

# The "New Hermeneutics"

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## Introduction

*Hermeneutics* is a word created from the name of Hermes, a god of Greek mythology, who served as interpreter for the other gods, especially Jupiter. Thus, *hermeneutics* refers to the science of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics are of ultimate importance — one's understanding of the Bible can be no better than his hermeneutics. Devout men were able to restore the church of Christ by applying correct Biblical hermeneutics. Devout men will be able to maintain the purity and identity of the church only through continued application of correct hermeneutics.

We all habitually (and without having to think about it) use several correct principles of hermeneutics each time we read the Bible. When we recognize a passage to be figurative rather than literal, when we take note of who is writing or speaking and who is being addressed, and when we distinguish between Old Testament and New Testament law, we are using sound hermeneutics.

For several years a few voices of radical liberalism among us have steadily denied some of the most basic principles of correct Biblical hermeneutics (e.g., Carl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett, et al.). In more recent years, a younger generation of brethren has arisen that has been influenced both by the spirit of hyper-tolerance which now dominates society and by the poisonous principles of the liberals of the past generation.

The younger liberals have especially developed a fixation on unity with the denominations, beginning with the Independent Christian Church (ICC). Since 1984, annual meetings between men in the two groups have been taking place. With but few exceptions, the participants from the churches of Christ have been those who have a history of doctrinal softness and compromise, if not outright apostasy.

Out of this background (and in order to hasten their union and fellowship agenda), these liberal brethren have adopted an entirely new approach to various

words, passages, and principles of interpretation of Scripture. Hence, we refer to their approach as the "new hermeneutics," and one brother has humorously described them as the "new hermeneutikers." (Actually, when analyzed, the "new hermeneutics" are hardly more than the "old hermeneutics" of a century ago that caused the Christian Church to apostatize from the Truth in the first place.) By listing and briefly discussing some of the principal points of this system of hermeneutical perversion we shall be able to see clearly the direction of movement.

### **A Novel View of Fellowship**

A significant element of the new hermeneutics is a novel view of fellowship. Ketcherside and Garrett have long advocated an erroneous distinction between "gospel" and "doctrine" (i.e., the "gospel" consists only of such basics as the death, burial, and resurrection, while "doctrine" consists of all other matters [e.g., worship, the nature of the kingdom, morals, etc.]). They then insist that only the "gospel" (excluding "doctrine," as they define it, altogether) is the basis for fellowship. This approach conveniently places such issues as worship with mechanical instruments and premillennialism in the realm of human preference and option. It also implies that we are in fellowship with practically all who claim to believe in Christ, regardless of how heretical their views are on a hundred "doctrinal" subjects. Ketcherside himself aptly named this fatally erroneous hermeneutic "unity in diversity," which, on the very surface, is an oxymoron.

The latest version of this view (fathered by Rubel Shelly) contends that there are two "levels" or "spheres" of fellowship. Shelly's scheme (which he calls "fellowship without compromise") distinguishes between "big 'F'" fellowship and "little 'f'" fellowship. According to him, one has only Fellowship (not fellowship) with all those who (in his view) have "obeyed the gospel." However, one has both Fellowship and fellowship with those who have "obeyed the gospel" **and** who agree with him on doctrinal matters. Since the "big 'F'" "level" of fellowship implies no endorsement of doctrine on the "little 'f'" level (according to Shelly), we can thus have Fellowship with those who use the instrument, advocate premillennialism, and such like, without endorsing their errors. He calls this his "doctrine of limited fellowship." Notice that Shelly's "big 'F'" is tantamount to the Ketcherside/Garrett "fellowship based on gospel," and his "little 'f'" equals their contention that fellowship does not depend on uniformity of doctrine.

The malignant consequences of this hermeneutic are many. It demands acceptance of almost every form of doctrinal error (from foot washing to counting beads) as mere matters of indifference. Ultimately, it demands acceptance of the "pious unimmersed," as long as they "believe" in Christ. This monstrous concept was born of the need for some device to allow those enthralled with their error (particularly the Independent Christian Church) to be granted "fellowship" without having to give up their errors.

Of course, the New Testament knows nothing of a distinction between "gospel" and "doctrine" nor of "levels" of fellowship. One is either in fellowship with God and his fellow man or he is not in fellowship with them (2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11; 1 John 1:7; et al.).

### **The Significance of Scriptural Silence**

Those who divided the church over a century ago by forcing in the missionary society and the instrument upon the church had to deny the significance of Scriptural silence concerning both. Now some of our brethren are carelessly doing the same thing in a new move for union with the Independent Christian Church. We expect those in the ICC to try to negate the force of Scriptural silence, but we do not expect our own brethren to surrender it as casually as some are doing and have done.

"Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent," more than any other one principle, has been responsible for the restoration and maintenance of New Testament Christianity. Through the same "breach in the dam" of Scriptural authority that men make for instrumental music (because it is not "explicitly condemned in the Bible"), others have brought in countless other innovations. It would be interesting to hear a debate between an it's-not-condemned-in-the-Bible instrumentalist and one who contends for milk and cornbread on the Lord's table.

Respect for the silence of Scripture, involving the "law of inclusion and exclusion," is rooted in Scripture itself. Simply put, when God specifies what He wants man to do or how He wants man to do a certain thing, He simultaneously includes what He wants and implicitly excludes every other thing in that class. We naturally and unconsciously use this principle every day.

When a song leader says, "Please turn to number 100," he implicitly excludes every other song by naming the song specified. Noah respected this principle, using only gopher wood in building the ark, although there was no explicit prohibition of other woods (Gen. 6:14, 22). Nadab and Abihu **did not** respect God's silence, and God consumed them for offering "strange

fire," not because it was explicitly forbidden, but because it was fire ". . . which he [God] commanded them not" (Lev. 10:1-2).

Inspired men lived and interpreted Scripture by this principle. There was no authority to bind circumcision upon the church because inspired men had explicitly forbidden it, but because they were silent concerning it (Acts 15:24). There was therefore no authority for it. No angel was a son of God because God pointed to each one and said, "You are not my son," but because He was utterly silent concerning angelic sonship (Heb. 1:5, 13). Christ could not be a priest in Israel (Heb. 8:4), not because He was of Judah and the law explicitly declared that no priest would come out of Judah. Rather, Jesus' was excluded from the Aaronic priesthood because, " Moses **spake nothing** [emp., DM] concerning priests" to come out of Judah (Heb. 7:14). If inspired writers used this principle to interpret Scripture, then so must we. The rank-and-file saint badly needs to hear this principle strongly emphasized as it was a generation or two ago.

### **"Weaker" And "Stronger" Brethren**

Romans 14:1-3 discusses "weaker" and "stronger" brethren and the forbearance that should exist between them. Some of our preachers are now saying that this passage applies to the issue of using instruments in worship and to our relationship with the ICC. Larry James, preacher for the Richardson East Church of Christ, Richardson, Texas, attended a local "Unity Forum" in the Dallas area with some Independent Christian Church men in 1984. What he wrote in his observations likely spoke for several others:

The whole discussion [with ICC men] called to mind Paul's advice to the weak and the strong in fellowship (1 Cor. 8, 10; Rom. 14-15). Implicit in our dialogue was the realization that our division in the past has been over an issue of opinion, not of revelation. From my perspective in a non-instrumental congregation, it seems that I stand in the camp of the weaker brethren. I was made glad...at the generosity and maturity of my stronger brothers from the Independent Christian Churches.

Even a neophyte in the Scriptures should be able to perceive that Paul was not discussing matters of obligation (such as how to worship acceptably, the action or purpose of baptism, etc.) in Romans 14. He was discussing matters of option or indifference (eating meat and herbs as opposed to eating only herbs, and esteeming days differently [Rom. 14:2, 5, 15]). God cares not whether we eat meat or herbs (1 Cor. 8:8) nor whether we esteem days differently (Rom 14:5-6), as long as we do not judge or condemn those who differ from our practice (14:4)

and do not destroy another by insisting on our way in such optional matters (14:13-14, 20-21). Such forbearance must apply to all matters of option.

If one inserts instrumental music into Romans 14, to be consistent, ought he not also to insert women preachers, missionary societies, non-congregational singing in worship, premillennial views, acceptance of unscriptural baptism, and all of the other errors of the ICC? In fact, why not throw in the multiplied hundreds of erroneous doctrines and practices of Protestantism and Catholicism as well? To consider those who can tolerate (yea, even revel in) error as spiritually "stronger" and those who refuse to become enmeshed in such errors as "weaker" is absolutely grotesque hermeneutics! Let it be clearly stated that in matters of obligation (which most certainly describes what Christ teaches about worship [John 4:24]), there is to be no forbearance extended to those who deviate from the inspired pattern (1 John 1:6-7; 2 John 9). In matters of obligation, Paul made it clear that we have no fellowship options: "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).

### **Instrumental Music A Mere "Expedient"?**

Some of our brethren who were caught up in the crusade in the mid-1980s for union with the ICC began calling instrumental music in worship a matter of "expediency" or "opinion" (e.g., Larry James, Randy Mayeux, Bill Minick, Calvin Warpula, Rubel Shelly, et al.). By such statements, the signal was sent to the ICC that at least some of "us" no longer consider the instrument a barrier to fellowship. The ICC folks must be laughing behind the backs of such weak and "irenic" brethren. I doubt that the aim of the ICC people has ever been to persuade us to use the instrument; they only desire that we embrace them while they keep the instrument (and their other denominational baggage).

What pleases God in worship is not for men to decide, but for God to decree (John 4:23-24), which He has done. We have the inspired command to sing praises unto God as Christians (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and no New Testament passage authorizes any other kind of music. This is the ground upon which the pioneer preachers of the restoration plea rejected the use of instruments, choirs, and other non-congregational singing in worship and upon which the restored church was united until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In the controversy over the instrument, David Lipscomb wrote in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1873:

We have no knowledge of what is well-pleasing to God, in worship, save as God has revealed it to us. The New Testament is at once the rule and limit of our faith and worship to God. This is the distinctive difference between us and other religious bodies.... We seek for things authorized, they for things not prohibited. "

The most important question about any religious practice is not, "Is it prohibited?" but "Is it authorized?"

J. W. McGarvey wrote an article in the *Apostolic Times* in 1881, correctly connecting rejection of instruments with the very basis of the restoration plea:

It is manifest that we cannot adopt the practice without abandoning the obvious and only ground on which a restoration of Primitive Christianity can be accomplished, or on which the plea for it can be maintained. Such is my profound conviction, and consequently the question with me is not one concerning the choice of rejection of an expedient, but the maintenance or abandonment of a fundamental and necessary principle...

Undeniably, many of the prime movers in the current union movement have departed from the ground of the pioneers as well as from their own former convictions on the instrument. Worse, they have abandoned the call for Scriptural authority in their "new" hermeneutics."

### **Wresting Ephesians 4:5 And 2 John 9**

In an effort to mitigate the use of musical instruments in worship as a hindrance to fellowship with the ICC, some now find it convenient to reinterpret Ephesians 4:5 and 2 John 9. Until recently brethren have almost unanimously (and correctly) understood the "one faith" of Ephesians 4:5 to be the same as "the unity of the faith" (i.e., the faith as a unit or a whole) in verse 13. However, some are now saying that the "one faith" is the "...atonement through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection..." (Rubel Shelly). Shelly concludes: "The 'one faith' has nothing to do with our methods and procedures of doing God's work...", thus conveniently removing instrumental music (and many other things) as hindrances to fellowship.

Surely the "one faith" and "the faith" are not used in reference to different things in such close proximity. "The faith" refers to "the word of God," "the gospel," "the right ways of the Lord," "the teaching/doctrine of the Lord," "the truth," et al. (Acts 8:4-25; 13:5-12; 1 Tim. 4:1-5). The "one faith" is simply "the faith," the entire Gospel system for which every saint is to contend earnestly (Jude 3). "The faith" certainly includes New Testament worship (John 4:24).

In 2 John 9 we read: "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." Our brethren have consistently contended (again, with good reason) that the "teaching of Christ" in this verse refers to that which Christ taught and inspired others to teach. Now, however, some are saying that the "teaching of Christ" refers merely to the teaching **about** Christ, particularly about His Deity and Incarnation. Shelly's view is that *he that abideth not in the teaching of Christ* refers to a denial of His incarnation. If this is what John was saying, then the only basis in this context for withholding or withdrawing fellowship from another (vv. 10–11) is a denial of the incarnation of Christ. Again, conveniently, this removes the instrument (and many other crucial things) as a hindrance to fellowship.

These views are not only contrary to recognized scholarship, they also deny what their new champions formerly believed and taught. More important, they deny both textual and contextual considerations. The New Testament consistently emphasizes the need for men to continue faithfully in the Truth (John 8:31; Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 John 1:7; et al.). Paul's statement (Eph. 4:5) and John's instruction (2 John 9–11) make it plain that Biblical unity and Scriptural fellowship are directly dependent upon faithfulness in doctrine.

### **The Purpose of Baptism**

There is no more fundamental matter than the Scriptural purpose of baptism, yet some brethren now have such a severe case of "union fever" that they are even capitulating on this. Rubel Shelly says that it is a false doctrine to hold that one must expressly understand that baptism is "unto the remission of sins." He postulates that more than one Scriptural reason for baptism exists. (e g., remission of sins, to obey God, etc.). He and his disciples aver that, as long as one is baptized for any of his alleged several "reasons," his baptism is acceptable. Jimmy Allen, long time professor of Bible at Harding University, wrote a book in 1991 (*Rebaptism*), in which he argued that one being baptized need not know the purpose of baptism for it to be Scriptural and acceptable to God. The book's dust cover carried a commendation by Rubel Shelly.

The consequences and implications of this new hermeneutic on baptism are potentially monstrous. While adamantly denying that baptism is necessary to salvation/remission of sins (as proved by hundreds of public debates), the Baptist Church teaches that one should be baptized "to obey God." This new hermeneutic therefore logically demands that we embrace every Baptist in fellowship. In fact, this view would demand acceptance of every

denominational variation of the purpose of baptism as long as it was immersion. We now wonder, if the Scriptural **purpose** of baptism can be thus surrendered, how long will it be until the Scriptural **action** of baptism (immersion) is surrendered? If neither the purpose nor the action of baptism is inviolable, then why not accept the "pious unimmersed"? Universalism, here we come! Whether or not this is the aim, this is the end of such loose and liberal exegesis.

*Unto the remission of sins* (Acts 2:38) are not the only words that convey the purpose of baptism in the New Testament. However, the equivalent of these terms (e.g., to be saved [Mark 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21], to wash away sins [Acts 22:16], to be made free from sin [Rom. 6:3–4; 17–18], to enter the kingdom of God [John 3:5], et al.), must surely be understood or one does not understand baptism. The foregoing expressions, although all are slightly different statements, all relate to the single design or purpose God had/has in mind for the act of baptism – to place one who is alienated from God by sin into a reconciled and forgiven state through the blood of Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). There are not **many** purposes of baptism, but there is **only one** purpose stated in a variety of ways.

The purpose of baptism is the very essence of the act. To suggest that one might be Scripturally baptized, not understanding the very essence of the act, is to suggest an utter absurdity. It is nothing but a dip in water. We have long reasoned with our denominational friends that one cannot be taught incorrectly and baptized correctly (Acts 19:1–5). We must now also turn the force of these Scriptural principles toward our compromising brethren.

### **Mixing “Apples” And “Oranges”**

In their "fellowship fever," several brethren are now "mixing apples and oranges." By this we mean that they are treating unlike things as if they were equal. Some now seem incapable of distinguishing between obligatory and optional matters. Bill Minick, of Fort Worth, TX, wrote the following illustrative statement in 1984 after attending the first Unity Forum with the ICC (the infamous "Restoration Summit") in Joplin, MO:

Do we really believe that one will be lost eternally because he does not agree with us on divorce, Sunday School, communion cups, going to war, instrumental music, missionary associations, covenants, formula for baptism, ladies wearing pants in the assembly, etc., etc.?

Obviously, Minick views every item he lists as among "our traditions and opinions." All of these are optional, negotiable things, including instrumental music and missionary associations. If matters of worship and organization of the church of Christ are optional, then just what about the church is obligatory? What about the terms of membership (the new birth



itself)? What about morals (he listed divorce)? Are God's laws concerning purity of life and holy living optional or obligatory?

This erring brother has produced a classic list of spiritual "apples" and "oranges." Equating instrumental music in worship and employment of a missionary society in evangelism with the communion cup and Bible class issues might be understandable in a spiritual neophyte, but it is inexcusably disgusting in a man who has supposedly been preaching the Gospel for 40 years. By including the instrument and the society in his list, he subtly equates elements that involve Divine obligation with things that are merely optional.

Whether we use one or one thousand cups in the Lord's supper is not specified in the New Testament, but the kind of music which God accepts in worship is specified (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Whether or not a church employs Bible classes on Sunday morning is a matter of option, but preaching the Gospel to the world by the church as God's sufficient agency of evangelism is a matter of Scriptural obligation (Mark. 16:16; 1 Tim. 3:15; et al.).

Our brethren who oppose multiple cups, Bible classes, orphan homes, and churches cooperating in evangelism make the mistake of counting optional things as obligatory – such is anti-ism. Those (viz., Minick) who equate instrumental music and missionary societies with Sunday schools and communion cups make the opposite mistake of counting obligatory matters as optional – such is unmitigated liberalism.

### **Unity Trumps Truth**

Perhaps the one element of the "new hermeneutics" that symbolizes the entire direction of the current "fellowship" initiative with denominational groups by some of our brethren is the disposition to exalt unity above Truth. Admittedly, the Bible frequently emphasizes the beauty and desirability of unity (Psa. 133:1; John 17; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:1-5; et al.), but unity is not the supreme virtue (Mat. 10:34; Luke 12:51). Some brethren, thinking there is no virtue beside unity, are proffering "union" and "fellowship" to others in spite of their errors in doctrine and practice and without any repentance or even acknowledgement of these errors.

Many quotations have already been cited in this manuscript that bear testimony to the willingness of some brethren to overlook such matters as the instrument, the missionary society, and many other pieces of sectarian baggage in an effort to forge a bond with the ICC. However, some have gone further and have already "**declared**" unity. They are now openly engaging in fellowship with the ICC in various ways. At the Joplin, Missouri, Unity Forum, the late Reuel

Lemmons called it a sin **not to recognize** "the unity that already exists." Randy Mayeux, who has since begun his own denomination in Dallas, Texas, has boasted of joint worship meetings with the Christian Church while he lived in Longbeach California, prior to the initial Unity Forum. Calvin Warpula, now of Jacksonville, Florida, has comforted the ICC folk by listing twelve reasons why it is "untenable" for them to publicly repent of their error of using the instrument before unity can exist. Space does not allow additional illustrations of this attitude that that are available.

If there is any principle taught throughout the Bible, it is that our ultimate loyalty must be to God's revealed Truth. This is so because it is not possible to be loyal to God or His Son if we are not loyal to their Word. To reject the words of Christ is to reject Him (John 12:48). All that we do (including any attempts at unity with others) must be done by the authority of Christ, with complete loyalty to His Truth (Col. 3:17). It is knowing and abiding in the Truth (not in unity) that makes one free in Christ (John 8:31-32). Every passage that requires us to practice "church discipline" emphasizes the superiority of Truth over unity. J. W. McGarvey grieved over the division his contemporaries in the church caused in the nineteenth century by their forcing the instrument and the missionary society upon the church. However, he correctly understood the ascendancy of the Truth as he wrote: "Truth first, union afterwards, and union only in the truth. This is our motto." So must this be our motto, also.

### **Conclusion**

The great need in the church in every generation is not "new hermeneutics," but a healthy respect for and adherence to the old, time-proved, experience-tested, Scriptural hermeneutics.

[**Note:** The date and place of publication of this article is unknown. I likely wrote it in the early 1970s.]

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