and everything else which is secondary (like church organization and function). To the extent that we have "majored in minors," the criticism is valid. But there is every potential for a far more dangerous "leveling effect" when we play fast and loose with hermeneutics.

Missing, avoiding, or blatantly rejecting the principle of male spiritual leadership may well lead to ruinous consequences far beyond more immediate questions of Who can do What in the assembly of the church. But even those ruinous consequences are penny-ante compared with the disaster which lurks in the wake of any radical change in the way we
understand the Bible.

When you undermine the authority of Scripture in order to resolve any one particular doctrinal issue, you undermine it on every front, whether it be "secondary" matters like the work and worship of the church, or even the "core message" of the gospel. Credibility has its own "domino effect." Push the first one over, and they all fall down—primary and secondary, "essential" and "non-essential" alike. If we can't trust Paul on the role of men and women in the church, how can we trust him on baptism and the Lord's supper?

What's happening in the call for a new hermeneutic is nothing short of what's happening in the "new morality." It is not simply "doctrinal decline" on a given church issue that we are experiencing. Today we are facing the very real prospect of abandoning altogether our commitment to biblical authority. That is the reason the hermeneutics question is so vital to our fellowship. It threatens to divide us, not merely on the role of women or whatever else might be of current controversy, but over our most basic assumptions.

And divide us it will. All you have to do is to look at the Disciples of Christ, for example, to see that the single issue of instrumental music was not the sole, or even the key factor in our parting of the ways. Today, the Disciples of Christ are as different from us in their view of scriptural authority as any other mainstream denomination which never shared our restorationist roots.

What happened back then is happening again now. It's a battle over how we are to understand Scripture. It's a test of our respect for biblical authority. Future generations will look back to the cultural church at the end of the twentieth century and know which direction we took at the fork in the road.

It's dangerous enough to weigh anchor on an issue here or an issue there. Drifting doctrinally always begs disaster. But, if we do no more than inadvertently drift away from our moorings, by the grace of God we can always come to our senses and lower the anchor once again.

It's another thing altogether to leave our anchor behind! And that is essentially what we are risking in the call for a new hermeneutic. Is that what we really want? Have we become so comfortable drifting on one matter of doctrine after another that we have decided to jettison our anchor altogether, like so much excess baggage?

I wish you could sit in on one of my Law and Morality classes. The frantic struggle of some of today's brightest minds to parrot the politically correct party line and yet avoid the obvious moral absurdities when that line is pushed to its logical extreme is not a pretty picture. You just know that on their way home from class they are asking themselves, "Did I really say that?"

As victims of the "new morality" (which is no morality at all), they face a directionless future, set adrift in a sea of moral uncertainty. They have nothing to which they can confidently anchor their beliefs. Yet what their "new morality" is doing for them is not so different from what the cultural church's new hermeneutic will do for us if we're not extremely careful. It promises greater freedom in Christ and an enhanced sense of spirituality, but guarantees only aimless self-determination in a sea of spiritual uncertainty.