An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy Posed by Toon's Four Basic Types of Theology: A Christian response

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Abstract

Contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs and approaches. The present situation poses unique challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. Using typology (as developed by social scientists), this article surveys a limited variety of intellectual constructs around which the greater variety of contemporary theologies are built. The article analyses Toon's four basic types of theology and evaluates their dangers, especially when their research methods are applied in a total manner. The article concludes with an appropriate Christian response to the contemporary challenges to evangelical orthodoxy posed by these approaches to theology.

Introduction

Contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs and approaches, from dogmatic fundamentalism, to radical liberalism. In fact, the shape of today's theology has changed so much over the past century, especially since the 1960s, that it has become difficult to make sense of it all. The present situation of contemporary theology poses unique challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. Using typology (as developed by

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[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

social scientists) this article surveys a limited variety of intellectual constructs around which a greater variety of contemporary theologies are built. After discussing a few typologies of contemporary theology, this article analyses four basic types of theology. It then evaluates their dangers, especially when their research methods are applied in a total manner. Toon's four basic types of theology are based on Berger's extended typology—extended from three to four basic approaches to theology—the deductive, the inductive, the reductive, and the regulative (Toon adds the regulative or narrative approach of Lindbeck to the three approaches in Berger's typology). The aim of this article is to provide an appropriate Christian response to the contemporary challenges to evangelical orthodoxy posed by these four basic types of theology.

1. Definition of Relevant Concepts

1.1. Type and typology

Richard H Niebuhr, in his *Christ and Culture*, supplies a good example of this method of typology. He explains a 'type' and 'typology' as follows (Niebuhr 1951:43–44):

> A *type* is always something of a construct, even when it has not been constructed prior to long study of many historic individuals and movements. When one returns from the hypothetical scheme to the rich complexity of individual events, it is evident at once that no person or group ever conforms completely to a type. Each historical figure will show characteristics that are more reminiscent of some other family than the one by whose name he has been called, or traits will appear that seem wholly unique and individual.
>
> The method of *typology*, however, though historically inadequate, has the advantage of calling to attention the continuity and significance of the great *motifs* that appear and reappear in the long

wrestling of Christians with their enduring problem. Hence also it may help us to gain orientation as we in our own time seek to answer the question of Christ and culture.

1.2. Evangelical Orthodoxy

Keysor used 'evangelical', 'conservative', and 'fundamentalist' interchangeably. However, he claimed that a more accurate term for all of these was 'orthodox'. Furthermore, he maintained that evangelical orthodoxy had 'developed a theological epicenter known as the "five fundamentals"' (Cowan 2003:98).

The above-mentioned five fundamentals did not include all of evangelical orthodoxy. However, they represented the common ground among evangelicals, who still differed among themselves on issues such as the nature and mission of the church, the relationship of justification to sanctification, and eschatology. The following five fundamentals represent evangelical orthodoxy: (a) the inspiration of scripture, (b) the virgin birth of Christ, (c) the substitutionary atonement, (d) the physical resurrection of Christ, and (e) his personal return. Billy Graham, America's most famous evangelical, is a good representative of evangelical orthodoxy, since his Christian thinking has been planted deeply in this theological soil (Croucher 2004).

2. Typologies of Niebuhr, Bloesch, and Berger

Utilising typology, as used in the sociology of knowledge, is probably the best method of describing contemporary theology, since it includes both the simplest and the most profound. This method was used effectively by Ernst Troeltsch in his *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911, 1931) (Toon 1995:151).

2.1. The typology of Richard Niebuhr

The enduring problem of contemporary theology is the relationship between faith and culture. 'Most typologies are based on known systems of thought rather than on aprioristic constructions' (Toon 1995:152). Niebuhr (1951) proposed the following types after the study of many individual theologians: 'Christ against culture', 'the Christ of culture', 'Christ above culture', 'Christ and culture in paradox', and 'Christ the transformer of culture'.

2.2. The typology of Donald Bloesch

In the last chapter of his book, *Theology of Word and Spirit,* Bloesch (1992:250–272) presents his own typology of modern theology. He developed his typology from that of Niebuhr. However, he carefully adapted it to cover expositions of theology rather than the relation of Christianity to human cultures. He presents four types, namely, (a) a theology of *restoration*, (b) a theology of *accommodation*, (c) a theology of *correlation*, and (d) a theology of *confrontation.*

2.3. The typology of Peter Berger

While Niebuhr based his typology on Ernst Troeltsch's work, Berger, as a sociologist, based his typology on Max Weber. Since both Troeltsch and Weber said much the same about typology, as can be expected, Niebuhr and Berger had a similar approach to typology (Toon 1995:160).

In his book, *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger's (1979) analysis of theology since the Enlightenment led him to propose that, in the light of the range of possibilities from *Christianity identified with culture* to *Christianity against culture*, there are essentially only three basic types

of theology—the deductive, the reductive, and the inductive. These intellectual constructs allow one to understand the essential aspects of all forms of contemporary theology, from *dogmatic fundamentalism* to *extreme liberalism*.

In the next section, an attempt will be made to analyse Toon's four basic types of theology based on Berger's extended typology, in order to present as simply, but as accurately as possible, the range and content of contemporary theologies.

3. An Analysis of Toon's Four Basic Types of Theology: Berger's Extended Typology

3.1. The deductive approach (restorative)

The deductive option can rightly be called the right-hand pole. According to Peter Berger (1979:61),

> The deductive option is to reassert the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modern secularity.' Once the tradition has been restored to 'the status of a datum, of something given *a priori*, it is then possible to deduce religious affirmations from it at least more or less as was the norm before in premodern times (Berger 1979:62).

The deductive approach is similar to the theology of restoration in Bloesch's scheme. It focuses on what should be done when a religious tradition is restored—deductions are made regarding present duties. One reason for the attractiveness of this method is that in the contemporary world, it has 'the cognitive advantage of once more providing religious reflection with objective criteria of validity' (Berger 1979:62).

Against a background of unprecedented turbulence in religious and secular matters today, JD Myer, in his book, *Deductive Theology: a Reasoned Approach to a Reasonable God* (2006), composed a reasoned basis for Christianity that is able to endure the worst assaults of those who prefer to believe that Christians are unreasonable people. Myers' aim is to reclaim a vision of a merciful, triumphant, and rational Christianity, which is accessible to all through an evaluation of observable facts and traditions. Myers' bases his approach on an appeal to rationality, and it invites scientific scrutiny that rises above the deceit that is the inevitable defect of man-made religious institutions.

Toon (1995:177–180) provides the following examples of a deductive theology:

- Wherever one hears statements in a church, such as, 'the Bible says', 'the Word of God states', 'the church teaches', and 'tradition declares', one is probably encountering theology of the deductive type.
- When an evangelical pastor stands in the pulpit on Sunday with the open Bible in front of him and preaches an exegetical sermon from a passage of scripture, and his congregants sit with their Bibles on their laps, they are actually making an important assumption. They believe that expounding the Bible in the power of the Spirit clarifies its message and actually makes available the Word of God. From the sermon, the congregants deduce their present duties of faithfulness and obedience.
- If one were to visit a conservative evangelical seminary, one would find textbook(s) in systematic theology that also claim to provide a biblical theology—'a theology that is both faithful to the teaching of the Bible, and also arranged so as to present the truth of God in a rational form for today'. A good example of

such a textbook would be Millard J Erickson's *Christian Theology* (1986).

- Conservative evangelicals have, to a large extent, followed the Western exposition of doctrine based on the Athanasian Creed and the Confessions of faith that arose from the Protestant Reformation.

3.2. The inductive approach (empirical method)

The inductive option turns to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations—one's own experience and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions. This range may be of varying scope—limited to one's own tradition or expanded to include the fullest available record of human religious history (Berger 1979:63).

The inductive method uses religious traditions (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and so on.) as bodies of evidence concerning religious experience and the insights derived from experience. The Bible naturally holds a primary place in the body of evidence, since it is a primary record of religious experience and the insights based on it. Berger (1979:63) indicates the advantage of the inductive method: 'The advantage of this option is its open-mindedness and the freshness that usually comes from a non-authoritarian approach to questions of truth.'

Induction is arguing from empirical evidence. According to Berger (1979:63), induction implies two things, namely, it means taking: '[H]uman experience as the starting point of religious reflection, and using the methods of the historian to uncover those human experiences that have become embodied in the various religious traditions.'

The great exponent of this approach is Schleiermacher. His lifelong endeavour was to formulate theology in terms of the experience of faith

(a theology from below). Schleiermacher never taught that religious experience was merely human self-consciousness. Instead, he insisted that religious consciousness is really consciousness of something far beyond itself. Berger (1979:133) elaborates, saying that 'the human subject feels himself to be utterly dependent on that other reality or being at the centre of the experience.'

So, to start with human consciousness does not mean that you actually end there. At the same time, human experience is before all doctrines and dogmas. Of this approach, pioneered by Schleiermacher, Berger (1979:135) writes:

> The core of the inductive model is, quite simply, the assertion that a specific type of human experience defines the phenomenon called religion. The experience can be described and analyzed. Any theoretical reflection about religion (including the theoretical enterprise of theology) must begin with religious experience (so that, for theology, the unavoidable procedure is to go from the human to the metahuman, and not in the reverse direction).

Liberal theology, in general, may be said to have followed an inductive method, in that it speaks of God from the side of man. In other words, it takes the content of scripture as being a description of religious experience in the context of the Jews, Jesus, his apostles, and the early church. Toon (1995:185) explains:

> It uses this—along with any other religious experience deemed appropriate (from the history of Christianity or from world religions or both)—as the basis for producing theology. In other words, it does not begin by assuming that God has revealed true statements about Himself and His activity and that these are contained in the texts of the Bible. Rather, it assumes that the Bible

is the record of religious experience within a changing history and context.

The inductive approach is an important method of theology pursued by the well-known Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. It is closely related to their emphasis on the transcendence of the human spirit. Since Lonergan is so clearly committed to the inductive (empirical) method, it would be helpful to quote from his essay, *Theology in Its New Context*:

> Theology was a deductive science in the sense that its theses were conclusions to be proven from the premises provided by Scripture and Tradition. It has become an empirical science in the sense that Scripture and Tradition now supply not premises but data. The data has to be viewed in its historical perspective. It has to be interpreted in the light of contemporary techniques and procedures. When before the step from premises to conclusions was brief, simple, and certain, today the steps from data to interpretation are long, arduous, and, at best, probable (Lonergan 1974:58).

Julian Reindor (2011) refers to the enormous gap that had opened up between the church and the lives of working people in England, in particular, between the church and the great mass of the working population. In this regard, he raises questions: how do we 'do' theology, how do we think about our faith? Where do we start?

In an attempt to answer these questions, Reindor (2011) quotes Archbishop Michael Ramsey regarding the inductive approach to theology:

> It is a theological adventure—it is doing theology in the working areas of people's lives. It uses the 'inductive' approach to theology in contrast to the 'kerugmatik' or 'deductive' approach, which is a proclamation of the Gospel using traditional words and thought

forms. The inductive method starts from the world and from experience, and works back to propositions about God, the world and Christ. There is nothing new about inductive theology, but without it we perish today ... Christian theology has become stale, and there is a divine call to intellectual spring cleaning ... We get a foretaste of the inductive method in the parables of Jesus (and) in the Gospel of John where he begins with words and concepts recognised in the Gentile world, and works on them, and then points to Jesus as the fulfilment of them.

Toon (1995:185–186) provides the following example of a sermon that uses the inductive method:

The preacher would begin by referring to the changing situation of women in the modern world – how that apart from being mothers and wives they are also doctors and lawyers and engineers. He would proceed by saying that it is obvious that men and women are equal—different but equal. Therefore, if they are equal, and if the Christian religion is true, then the real Christian teaching must be that they are equal before God and in the church. Accordingly, this is really what the Bible actually teaches – despite appearances to the contrary.

3.3. The reductive (liberal) approach

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the deductive approach is the reductive approach. Berger (1979:62) defines this approach as follows: 'the *reductive* option is to reinterpret the tradition in terms of modern secularity, which in turn is taken to be a compelling necessity of participating in modern consciousness.'

In this approach the researcher uses something much more radical than some or other contemporary intellectual tool, such as the historical-

critical method in the study of the Bible. It actually involves a radical exchange of authorities. The authority of contemporary thought and/or consciousness is substituted for the authority of the tradition, such as the Bible and the Creeds. Thus, teachings and affirmations derived from the biblical tradition are translated into terms which are acceptable to modern man and permissible within contemporary culture. This is similar to Bloesch's *theology of accommodation*, where Christ is made the *Christ of culture* (Toon 1995:161).

According to Berger (1979:62), 'The major advantage of this option is that it reduces cognitive dissonance, or seems to do'. In his book, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, Bayer indicates that the hermeneutical method implicit in this reductive approach to theology reduces content to form, and is similar to the type of 'interpretation' used in Freud's psychoanalysis. Theology is to be treated as a 'psychological pathology' for the purpose of therapy (Bayer 2007:151).

Bultmann's method of *demythologization* is a primary example of the reductive approach. He asserted that the essential content of the gospel of God concerning Jesus is couched in mythological language. According to Patzia and Petrotta (2002:34), Bultmann's method seeks to: 'strip away ancient mythical elements from the text, such as angels, demons, a three-storied universe, the virgin birth, resurrection, and the like, as objective realities and to interpret mythical language existentially, that is, asking what these myths say about human existence.'

Bultmann was convinced that the narratives of the life of Jesus were merely providing theology in story form, rather than historical events or accurate quotations from Jesus. According to this view, 'spiritual messages were taught in the familiar language of ancient myth, which has little meaning today' (Rudolf Bultmann 2010:§2). For example,

Bultmann (2000:34) said that 'Jesus Christ is certainly presented as the Son of God, a pre-existent divine being, and therefore to that extent a mythical figure. But, he is also a concrete figure of history—Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of the crucifixion.'

Bultmann argued that in a modern world, with a scientific worldview, Christianity has no future, unless it can be totally translated into an acceptable modern form. Since modern man cannot believe ancient mythology, Bultmann attempted to present the gospel in such a way (expressed in existentialist categories) that it was the dynamic equivalent of the message of the New Testament (expressed in ancient mythology). However, he went even further than this. He actually demythologized the act of God in Jesus Christ, making that act occur at the precise moment when there is a 'meeting between the proclamation of the Gospel and the response of human faith' (Toon 1995:191–192).

Ever since the 1960s, there has been an explosion of reductive (liberal) theologies, or at least theologies that combine the inductive and the reductive approaches. For example, much of what is called political, liberationist, black, and feminist theology, is reductive. Their aim is to translate (reduce) biblical categories and teaching into modern categories and teaching. In this way they will serve a fully modern, secular, political agenda.

Most contemporary liberal theologians prefer to read Jesus' miracles as metaphorical narratives for understanding the power of God (Brandom 2000:76). In his article entitled, *Liberal Theology*, Hodgson (2010) identifies six marks of a liberal theology for today, namely, (a) a free and open theology, (b) a critically constructive theology, (c) an experiential theology, (d) a visionary, spiritual, holistic theology, (e) a prophetic, culturally transformative theology, (f) and a mediating,

correlational theology. He argued, that by means of these marks, theology is made relevant to the contemporary world and therefore provides resources for church renewal.

Toon (1995:192) indicates the basic assumption of these reductive (liberal) theologies:

> It is assumed that what is being desired (a new society, a just order, equality of the sexes, decolonization, and so forth) is superior to what has been, and remains, the present state of affairs. As a result, the Bible and the Christian tradition are used highly selectively to provide a model (e.g., exodus, deliverance) that is then translated into a secular model (e.g., social revolution) for modern society.

3.4. The regulative (narrative) approach

Lucie-Smith (2007:1) defines *narrative theology* as 'one that starts not with abstract first principles, but rather with a particular story; it is inductive rather than deductive. The story it examines is "embodied" in a community's tradition.'

According to Green, *narrative theology* refers to a constellation of approaches to the theological task. These approaches are typically joined by: (a) their antagonism toward all forms of theology dealing with the systematic organisation of propositions and grounded in ahistorical principles, and (b) their attempt to identify an overall aim and on-going plot in God's ways, as these are revealed in scripture and continually communicated in history (Green 2005:531).

Toon (1995:203–204) maintains that to appreciate the narrative approach, expressed in a variety of forms in contemporary Christianity since the 1970s, the following basic aspects of this approach need to be grasped:

- The contents of the books of the Bible are primarily narrative or story. It is the narrative of the relationship of God to specific peoples—first the Hebrew people, and then, the Christian church.
- Each person also has a story—a story that continues and develops every day of one's life. When one speaks of 'the story of our lives', it implies a narrative interpretation of personal identity and personal history—a story that needs to be connected to God's story.
- The church, as the community of faith, also has a story that it tells each time it meets. The local church participates in this unique story in its reading of the Bible, in its listening to sermons based on the Bible, and in its act of worship, as the congregants recall the mighty works and words of God.
- Revelation from God occurs as the worshippers participate in the narrative of God's gracious activity, as recorded in the Bible. Primarily, however, 'the narrative in words makes possible the disclosure of the One who is the Word, even Jesus Christ.'

Using the narrative approach, in his book, *Biography as Theology*, McClendon emphasized the importance of our story intersecting with God's story. He presented a model of teaching doctrine by using life examples that are both exciting and potentially dangerous (McClendon 1974:36). In an interview conducted with Ched Meyers, McClendon reflected on his purpose for writing the book, 'I was just trying to show that there is theology present in everyone's life' (Myers 2000). In other words, according to McClendon, our life narrative is a source of theology. Hence, biography is viewed as theology.

George Lindbeck is another good example of the narrative approach. In his *The Nature of Doctrine,* Lindbeck (1984:33) proposed that a

religion be looked at as 'a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.' He stated that its doctrines are best understood as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action: 'The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action' (Lindbeck 1984:18).

According to Lindbeck, therefore, doctrines are not talk about God, but rather, talk about the church's talk about God, salvation, and so on. The primary talk (narrative) is what one hears in worship, essentially from reading the Bible. Hence, doctrines function like the rules of a game, which regulate how the game is to be played—how believers are to think, speak, and act in a Christian manner. Once may label his general position as intra-textual theology (Toon 1995:204).

Reflecting upon the first days of the Christian church, Lindbeck pointed out that it was not a different canon of scripture, but a distinctive method of reading it that differentiated the church from the synagogue:

> Christians read the Bible they shared with the Jews in the light of their first orally transmitted stories of the crucified and resurrected Messiah … It was not simply a source of precepts and truths, but the interpretative framework for all reality. They used typological and, less fundamentally, allegorical techniques derived from their Jewish and Greek milieu to apply the canonically fixed words to their ever-changing situations (Lindbeck 1989:76–77).

It is important to bear in mind that sound biblical interpretation is a complex process, which consists of the creative interaction between the following *three elements*: (a) the world of the author, (b) the world of the text, and (c) the reader's perception of them. Each of these elements requires special attention. Unfortunately, influenced by post-modern

subjectivity, some theologians have failed to ground imagination in historical background and the author's intent. For them, a text becomes an independent entity into which a reader pours meaning. However, it is irresponsible to interpret a Biblical text by casting it off from its historical moorings. This is called *eisegesis* not *exegesis* (Malbon 1992:35–36).

In the next section, is an attempt to evaluate the dangers of Toon's four basic types of theology, especially when these approaches are applied 'totally' as a research method.

4. An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy

After analysing Toon's four basic types of theology based on Berger's extended typology, it is evident that these approaches, when applied 'totally' (in a total manner, to the exclusion of other approaches), raise serious concerns and pose challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. These challenges (inherent dangers) can be summarised as follows.

4.1. The deductive approach (restorative)

Some have argued for a 'totally' deductive approach. The problem with this approach is that it is only concerned with the Christian tradition and takes no account of the advance of modern knowledge. This approach is critical of the contemporary situation, but uncritical of the Christian tradition. It is possible to regard such an approach as dogmatic fundamentalism. The researcher should rather opt for a generally deductive approach in theology, which does justice to both the Christian tradition, as well as the contemporary situation (Toon 1995:163, 164).

4.2. The inductive approach (empirical method)

An entirely inductive approach also poses problems. This approach tends to be thoroughly aware of the modern cultural situation, and tends to make that situation an authority for the Christian religion. Such an approach is critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. However, the researcher should rather adopt a generally inductive approach, in which he is relatively critical of both the Christian tradition and the contemporary situation. He/she must base theology on the study of the experience of God in the Bible and Christian tradition (Toon 1995:163, 164).

4.3. The reductive (liberal) approach

When the approach to theology is entirely reductive, its main concern is the contemporary situation. The problem with this approach is that it is critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. This approach presents theology from two possible perspectives, namely, (a) secularist theology, or (b) a form of philosophy. Christian tradition, thus, receives no weight (Toon 1995:163).

Some would argue for a generally reductive approach, which is relatively critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. Toon (1995:163) elaborates:

> The concern here is to do justice to the Christian tradition by doing justice to the contemporary situation. Some weight is given to the Christian tradition … The theologian works within the modern mind-set, but he is willing to grant that genuine truth is found in the Christian tradition. Thus his theology is not totally secular theology.

Both the total and general reductive approaches have inherent dangers and should be avoided by evangelical theologians.

4.4. The regulative (narrative)

On the positive side, what unites people from very different theological positions in the narrative approach is their commitment to the (a) primacy of the canon as canon, and to the (b) first-order language of the Bible itself. However, on the negative side, the narrative approach is rather restrictive, since it is 'a way of rendering the doctrines of any denomination to be valid, but only valid for that denomination in the sense that they guide or regulate its ways of worship, witness, and morality' (Toon 1995:208).

Furthermore, the problem with the narrative approach, when it is totally regulative, is that it fails to ground biblical interpretation in the historical background and the author's intent. According to Malbon (1992:35–36), the researcher should rather opt for a generally regulative (narrative) approach, which takes into account the three main elements of Biblical interpretation, namely, (a) the world of the author, (b) the world of the text, and (c) the reader's perception of them.

5. A Christian Response to Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy

It is clear from the above evaluation that evangelical orthodoxy faces many contemporary challenges, especially those posed by Toon's four basic types of theology when applied totally. The question arises: how should Christians, in particular evangelical theologians, respond to these challenges?

5.1. A return to biblical authority

Since contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs, there is an urgent need for evangelical theologians to return to the authority of the Bible. Because the Bible points beyond itself, to God, it has conferred or inherent authority. The Bible is therefore authoritative because God bestowed its authority. Most evangelicals go further than this, insisting that the Bible has a genuine authority 'as the authentic embodiment of God's self-disclosure' (McDonald 1999:139).

McDonald (1999:139) explains how liberal theologians reject this ontological authority of the Bible, at most granting it a borrowed authority:

> Some, like Karl Barth, allow this authority to be bestowed by God while insisting that the Bible itself is essentially a human product. Others—e.g., Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich—regard the Bible as a fallible collection of religious writings on which the early church arbitrarily imposed an authority that evangelical piety has continued to uphold.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul affirms God's active involvement in the writing of scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV): 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.' Barker (2007:1846) describes God's involvement in the writing of scripture as 'an involvement so powerful and pervasive that what is written is the infallible and authoritative word of God.'

The fact that all scripture is 'God-breathed' supports the *inspiration* of scripture. It also affirms *the authority of scripture*, since the entire Bible (every word in it) originates from God. This quality of scripture being 'God-breathed' includes the teachings expressed in the Bible. Andria (2006:1481) points out the purpose for which we have been given the

scriptures: 'Timothy must use them to teach believers, to refute false doctrines, to correct errors and to train believers so that they will be equipped to do good works.'

The authority of the Bible, therefore, refers to the concept that scripture is 'normative for the church in speech, thought, and practice.' In other words, the Bible is 'the sole and final authority for Christians in all matters of faith and practice' (*Authority of the Bible* 2011).

5.2. A return to biblical hermeneutics

In view of the diversity of conflicting approaches in contemporary theology, there is an urgent need for today's evangelical theologians to return to the valued principles of Biblical hermeneutics, accepted by the majority of conservative Protestants for many years. Biblical hermeneutics is perhaps best summarised by 2 Timothy 2:15. This verse implies that there are certain principles that enable us to handle accurately the Word of God. Paul exhorted young Timothy to follow his example: 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15, NIV).

Improper methodology in interpreting the Bible is nothing new. Even in New Testament times, the apostle Peter warned of false teachers who deliberately misused Paul's writings, 'which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction' (2 Pet 3:16, NIV). This verse indicates that mishandling the Word of God can be highly dangerous, since it is the pathway towards destruction. Contrary to the practices of some false teachers in Corinth, the apostle Paul assured his readers that he faithfully handled the Word of God (2 Cor 4:2).

Hommel (2005) defined Biblical hermeneutics as, 'the science that teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Word of God' and proposed, amongst others, the following principles for interpreting the Bible properly:

The literal interpretation principle. The golden rule of Biblical interpretation is this: 'When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense'. According to this principle, each word is taken at its primary and common meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context of the word clearly indicate otherwise. Biblical hermeneutics is thus, faithful to the intended meaning of scripture and avoids spiritualising Bible verses and passages that should be understood literally.

The contextual principle. DA Carson has been quoted as saying, 'A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text' (Gawiser and Witt 1994:111). The context is that which accompanies the text. The Bible is a perfect unit, in which all the books hang together in harmony. Hence, it cannot be broken up into smaller unrelated units. Scholars should, therefore, consider the verses immediately before and after a selected passage. In addition, a passage of scripture should be always be interpreted within the framework of the entire Bible.

The genre principle. Biblical hermeneutics takes into account that the fact that the Bible is made up of all kinds of literature, such as poetry, prose, prophecy, history, allegory, and so on. How one interprets a particular passage depends on what type of literature it is. The questions arise: is one dealing with poetry or prose? Is one dealing with history or prophecy?

The grammatical principle. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Hence, the study of word meanings, grammar, and

syntax of the original languages is essential for a proper understanding of a passage of scripture.

The historical background principle. The Bible was written within in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While scriptural passages have universal application, the truths in the Bible can only be fully realised when the surrounding culture and history are taken into account.

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