
“The challenge for evangelical hermeneutics is the struggle to make the ‘old, old story’ available to a needy postmodern and pluralistic world without compromising the gospel’s power to save” (182). The postmodern and pluralistic world that Goldsworthy speaks of is one that has been hardened to the message of the gospel and has eclipsed this gospel by sacrificing sound hermeneutics and biblical theology for subjective, emotional applications from texts with no regard for their meaning. How can a world such as this return to the gospel-centered hermeneutics of the apostles? How can modern interpreters bridge the gap between the meaning of the ancient text and its significance and application for contemporary culture? These questions have largely been left unanswered or have been carelessly handled in recent years. There remain a large number, however, who see meaning in the text and the author’s intention; there remain those who seek to bridge the gap between the ancient and the modern by means of hermeneutics; and many see biblical theology and hermeneutics as central to the life of the believer as he or she approaches the Word of God. In *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, Graeme Goldsworthy seeks to provide the modern interpreter with the knowledge and tools to succeed in the latter enterprise.

**Summary**

Goldsworthy states that he has three goals which he aims to achieve in writing *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*. These three goals are achieved systematically, dealing with the first goal in Part I, the second in Part II, and the third in Part III. Though dealt
with separately, the latter parts build upon the foundation of the former, creating a unified message which finds its culmination in Goldsworthy’s commendation of the role of biblical theology in hermeneutics, which he notes can be regarded as a fourth aim of his book (15).

The introduction sets the stage for the book by defining and discussing key terminology. When speaking of hermeneutics, Goldsworthy means “both the theory and practice of interpretation” (17). He argues that for evangelicals, reading Scripture is for the purpose of knowing God and his will. Noting his belief that Scripture is the Word of God and the means by which God speaks to believers, Goldsworthy suggests that the goal of hermeneutics is a proper understanding of what God is saying in his word (16).

With these concepts properly defined, Goldsworthy moves on to his first goal, which is to look at grounds and assumptions related to hermeneutics which are held by evangelical believers (15). The bulk of this section is devoted to presuppositions and their role in hermeneutics. While this will be discussed in detail later, it is important to note that Goldsworthy asserts that in order to make the claim for evangelical hermeneutics, one must first show that evangelical presuppositions are preferable to modern philosophical ones (22). A second main emphasis of Part I is Goldsworthy’s discussion on the necessity of hermeneutics. Goldsworthy delineates six gaps that separate the reader from the ancient text, and argues that hermeneutics takes on the role of closing that gap and making the text significant for today (28-30).

Part II looks back at the history of Christianity and hermeneutical systems that Goldsworthy believes departed from the gospel-centered hermeneutics of the apostles (297). Apparently drawing upon the language of Hans Frei from his book The Eclipse of
Biblical Narrative, Goldsworthy addresses eight different periods in the history of Christianity in which the gospel was eclipsed by new hermeneutical systems which wandered from gospel-centeredness: the early church, the medieval church, Roman Catholicism, liberalism, philosophical hermeneutics, historical criticism, literary criticism, and evangelicalism. In each of these eight chapters, Goldsworthy gives a thorough history of the events and decisions which led to such systems, introduces the most influential people in each movement, and discusses how each have led away from gospel-centered hermeneutics.

In the final part of the book, Goldsworthy seeks to reconstruct a gospel-centered hermeneutic by means of developing several steps. The first step involves a return to Reformation principles, such as the four ‘alones’, and adoption of Luther’s position of Scripture as pointing to Christ, authenticating itself, interpreting itself, and a recognition of Christ as the Lord of Scripture (185). The second step looks at literary developments in linguistics and speech-act theory as aids in interpretation. The third step in reconstructing evangelical, gospel-centered hermeneutics is the historical dimension. Goldsworthy then addresses theological issues, paying particular attention to systematic and biblical theology. Goldsworthy portrays biblical theology as the context for exegesis and the means by which hermeneutics can be applied to the text to find application for the contemporary believer (257). The next step is contextualization in which Goldsworthy looks at issues of culture and translation. Finally, he concludes with a section on the hermeneutics of Christ where he looks at the hermeneutical implications of such aspects of Jesus’ life as incarnation, obedience, death, and glorification. Ultimately, Goldsworthy argues that “gospel-centred hermeneutics sees Christ as the determiner of
meaning” (176).

The final word for Goldsworthy comes in the epilogue in which he reiterates that hermeneutics is about understanding God’s Word and conforming to the image of Christ (314). To Goldsworthy, all of reality must seek understanding in light of Christ; the Bible, then, must be understood on the same grounds (315). Finally, Goldsworthy leaves the task of hermeneutics not to the individual alone, but to the church. He reminds the reader that the people of God must “go to God on behalf of the church and seek to bring the word of life to the church on behalf of God” (315). In this way, Goldsworthy seeks to bring the hermeneutical conversation back into the church and involve the church in the ongoing drama of doctrine.

**Critical Evaluation**

Much is to be commended in Goldsworthy’s work. For one, his research is thorough and, as this book is an academic approach to hermeneutics, his use of scholarly sources is appropriate. Though he often quotes from or alludes to more than a dozen sources on a single page, the footnotes never distract from the message of the text. In fact, Goldsworthy’s ability to draw in such a vast array of material while still maintaining his own, unique voice is masterful. By maintaining his voice throughout, Goldsworthy succeeds in highlighting the main ways in which the gospel was eclipsed and linking these mistakes with the solution presented in Part III.

As mentioned earlier, presuppositions play a huge role in Goldsworthy’s discussion. He argues that presuppositionalism is the most consistent and helpful position for evangelicals (184). On the most basic level, Goldsworthy notes that God either is or is not the sender of the message of Scripture, and that our decision either way
is a presupposition. He suggests that in practice one cannot read Scripture apart from certain presuppositions (43). The strength of Goldsworthy’s discussion on presuppositions is his ability both to establish some of the more common and important presuppositions and also to guard them against the claims of circularity.

He outlines basic evangelical presuppositions such as the existence of God and the reality of an objective world, but moves beyond these issues to biblical ones, such as divine involvement in the writing of Scripture and the four alone of the Reformation (45-46). If, however, one begins with a belief in salvation by faith alone, for example, what protects the interpreter from the charge of circular reasoning when he ultimately determines that Scripture teaches salvation by faith alone? The answer to such questions as this one is of vital importance in maintaining validity in the interpretive enterprise. Goldsworthy’s response is both clear and coherent and provides an excellent answer to this question. Goldsworthy suggests first that there is a hierarchy of presuppositions (51). By this concept he posits that one need not return to the basic presuppositions each time; rather, as one reads the text with basic presuppositions in mind, certain teaching becomes clear, such as the example of salvation by faith alone. This conclusion, then, can become a new presupposition that informs later reading. This process is referred to as the hermeneutical spiral, and provides a method for moving beyond basic presuppositions. Goldsworthy’s caution, however, is that these new presuppositions must be checked by Scripture (52).

Goldsworthy gives further clarification on the way in which Scripture checks the presuppositions involved in the hermeneutical spiral, and it comes in the form of biblical theology. As suggested before, modern hermeneutics has eclipsed the gospel in
discarding biblical theology in favor of contextualizing (incorrectly) passages for the purpose of cultural or personal preference. Such a hermeneutic guided by subjectivity and personal preference does not use Scripture to check their presuppositions to see if they are valid. In Goldsworthy’s proposal, however, biblical theology is the means by which Scripture holds interpretation accountable. Texts are to be read in light of a biblical theology which sets parameters of interpretation around the text to keep it from being misappropriated. One such basic biblical theological concept that Goldsworthy puts forward is that the sole content of Scripture is Christ (193). In this way, Goldsworthy proposes that “biblical theology is an important discipline in enabling us to discover both the revealed propositions of unity and the empirical shape of it” (194). Determining unity helps guard against incorrect interpretations, and thus biblical theology is an appropriate tool in the hermeneutical task, as well as the end result.¹

Goldsworthy succeeds as well in his evaluation of modern literary dimensions of hermeneutical study. One such exemplary discussion is on speech-act theory. Goldsworthy provides the reader with the background of speech-act theory, clarifies the main terms such as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary action, and draws from the research the implication of speech-act theory most beneficial for his hermeneutical proposal, namely the concern for the author’s intention (209-10). Similarly, Goldsworthy succinctly, yet clearly, addresses double-agency discourse, which helps unify the apparent contradiction that Scripture is written both by God and by man. Moreover, double-agency discourse also suggests authorial-discourse interpretation, thus supporting

¹ This assumes that the purpose of hermeneutics is the produce a cogent biblical theology.
the conclusion of speech-act theory (213). However, though Goldsworthy is optimistic about the possible benefits of such study, he warns that evangelicals must continue to assess its presuppositions (215). His care to assess presuppositions on the basis of Scripture in this case confirms his proposal for such activity in reading Scripture; his consistency and clarity, then, are commendable.

A final valuable insight worth discussion is Goldsworthy’s analysis of the gospel as “the hermeneutical norm for the whole of reality” (63). Goldsworthy argues, “Thus we should read all other books as we read the Bible in the sense that the ultimate interpretation of all literature, of every spoken or written word, can only be achieved in the light of Christ” (63). Goldsworthy prefaces this statement (which is found in a footnote) by suggesting that the meaning of all existence, of all reality, is found in the person of Jesus (63). In this sense, all literature is based upon norms of reality which find their fulfillment in the gospel message. The gospel is the ultimate reality and all portrayals of the real world would be subject to this ultimate reality. Such a statement does not discount that there is a very real sense in which authorial-intent can be devoid of theistic or Christian sympathies; nevertheless, the fact that anyone can read and discern and understand at all is because of the reality of the gospel. If the gospel is true, then all of history, all communication, all of reality finds its fulfillment in the gospel event and record.

Amid the many strengths of Goldsworthy’s book, one statement stands out that is less carefully defined and defended than the rest. This statement is a claim that could be empirically defended on several levels, but is left at face value with no clarification or defense. Goldsworthy writes, “But, even though there is presently a wide acceptance of
humanistic beliefs in the churches, evangelical Christianity is perhaps stronger now than it has ever been since the Enlightenment” (88). This sentence ends both the paragraph and thought, and thus stands alone without defense. It is unclear based on the context what exactly leads to his optimism that Christianity is stronger now than at any time since the Enlightenment. Is it stronger because of greater numbers in the churches? More converts? Better teaching? If humanism is widely accepted in the church as Goldsworthy posits, what might he have in mind that favors the evangelical Christianity of today? These questions and others are left unanswered due to the absence of any defense of his statement or clarification as to the standard by which he is measuring strength.

Conclusion

Goldsworthy’s purposes in *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* were to look into the presuppositions and foundations of evangelical belief, to overview past hermeneutical developments and how they eclipsed the gospel, and to reconstruct a gospel-centered hermeneutic. In each of these goals, Goldsworthy should be commended. His clarity, structure, argumentation, and proposals are both insightful and attendant to his thesis. Moreover, he admirably commends biblical theology as an integral part of the hermeneutical task. Goldsworthy’s work has numerous strengths which serve to advance his argument as well as introduce new topics for research and inquiry. Conversely, he has very few weaknesses of any consequence which strengthen both his qualifications for writing the book and the argument and position he presents.

This book serves to move readers beyond a basic understanding of hermeneutical issues to a practical application of it through a developed method, and is thus appropriate
for a study on the discipline of hermeneutics as well as an aid in developing and
advancing one’s own hermeneutical practices. Among the vital tasks of the author for a
helpful book are a clear and manageable thesis and the successful execution of the
purpose for which the author set out to write the book. Goldsworthy has done both in this
work, along with several other contributions, and has thus helped advance the
hermeneutical conversation through his presentation in *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*. 