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Review: Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction

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The book is not excessively technical and can easily be read by theological students. The themes do range widely over the centuries, but all have relevance to modern issues. I hope it will find its place in evangelical libraries, even church libraries. The fruit of good scholarship is tasty indeed.

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Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction, by Elliott E. Johnson. Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1990. Pp. 330. \$19.95.

This volume, long in the making by Johnson, veteran Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, and Zondervan, is not helpfully titled, and thus sets most readers up for an initial cluster of false expectations about its style and contents. *Technically*, the claims to handle "expository" hermeneutical matters in an introductory way are true. But, let the buyer beware: "expository" here means the formal classroom variety, not the anticipated arena of expository preaching (e.g., of well over a dozen professors and pastors polled by this reviewer, *all* expected a preaching-oriented work from the title *Expository Hermeneutics*). Relatedly, the book qualifies as an advanced, philosophically-oriented approach to biblical hermeneutics (not at all what the subtitle suggests). In the working vocabulary of ministry and ministry training in the 1990s, Johnson's work might be more aptly titled something like *Pre-Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Advanced Questions*.

To focus on the title of such a book as a major issue may seem like "a tempest in a teapot" to some. But, it actually serves to underline much of what is both right and wrong in the field of evangelical hermeneutics as we proceed through the decade of the '90s.

It has only been a couple of decades since (even graduate-level) hermeneutics occupied a sort of "step-child" status in most evangelical schools. Professors were often assigned to teach the subject matter (almost always using Terry's, Ramm's, or Traina's texts) for any number of other reasons besides speciality or proficiency. With notable exceptions, many who studied under such a mentality walked away with an advanced Sunday School (even catechism) or "required bore" outlook.

In the meantime, though, evangelical hermeneutics has pulled itself up by its bootstraps. Spurred on by wider voices like E. D. Hirsch and A. C. Thiselton, thinkers like Johnson engaged the literary and philosophical issues of the times. In the process, the field of evangelical hermeneutics has been roused from its sleepy, simplistic state and ushered into the world of ideas to which Christianity must offer meaningful answers. Bottom line assessment: our scholarly rigor in the field of hermeneutics has come a long way inside one generation. So far, so good!

Unfortunately, that's not the whole story. Evangelical scholarship that is an end in itself is either disoriented, short-sighted, arrogant, or all of the above. Certainly that is not the intention of one like Johnson, who also ministers very

effectively in a local church setting. But, realistically, it is the problem confronting the avant garde hermeneutical gurus in conservative circles: you've come a long way, baby; but "So what?" in terms of the front lines of ministry.

It may be answered that the occasional geared-down and popularized work, like Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (1982) or Zuck's *Basic Bible Interpretation* (1991) plays a balancing role here. Along those same lines, this reviewer recently wrote the "How to Interpret and Apply the Bible" essay for the *New American Standard Study Bible*, and understands what is needed at the foundational "introductory" level. But, such treatments are far from a full answer.

If anything, they simply highlight the harsh contrast between the high-octane scholarly works and the entry-level, "no-previous-experience-needed" ones. To those who have labored long on both the professional and pastoral sides of the aisle, as this reviewer has, this publishing polarization simply spotlights the virtual "Grand Canyon" in between.

All of this has been to say that I suspect that my excitement when I first read Johnson's title and the initial congratulatory blurbs happened largely because I (wrongly) concluded that he was attempting a serious "bridge" between the scholarly and pastoral realms. Admittedly, my first-glance enthusiasm was dulled considerably by reading the stiff and poorly set-up text, not to mention wading through a considerable amount of vague or technical discussion that could easily have been relegated to footnotes.

Still, against my better pastoral (and pastoral *training*) instincts, I boldly required *Expository Hermeneutics* as the primary text in my introductory hermeneutics course. While not a disaster of the Titanic or Edsel variety, the only way I could make it workable as a true "introductory" text was a to "translate" almost everything Johnson said into understandable "pulpit-and-pew" concepts. Suffice it to say that I've never taken as much flak on student evaluations in regard to a textbook. It convinced me to never again require a text where even the "Glossary" (pp. 307-11) is written in technical-ese and is arbitrarily selective.

The good news is that *Expository Hermeneutics* finally floated to its own natural level in an advanced hermeneutics offering. But, even then, informal student feedback was to the effect that it offered very little in any *direct* sense for the overwhelming majority of biblical expository opportunities: i.e., week-to-week preaching and teaching in practical ministry settings.

This "misfire" on the way from philosophically-oriented hermeneutics to honest-to-goodness hermeneutics for expository ministry is doubly tragic because of the otherwise helpful nature of Johnson's interpretation-application-validation scheme. Perhaps he is overly dependent on Hirsch, who is cited roughly three times as much as any other source (see the Index; p. 313), but most of the material is insightful (when understandable). The reviewer particularly appreciated the development of "Recognition" (as the "forest"; chaps. 5-7) and "Exegesis" (as the "trees," chaps. 8-10). He also succinctly demonstrated the broader insufficiency of the pure "Inductive Bible Study" approach in chapter 1.

Potentially the most important portion of Johnson's volume is the capstone sections on "Application" (chaps. 11-12) and "Validation" (chaps. 13-14), which means basically "double-checking" your interpretation and applicational

conclusions. Although the development is still far too complex for the introductory seminarian or busy pastor to find useful, it is at this point that Johnson has much to offer that desperately needs to be heard across the board in evangelical circles. Thematically, at least, he begins to erect the “bridge” spoken of earlier across the gulf separating the theoretical support troops in our seminary “think tanks” from the hands-on ministry forces. But, like many building projects in an era of recession, it ground to a halt before it reached its proper conclusion.

Who will now come forward to complete the bridging process begun by Johnson and others? Who will present a reasonably “state of the art,” yet “user-friendly” hermeneutics manual to the army of pastoral foot-soldiers hoping for “trickle-down” insights from the best and brightest in our training sector? The answer to that question is not yet clear, though an answer becomes more and more imperative with each passing year.

Until then, Elliott Johnson’s contribution can serve as a “Toward an Expository Hermeneutics” (apologies to W. Kaiser) half-way house for those willing to wade and wrestle. It is definitely worth the effort to understand for personal profit, even if it largely defies use in helping others understand and obey the biblical text.

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Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical, by Eta Linnemann. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990. Pp. 169. \$9.95.

Prof. Eta Linnemann became a born again follower of Jesus Christ in her late fifties, after a long and prestigious career teaching biblical theology in Germany. As a student of Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and others, she had drunk deeply at the wells of modern historical-critical method and existential theology. But her conversion to true faith in Christ brought radical changes in both her personal life and the method she used to read the Bible. This book is Prof. Linnemann’s critique of her old theological and methodological positions, in the light of her new found faith—one insider’s look at the modern, academic theological establishment.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first half discusses the evolution of the modern (European) university system. Prof. Linnemann contends that the development of the modern university is rooted in a medieval Christian compromise with ancient paganism. From the beginning, Greek philosophy was more important to these new institutions than was faithfulness to the Word of God. This root gave rise to the massive trunk we see today in institutions of higher learning where atheism is *the* methodological assumption and skepticism the main article of faith.

From this beginning, Prof. Linnemann traces two important characteristics of university life. First, she offers a fine description of the socialization process undergone by every new student who finds him or herself inundated