“Current Trends in Hermeneutics and Theology: Certainty and Simplicity” published in the Paraklesis: A Ministry of Encouragement from Baptist Bible Seminary by David Mappes, PhD (Clarks Summit, PA). Summer 2010; ©By David Mappes, Ph.D.¹

During a recent seminar I posed the question of whose responsibility it is to make the Scripture relevant. Is it the pastor as communicator or the parishioner as listener? The answer to this question among others reveals various hermeneutical presuppositions and commitments. Hermeneutics comes from the Greek term hermeneuo which carries the idea of explaining, interpreting, or translating the sense of one language to another. In a more technical sense the term denotes the science and art of interpretation thus various rules and norms of interpretation are employed to determine the authors meaning in text. While these interpretive principles are not always fully agreed upon nor consistently practiced, a prevailing norm has existed that the authors intended meaning could be understood and correctly applied.

Interpretative certainty refers to the notion that sufficient literary evidence exists in a text so as to remove reasonable or justifiable doubt regarding the authors meaning to the extent that the interpretation is non-negotiable and absolute (some interpretations have sufficient literary evidence for certainty while other interpretations are held at a confidence or assurance level). The term simplicity (or single meaning) indicates the authors determinative meaning does not change and thus remains fixed and constant over time. The interpretative process entails a historical-grammatical-cultural method and the authority of the interpretation is further validated through the analogy of Scripture. Since all Scripture is a product of God (who has a single divine intent) then carefully nuanced interpretations (a canonical, coherent, congruent, consistent and comprehensive interpretation) provides objective validation against all other evidence or incorrect interpretations marshaled against it. Hence some interpretations can be so discernable, definable, and preservable that they can adjudicate any counter view. Certainty does not mean

¹ Dr. David Mappes serves as an Associate Professor of Theology and Bible Exposition at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA. This article was published (with minor changes) in the Baptist Bible Seminary publication entitled, “Paraklesis; summer 2010. Please contact BBS if you would like to receive this complementary publication. Any quotes or citations should be sourced from “Paraklesis.” ©Dr. David Mappes-this article be reproduced and circulated in any format as long as it is circulated in its entirety and without charge.
that the interpreter claims omniscience nor does it mean the interpreter holds all interpretations to the same degree.

Challenges to these hermeneutical norms began to be popularized in post world war II and the *new hermeneutic* emerged positing the meaning of the author is actually a fusion between the readers perspective and the authors of the text thus both certainty and simplicity was denied. With the flowering of postmodernism the notion of simplicity (single meaning) and certainty (no plausible, justifiable doubt) are being radically denied. *Postmodernism is often defined as a provisionalizing of all knowledge which is necessarily subject to ongoing revision.*

Since the postmodernist argues that all truth assertions/ language (including Scripture) is constructed by a particular culture/ society, then any truth assertion (including Scripture) is actually a cultural expression particular to one social group. Thus the postmodern emerging kind of Christianity argues that everyone (including the Scripture authors) operate from there own presuppositional, culture lenses and filters which to some extent distorts the very reality they sought to present (hence the popular though incorrect phrase, perception is reality). In this model then the Scriptural authors do not present truth and reality but rather they present what they perceive to be real and true?

Many of these emerging postmodern Christian authors then conclude the following: Since all knowledge can only be held at a provisional level of confidence (not certainty) subject to continual revision, then tolerance and dialogue are held as the loftiest of virtues. Those that assert certainty are often referred to as arrogant, divisive, subversive, and disruptive to this communal norm of tolerance. This tolerance is then incorrectly portrayed as humility. Second, they posit that actual author’s intent can change due to the reader’s situatedness thus authors meaning is fused with personal application and meaningfulness of the reader. This fusion creates the inability to critique and correct another’s interpretation since meaning is personalized as meaningfulness and it further drives the reader to always discover new meaning. Third and most seriously this postmodern kind of Christianity necessarily posits that a difference exists between the Scripture and the actual Words/ Revelation/intent of God. Thus moral commands and doctrines in Scripture become more of a human authors partially distorted view on a matter rather than God revealing His truth and reality. This separation between the Scripture and God’s revelation then creates a type of mystical and neo-orthodox approach to interpreting the text. In short, the reader becomes the determiner of meaning and significance of the text and not the biblical author.

Hemereneutical realism (not perception) insists the author’s verbal meaning is fixed, determinative, and constant and can be known in varying degrees (depending on the literary evidence in the text) and that a distinction is made between the authors meaning and its meaningfulness (or significance) to the reader. Returning to the initial question of who makes the Scripture relevant and meaningful. It is neither the communicator nor the listener. The meaning of Scripture is not made relevant. *It is relevant*—its relevancy is based upon the *authors intended meaning* and then significance is the readers’ appropriate relationship to the authors meaning.  

---

2Dr. David Mappes serves as an Associate Professor of Theology and Bible Exposition at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA. For more extensive discussion on these matters see the following recent articles: “A New Kind