

The Hermeneutics of the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana on its Fortieth Anniversary: Still Towards a Latin American Evangelical Contextual Hermeneutics

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Introduction

Hermeneutics may thus be conceived as having a spiral structure in which a richer and deeper understanding of the Bible leads to a greater understanding of the historical context, and a deeper and richer understanding of the historical context leads to a greater comprehension of



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*the biblical message from within the concrete situation,
through the work of the Holy Spirit.*¹

In the experience of the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana* (Latin American Theological Fellowship, FTL),² it is easy to see how all theological reflection is socially and historically centered and that only in light of its historical context is it possible to understand, appreciate, and appropriate it wisely. This article provides a panoramic view of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as the framework and context in which the FTL and its hermeneutical reflection were born and developed.

As I suggest in the title of this article and hope to demonstrate in its argument, the FTL's task remains unfinished; we are *still* on the journey to produce a contextual hermeneutics, faithful to the Bible and pertinent to our diverse social realities. At the same time, even in light of its "on the road-character" (Mackay), the FTL has, to its credit, stimulated and inspired a rich and meaningful theological production during the last four decades that not only significantly influenced the theological reflection of the younger generations of biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, and missionaries but has also changed their praxis and contributed, in a modest way, to the development of integral models of evangelization. It has changed the way that theological thinking and ministry are done in Latin American churches and beyond.

The FTL's task remains unfinished; we are still on the journey to produce a contextual hermeneutics, faithful to the Bible and pertinent to our diverse social realities.

¹ C. René Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture—A Theological Perspective," in *Gospel and Culture*, eds. J. R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 102.

² For many years the official name in English of the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana* was the Latin American Theological Fraternity. Given that the word "Fraternity" in North American English refers to male-only organizations, the title "Latin American Theological Fellowship" was adopted in 2006 as the official title in English to better express the composition and spirit of the organization.

This article is a condensation of two chapters of my doctoral dissertation.³ The working thesis of the dissertation is that during the last four decades a new paradigm has been emerging in Latin America in evangelical, biblical interpretation which is not only opening creative ways of re-reading the Bible and doing theology but is also producing new models of Christian education, mission, discipleship, cultural involvement, and socio-political praxis.

The emerging paradigm is poised to change not only the hermeneutical task of the church but also its socio-political praxis in the continent—a huge claim indeed.

This article has two main parts: A historical reconstruction of the process of elaboration of a *contextual hermeneutics* and a brief description of the hermeneutical circle that represents the foundational model of the FTL.

I. The Birth and Development of the FTL's *Contextual Hermeneutics*

Linked with the birth of the FTL in 1970, the development of its hermeneutical model was a central concern and task during the 1970s and 1980s. It is important to take into consideration the historical, theological, and ideological factors that influenced such a development. Those historical and ideological realities have been the vital framework in which traditional hermeneutical questions have been examined and placed in a new context (social reality). By considering them we will be able to ascertain if and how “a richer and deeper understanding of the historical context leads to a greater understanding of the biblical message.” This claim is a central feature in the paradigm being developed by the FTL.

³ I finished my doctoral dissertation in 1996 for Westminster Theological Seminary on the hermeneutics of the Latin American Theological Fellowship under the title, “Towards a Latin American Contextual Hermeneutics.” As the title indicates, the search for a new paradigm in biblical interpretation, launched by the founders of the FTL, was a process aimed *towards* a concrete expression and articulation of a distinctive approach to Scriptures *and* to social reality.

A. The Latin American Context: 1959–1995

Christian interpretations of Latin American reality depended until the end of the 1980s, in different degrees (consciously or not, critically or naively), on two basic paradigms: modernization theory and dependency theory. There was a conscious effort in the FTL to articulate a socio-historical analysis of Latin America in critical dialogue with these basic paradigmatic theories (which informed political ideologies and were openly debated in the continent) and that was also informed by and faithful to the Scriptures.

For the FTL, since its beginning, historical interpretations were meant to be an integral part of the hermeneutical process. As such, they should serve to gain an understanding of Latin American reality in order to clarify the message of God's Word for today. That is why it is so important for the FTL to understand historical reality.

Furthermore, historical analyses were not merely academic exercises; their objective was to understand the complex Latin American world in order to provide realistic options for Christian life and ministry. The goal was ethical, pastoral, and missiological.

B. Birth Marks: Theological Trends

Different and frequently opposing theological views emerged during these crucial early years, and they affected the way biblical interpretation, theology, and Christian mission were understood.⁴ The FTL during the first two decades of its existence grew in interlocution with liberation theologies and with conservative evangelical theological positions.

1. *Liberation theologies*. It was in these historical and ideological contexts that important theological movements developed. In 1968

⁴ In this review we are interested in documenting mainly the origins and development of the hermeneutical reflection of the FTL. Only to underline the distinctiveness of the FTL's thought, we have included examples of contrasting positions in both Catholic and evangelical circles. It is not our purpose to present here a comprehensive overview of theological and hermeneutical trends in Latin America.

the Latin American Catholic Bishop's Conference (CELAM) met in Medellín, Colombia and offered pastoral guidelines along the lines of liberation theologies. Dependency theory, as well as other analyses of social reality, was adopted, and a revolutionary project emerged to liberate the poor from oppression and exploitation.⁵

A progressive sector of the Roman Catholic Church experienced a "conversion," turning itself towards the poor and oppressed in the continent. The *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs, Base Ecclesial Communities) were one of its concrete expressions.⁶

⁵ As described by Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La verdad os hará libres* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1990), 76–77.

⁶ A good number of US American and Latin American scholars have documented the role and impact of the CEBs as one of the most significant contemporary movements in Latin American civil society. Thus, not only Jon Sobrino (with I. Martín-Baró and R. Cardinal, *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero* [San Salvador: UCA, 1980]) but also María Helena Moreira Alves (*State and Opposition in Military Brazil* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985], 11, 22, 87, 154–60, 177–82, 198, 202–207), June E. Hahner (*Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850–1940* [Durham: Duke UP, 1990], 191–92, 203), Jane S. Jaquette (*The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* [Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989], 4, 21, 42), Anjali Sundaram and George Gelber (*A Decade of War: El Salvador Confronts the Future* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990], 167–81), and Jeffrey Gould (*To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912–1979* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990], 198–99, 273, 275–78, 288) have all documented the fact that, during critical times when the state has become extremely weak to produce effective social changes, Christian movements (among other civil ones) have provided civil society with social and political spaces from which they have been able to effect significant changes in society and state. See also Harvie M. Conn (*Eternal Word in Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology and Mission in Dialogue* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 387–91). An excellent documentation of the CEBs was written by Guillermo Cook (*The Expectations of the Poor: Latin American Base Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985]).

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An attempt to apply the reforms of the II Vatican Council to Latin America took place, and profound changes started to occur. Christians became conscious of the situation of oppression and exploitation that Latin America was suffering and of the role that the church had played in it. Míguez Bonino describes the beginning of such awakening among progressive Catholics and Protestants in the early 1960s as a crisis of conscience:

Progressive Catholicism, updated to Vatican II, and Protestantism share the crisis of the modernistic-liberal ideology. Co-opted into the colonial and the neocolonial systems as religious sanction and ideological justification, Christianity faces an agonizing experience of self-criticism.

It is a crisis of conscience, when Christians discover that their churches have become the ideological allies of foreign and national forces that keep the countries in dependence and the people in slavery and need. . . the contrast of a rich Church and a starving people, these are the food for the crisis so widespread today among Roman Catholic younger priests and laymen, not excluding many bishops.

Both Protestants and Catholics. . . suddenly and unexpectedly see their Church serving, in fact, the interests of an inhuman structure. But this “traumatic experience,” opens the door for a new search—the quest for a post-colonial and a post-neocolonial understanding of the Christian gospel.⁷

New hermeneutical approaches to Scripture were developed among liberation theologians and Bible scholars which also became a challenge for evangelical thinkers. Some scholars developed a framework for a hermeneutical theory: Severino Croatto, Juan Luis Segundo,

⁷ José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 17–18.

Clodovis Boff, and José Míguez Bonino. Others showed their re-reading of Scripture in their exegetical works: José Porfirio Miranda, Elsa Tamez, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Carlos Mesters.⁸

2. *Evangelical responses.* In general, evangelicals maintained a fundamentalist theology and conservative political attitude towards social reality, polarized by the emergence of liberation theologies. Accordingly, their anti-world theology prevented them from responding in any significant ways to the crisis that the continent suffered during those traumatic decades.

Evangelical systems of biblical interpretation were dominated by dispensational, pentecostal, and grammatical-historical hermeneutics, all of them unrelated and indifferent to the social reality of Latin America.

For a small sector and a minority among evangelical and Protestant groups—the movement Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina (ISAL, Church and Society in Latin America)—this was a time of a new consciousness and radicalization.⁹ ISAL maintained its radical position and eventually alienated itself from the historical denominations.

⁸ For a comprehensive bibliography and a thorough analysis of liberation theologies see Salatiel Palomino López (“The Hermeneutics of the Latin American Theology of Liberation and its Possible Contribution Toward a New Reading of Reformed Theology,” Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), J. Andrew Kirk (*Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View From the Third World*, New foundations Theological Library, eds. Peter Toon and Ralph P. Martin [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979]), and Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner (*Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989]).

⁹ Samuel Escobar, *La fe evangélica y las teologías de la liberación* (El Paso: Casa Bautista, 1987), 58.

II. The Beginnings of Hermeneutical Reflection in the FTL: A Commitment to the Word of God and to Latin American Reality

It was in this context that the biblical-theological reflection of the FTL developed. CLADE I, the first Latin American Evangelization Congress, held in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 1969, was the key point that marked the conception of the FTL.¹⁰

Several factors that were important for many of the founders of the FTL left a significant mark for the years to come: first, the need for an indigenous reflection, free from the restraints of missionaries; second, a strong criticism of Marxism; and third, a clear commitment to the Scriptures and to Latin American reality.¹¹

According to Escobar, there have been at least four major concerns in the FTL's theological reflection: consciousness of the acute problems that plague Latin America, the meaning of the gospel in such a context, what should the role of the evangelical church be in Latin America, and a search for an indigenous theological reflection.¹² The following analysis will explore the way that these concerns were addressed in the theological and hermeneutical reflection of the FTL.

The foundational work of the FTL on hermeneutics is found in the book *El debate contemporáneo sobre la Biblia* (The Contemporary Debate over the Bible),¹³ which contains

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¹⁰ Escobar, *Hacia una teología evangélica latinoamericana*, ed. C. René Padilla (Miami: Caribe, 1984), 140–41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59–61, 64.

¹³ Pedro Savage, ed., *El debate contemporáneo sobre la Biblia* (Barcelona: Ediciones Evangélicas Europeas), 1972.

the papers presented at the consultation where the FTL was founded, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1970. A constant theme in the consultation was the need for a Latin American theological reflection free of the constraints imposed by Anglo-Saxon missionaries and thinking, as already indicated.

Accordingly, Escobar's paper at the consultation¹⁴ addressed the problem of biblical content and Anglo-Saxon trappings in Latin American theology.¹⁵ He spoke of the need for a contextualized and indigenous theology, of a cultural interpretation of the Latin American world, and of a conscious removal of Anglo-Saxon overtones. At the same time, he proposed several tasks in order to achieve such renewal. His paper was like a "declaration of independence" which marked a new road for Latin American evangelical theologians.

Next, Pedro Arana¹⁶ established principles and ideals which were theologically solid. He reacted strongly against different influential theological approaches in the continent: fundamentalism, liberalism, existentialism, and Marxism. Yet he gave no specific proposal or alternative to them. It was more a critique of other ways of doing theology without advancing a more concrete and better way of doing theology in that context and time.

Then Ismael Amaya¹⁷ offered a criticism of liberal biblical scholars and theologians. In a sense he represented the fundamentalist approach which tends to point out the deficiencies without appreciating the contributions. His presentation was a good summary of the discussions of the theme in Anglo-Saxon conservative circles.

¹⁴ Escobar, "Una teología evangélica para Iberoamérica," in Savage, *El debate*, 19–36.

¹⁵ See also Escobar, "Biblical Content and Anglo-Saxon Trappings in Latin American Theology," *Theological Fraternity Bulletin* 3:1–11.

¹⁶ See Pedro Arana, "La revelación de Dios y la teología en Latinoamérica," in Savage, *El debate*, 37–78.

¹⁷ Ismael E. Amaya, "La inspiración de la Biblia en la teología latinoamericana," in Savage, *El debate*, 79–119.

The problem was that he lacked the creativity and the effort of other lecturers to contextualize the discussion. For example, no allusion was made to Catholic theologians or Latin American thinkers.

René Padilla presented one of the most profound and contextualized papers.¹⁸ His line of thought developed in close dialogue with Anglo-Saxon conservative theologians (just one Spaniard was quoted, José Grau). Yet he interacted continuously with Latin American evangelical realities using tools from US American and European evangelical theologians.

Thus, Padilla rejected the “bibliolatry” which was stimulated by fundamentalism; criticized the “rationalist negation” that denied the inspiration of Scripture; questioned the error of Barthianism, which reduced “revelation to an encounter with Jesus Christ”; excluded the claim of Catholicism by which the authority of the Bible depended on the authority of the church; and repudiated the “mystic subjectivism” so common in evangelical circles.

Padilla represented a solid evangelical position with regard to the authority of the Scriptures. He showed a broad understanding of the matter, and his main points covered important theological debates around the authority of Scriptures. While the character of his paper was not normative (it was more a declaration of faith and an illuminating proposal), it was influential in the years to come (as Escobar declared). The paper contributed to the creation of an evangelical consensus: non-fundamentalist, conservative, and yet progressive.¹⁹ It established essential questions for an evangelical epistemology. It is important to point out that Padilla in his paper did not carry on a dialogue with some of the precursors of liberation theologians, such as ISAL.

¹⁸ C. René Padilla, “La autoridad de la Biblia en la teología latinoamericana,” in Savage, *El debate*, 121–53.

¹⁹ Early brochures of the FTL described its members as *conservative evangelicals*.

Finally, Andrew Kirk presented his paper on the Bible and its hermeneutics in relation to Protestant theology in Latin America.²⁰ This paper provided foundational principles for the further hermeneutical reflection of the FTL. It is a very fine paper, well thought-out, comprehensive, and articulate, but in some cases Kirk caricatures the people he criticizes and dismisses them too easily. Nevertheless, Kirk's effort to contextualize his thinking to the reality of Latin American evangelical churches should be appreciated.

While the diverse papers moved along the lines of orthodox evangelical Christianity in their presentation of several topics (revelation, inspiration, authority, hermeneutics), at the same time there was a deliberate attempt to relate those topics to the Latin American theological situation. In that sense the consultation represented an important contribution to the evangelical churches of the continent. By rethinking the fundamental doctrine of Scriptures in light of the evangelical reality of Latin America, and with a lesser emphasis on the relationship and applicability of the doctrine to the socio-economical-political reality, the FTL became a landmark in the history of Latin American evangelical theology.

If it is true that, as Savage indicates in his introduction, there was a clear dependence on Anglo-Saxon theology in the articulation of the key theological issues, at the same time there was a constant and coherent note of a theology "come of age." If we evaluate the essays considering the historical moment and the background against which they were written, we may be able to conclude that Latin American evangelicals (represented by these theologians) were starting to do their own theological thinking with greater freedom and maturity. A new sun had emerged in the horizon of the continent.

²⁰ Andrew Kirk, "La Biblia y su hermenéutica en relación con la teología protestante en América Latina," in Savage, *El debate*, 155–213.

III. Hermeneutical Reflection in the 1970s

A. A Key Theological Trend

Dependency theory dominated the understanding of Latin American reality and provided the tools for a new way of doing theology. This was a key decade for liberation theologians. Gustavo Gutiérrez published his *Teología de la liberación* in 1972, which was the beginning of a large number of publications and, more importantly, of a socio-political and religious movement partially represented by the CEBs. Gutiérrez' book was a manifesto and a search for justice, from a Christian perspective, in a continent characterized by oppression and injustice.

B. Hermeneutical Developments within the FTL

After the founders of the FTL established the Word of God as their common platform,²¹ according to Escobar, “the subsequent work of the FTL led us to broaden and to make more precise certain key concepts, especially in the field of hermeneutics.”²²

1. *Key antecedents.* Serious considerations of the role of the church in the critical social context led the FTL to organize the “First Evangelical Consultation on Social Ethics” in Lima, Perú, in July, 1972.²³ The first three presentations were devoted to an analysis of the Latin American situation. Escobar made very clear that his paper attempted to move away from ideological paradigms (especially Marxist) of understanding reality and suggested the possibility of an evangelical perspective.²⁴

Six months later, in December 1972, also in Lima, Peru, the FTL organized its second major consultation under the title “The

²¹ See Escobar, “Una teología evangélica.”

²² Escobar, “Herederos de la reforma radical,” in *Hacia una teología evangélica latinoamericana*, ed. C. René Padilla (Miami: Caribe, 1984), 66.

²³ The papers were published in book form by René Padilla, *Fe cristiana y Latinoamérica hoy* (Buenos Aires: Certeza, 1974).

²⁴ Escobar, “La situación latinoamericana,” in Padilla, *Fe cristiana*, 15–17.

Kingdom of God and Latin America” (the papers appeared in book form edited by Padilla).²⁵ Again, major importance was given to a serious analysis of the historical situation, not as deeply as was done in the previous meeting in July, but as an integral part of the presentations whose content was more biblical and theological.

At the same time, in that consultation, the “kingdom of God” became a biblical and hermeneutical key, a paradigm, to articulating a theology “faithful to the Scriptures and relevant to the historical context.”²⁶

It is important to note that the consultation represented an evangelical spectrum of theological positions at that point in time. Accordingly, the papers on the kingdom of God were delivered from

dispensational (Emilio Antonio Núñez) and on the other extreme from liberationist (José Míguez Bonino) perspectives. The center was represented by one Mennonite (John H. Yoder) and two Baptist thinkers (Escobar and Padilla).

In all the papers a deliberate attempt was made to relate the theological reflections to Latin American reality. Núñez confined his reflection to the church in Latin America; Padilla, from his perspective

of the kingdom (already-not-yet), made pointed criticisms of evangelical (church growth and dispensationalism) and liberationist practices and indicated ways to minister in the historical context; Yoder proposed the “Messianic Expectation of the Kingdom” as a key to developing an adequate hermeneutical approach today and to relating it to the exercise of power in Latin America. This paper was very significant and foundational for many FTL members.

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²⁵ C. René Padilla, ed., *El reino de Dios y América Latina* (El Paso: Casa Bautista, 1975).

²⁶ Escobar, “Herederero de la reforma radical,” 67.

Escobar's presentation was more oriented towards analyzing Latin American reality, and he suggested a socio-political ethics for ministry in the continent. Míguez Bonino's paper created the strongest reactions and criticisms because of his clear preference for a socialist model of society.

2. *Evaluation.* In these antecedents of the hermeneutical work of the FTL, we discover the evangelical nature of the group. In Cochabamba the foundations were established when the Bible was recognized as the only rule of faith and practice.²⁷ Of course, the need emerged for "a hermeneutics that in each step of the way does justice to the biblical text."²⁸

In Lima, the search for a hermeneutical key to relate the biblical message to the historical context was expressed in the biblical doctrine of the kingdom of God. Yet in the "First Evangelical Consultation on Social Ethics," the concern to understand Latin American reality was clearly and notably addressed.

During these formative years the way was prepared for a new hermeneutical paradigm in the evangelical church of Latin America. The ingredients were there: the Bible, Latin American reality, and a hermeneutical key to relate them: the kingdom of God. The task of relating them became the concern for the following years.

C. First Consultation on Hermeneutics

Under the theme "Towards an Evangelical Hermeneutics," a consultation was held in Mariópolis, Brazil in November 1976. Samuel Escobar authored the important summative document of the consultation.²⁹ As its introductory statement indicates, "This is not a

²⁷ See the "Declaración Evangélica de Cochabamba" in Savage, *El debate*, 225–28.

²⁸ Savage, *El debate*, 226.

²⁹ Escobar, "Hacia una hermenéutica evangélica. Resumen de la consulta realizada en Mariópolis," 1976.

lecture. It is a summary of the work and reflection of the participants of the consultation held in Mariápolis on November 4–7, 1976.³⁰

In the document, Escobar points out four theses which Andrew Kirk had expressed in the consultation that had given birth to the FTL in Cochabamba in 1970, theses that he considered important and foundational for the ongoing work of the FTL.

The first proposition is that . . . what the text says is what God says, without any reservations or reductions.

The second proposition is that the Bible has its own hermeneutical principles.

The third proposition is that the Bible possesses its own *weltanschauung* or worldview. . . The only legitimate pre-understanding is the one that does not contradict the biblical worldview.

The fourth proposition is that it is impossible and illegitimate to build our hermeneutical principles taking as a point of departure, in a unilateral way, the present situation, since such situation is trapped in a closed circle unless we use the text to break it.³¹

Escobar explains that the elaboration of an evangelical hermeneutics was carried out, taking into consideration, on the one hand, the challenges of dispensationalism and reformed interpretations, and, on the other, that of liberation theologies.

Escobar acknowledges the influence of Yoder's hermeneutical key (the messianic expectation of the kingdom and its centrality for an adequate contemporary hermeneutics) to the development of a hermeneutical perspective. Such reflexive effort was carried out with the goal of missionary praxis more than mere academic interest.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.

³¹ Ibid., 1–2.

The consultation's papers covered three basic areas: first, fundamental hermeneutical elements (epistemology, the hermeneutical circle, and the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament); second, lessons from church history (Origen and Ricoeur); third, the relationship between hermeneutics and culture.

A consensus emerged after the work of this consultation and was expressed programmatically in several "lines of consensus":

1. *Hermeneutics is the task of all the people of God.* The main concepts under this topic include the commitment to the mission of the church and the confidence in the direction of the Holy Spirit.³²

2. *Our hermeneutics need purification.* This statement gets broken down into several points: recognition of elements which condition our understanding of the text, both theological and cultural; lessons of the history of biblical interpretation; use of the "suspicion methodology" (Ricoeur) to uncover our personal biases; our missionary practice; the social sciences; the principle of *analogia fidei*; an evangelical attitude towards culture; and an awareness of our own worldview in continuous dialogue with the biblical one.

*Hermeneutics is
the task of all the
people of God.*

3. *Resources for the future hermeneutical task.* Several resources were outlined as relevant for the development of an evangelical hermeneutics: scientific tools (the Ricoeurian approach); a recognition of the limitations of the social sciences; the reading of the situation; and the evangelical perspective.

Thus, in this summative document are expressed the main ingredients of a contextual hermeneutics and the way they relate to each other, leading to the development of an evangelical contextual hermeneutics in the FTL. It was in the context of these reflections that René Padilla developed his hermeneutical perspective which found expression in the paper he presented at the Consultation on Gospel

³² Ibid., 3.

and Culture, in Willowbank, Bermuda in January 1978, a document which has become foundational for the hermeneutical reflection of the FTL.

Evaluation

Some important hermeneutical presuppositions, principles, and resources (not always easy to distinguish from each other) for the interpretation of the biblical text were established as a result of the

Mariópolis consultation in November 1976. For the participants, the results of this consultation were preliminary, more like working theses than finished products. The papers given represented a deepening into previously established areas. Some lines of consensus were developed in subsequent consultations while others were left in an incipient stage.³³

The question remains open for further research to ascertain how influential were the elements mentioned above in the coming years, in what measure they represented a consensus, and how thoroughly they were integrated into the hermeneutical and exegetical works of new generations of FTL members. We provide some hints in the next section.

D. The Kairos Community in Argentina

During the years 1977 and 1978, after the consultation in Mariópolis, in the Kairos Community of Argentina, the work and reflection on hermeneutics continued “with a truly interdisciplinary team that

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³³ For example, the use of Ricoeurian hermeneutics as a way to integrate diverse scientific disciplines (a contribution of Beatriz Melano Couch) was not developed. Víctor Hernández, a member of the FTL, wrote his Licenciatura thesis on this subject (“Método y existencia en la hermenéutica: La hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur y sus implicaciones para la hermenéutica bíblica,” Licenciatura thesis, Seminario Teológico Presbiteriano de México, 1992), but it represents an isolated case and has not had much impact on the rest of the FTL.

worked for two years, particularly with the topics of hermeneutics and history.”³⁴ As a result, another event was organized.

E. Second Consultation on Hermeneutics

This consultation continued the exploration of the theme “Towards an Evangelical Hermeneutics.” It was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in May 1977. The consultation included the concurrence of an interdisciplinary team of Bible scholars, theologians, and social scientists. For three days they developed previous insights and preliminary conclusions in order to advance their understanding of the hermeneutical task. The letter of invitation to the event announced the production of a “Study Manual” for pastors in Latin America which was planned for use in pastors’ retreats and other “hermeneutics encounters” to be organized throughout the continent.

This consultation revealed a clearer and more definite model for the hermeneutical task. The hermeneutical circle was well defined: exegesis of the text, interpretation of reality, and the role of the Christian community in the hermeneutical process. Attention was paid also to the understanding of the whole hermeneutical process in the interpretation of selected biblical texts. The results of this consultation were presented in a more systematic way in a course which we will now analyze.

F. “Hacia una Hermenéutica Bíblica Latinoamericana”

After the first consultation on hermeneutics was held in 1976, some FTL members set out their explicit purpose of developing a hermeneutics course, using the resources and insights gained in Mariápolis, to be used by pastors and students in Latin America. It is very possible that Samuel Escobar and Pedro Savage’s “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana” (“Towards a Latin American

³⁴ Escobar, “Hacia una hermenéutica evangélica,” 69. The results of these years of work were published by the Kairos Community in several booklets (see Comunidad Kairós, *Hacia una hermenéutica evangélica, vols. II and III* [Buenos Aires: Kairós, n.d.]).

Biblical Hermeneutic”) represents the first fruits (and, as far as we know, the last) of this stated objective.

Escobar and Savage developed a hermeneutics course that illustrates very clearly some of the points mentioned in the summative document previously analyzed.

Two points in the introduction deserve consideration:

1. The context of the hermeneutical task is *pastoral*. That means that hermeneutics “is not merely an academic, linguistic, and literary exercise, but pastoral as well.”³⁵
2. Hermeneutics is an unavoidable exercise for all evangelical Christians especially because of their high view of Scripture which stems from the Reformation.

The first part of the course dealt with the hermeneutical circle. The purpose of this section was to create in the student an awareness

The hermeneutical task is pastoral. That means that hermeneutics “is not merely an academic, linguistic, and literary exercise, but pastoral as well.”

of his or her own biases and perspectives and the way they affected the process of interpreting the biblical text. The circle consisted of four elements: the interpreter’s situation, the Bible, the interpretation, and the interpreter’s perspective.

The next section dealt with the hermeneutical spiral. This metaphor refers to the cumulative meanings and interpretations of Scripture that the church has gathered throughout history. It can be considered the hermeneutical tradition of the church. The use of hermeneutical “keys” or “axes” is high-

³⁵ Escobar and Savage, “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana. Apuntes preliminares” (photocopy, n.d.), 1, 9. It is important to relate this emphasis with the fact that it was during these days, July 1977, that the FTL’s third consultation took place in Itaici, Brazil, under the general theme “El Pueblo de Dios” (“The People of God”). Such emphasis on the pastoral character of the hermeneutical task was a central feature on the agenda (Escobar, “Herederero de la reforma radical,” 69).

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lighted as a means to understanding the Bible in specific historical circumstances. Such interpretations, because of their relativity, must be subjected to the normativity of Scripture. Nevertheless, the church re-reads Scripture and “from the praxis of reality. . . finds new meanings in the text.”³⁶

The following section, “The Bible as a Book,” develops central ideas for a proper interpretation of the Bible. Thus, it deals with “the Bible’s own self-description,” its nature, divine inspiration, its purpose, and the “requirements for the reader of the Bible;” openness and obedience are emphasized among these topics.

While an orthodox view of Scripture prevails in this section, it is also clear that such a view is described with a pastoral concern in mind—a concern related to the urgent and multiple needs in Latin America.

Next, a brief history of interpretation is outlined to provide a necessary perspective for interpreting the Scriptures. Throughout reviewing different examples of interpretation, the overall advice is tinged with a negative tone.³⁷ In my opinion such advice lacks an appreciation of the notable effort to “contextualize” the Bible by persons such as Origen and others.³⁸ Also, this section strongly criticizes those who use Marxism as a tool for the interpretation of the Bible and those who follow liberal interpretations.

Escobar and Savage here outline the direction in which, according to them, a Latin American hermeneutics must go. Three ingredients are mentioned:

³⁶ Escobar and Savage, “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana,” 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ See Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 58–75.

1. A dialogue with evangelical theology in other parts of the world,
2. The richness which Latin American evangelical reality provides for the task, and
3. A search for an understanding and use of the Bible's own hermeneutics, namely, how the New Testament interprets the Old Testament.³⁹

The next section deals with some steps to approaching the biblical text. Classical principles are indicated: the historic-grammatical level, the immediate context, the meaning of words, the historical context, and the theological-ideological-missiological level. This effort to elucidate not only the theological perspective in which the text is given but also the ideological and missiological dimensions is noteworthy.

The student is invited to think in terms of the hermeneutical circle and to discover in the biblical text *those elements which conditioned and influenced the biblical authors*. This emphasis is not common in textbooks used in most Latin American evangelical seminaries and Bible institutes.⁴⁰

Next, the use of hermeneutical keys is encouraged in order to give coherence to the biblical teaching.

The last section deals with the existential level of the hermeneutical process. This is an integral part of biblical hermeneutics, according to the syllabus, and should be taken seriously. In this section, keys for a "reading" of our reality are provided at different levels. The purpose is to achieve an understanding of the student's personal reality; the student's micro reality (interpersonal relation-

³⁹ Escobar and Savage, "Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana," 13.

⁴⁰ Among the books used most frequently are: Luis Berkhof (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950]), M. S. Terry (*Biblical Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958]), and Herbert T. Mayer (*Cómo interpretar las Escrituras* [Buenos Aires: Centro de Publicaciones, 1967]).

ships in society); and our shared macro-reality (the world structure of societies).

Next, Escobar and Savage recommend the use of “those instruments of the social sciences which may be helpful in our reading of reality.”⁴¹ They go on to present a preliminary and coherent understanding of reality (where symptoms and causes, micro and macro realities are related and placed in the proper interpretative perspective). Out of this understanding a “set of questions” emerges.

If the previous steps demand mainly an academic exercise, the next one points out the necessity of an immersion in the reality studied in order to enrich our previous perceptions and be able to produce a “more authentic hermeneutics.”⁴² A commitment and identification with those who participate and belong to that reality is a must. This last statement comes close to the “epistemological advantage of the poor” in liberation theologies.

It is at this point, when an approach to reality has been achieved, that such interpretation must be related to the principle or hermeneutical key which has more affinity with it. In addition, as a control measure, Escobar and Savage advise the student to situate the hermeneutical bridge (between the biblical text and the present reality) in the context of the hermeneutical spiral. In other words, it is important to think about the present challenges in light of the interpretative tradition of the church and to derive lessons from there.

A final note closes the course. When we have done our homework, it is necessary to exercise a healthy *suspicion*. A suspicion against our own solutions (in the context of conflicting interpretations present in the Christian arena) leads us to seek “together with all the people of God, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God for today.”⁴³

⁴¹ Escobar and Savage, “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana,” 17.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 18.

Evaluation

This course is the first attempt to integrate the results of the previous consultations in an organic form. In many ways, it was successful. Yet, it remains a mere sketch (developed no further than the class syllabus) and needs elaboration in most of its points. In a way, such lack of information may be filled with the documents of the FTL's first and second consultations on hermeneutics.

What remains clear is the fact that the many elements mentioned in the consultations appear here in a coordinated fashion, elucidating the direction taken by those who were an integral part of that interdisciplinary team.

A hermeneutics course with a contextual approach is still urgently needed in Latin America.

Sadly, as far as we have been able to ascertain, there was no further elaboration of this hermeneutics course, and the project, in this sense, ended there. Its significance, however, remained in the many articles, books, courses, and lectures delivered by members of the FTL in the years to come, which reflected in most cases Escobar and Savage's hermeneutical approach.⁴⁴ Even so, the scholastic gap remains to be filled. A hermeneutics course with a contextual approach is still urgently needed in Latin America.

⁴⁴ Significant parallel events were organized by the FTL: In 1978 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a consultation was held about "Poverty, Wealth, and the Theological Task." The next year in Huampaní, Perú, the second Latin American Congress on Evangelization (CLADE II) was organized by the FTL. These events show the diverse concerns of the FTL, and some of the fruits of its hermeneutical reflection can be appreciated in the published documents. No book was published on the consultation on "Poverty, Wealth, and the Theological Task," although some of the papers were published in the *Boletín teológico*. The documents of CLADE II were published by the FTL in one volume (*CLADE II. América Latina y la evangelización en los años 80* [FTL, n.d.]).

IV. Hermeneutical Reflection in the 1980s

A. Theological Trends

In 1979 in Puebla, Mexico, the third Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM III) met, and, in the opinion of many analysts, it represented a setback in the understanding of the role of the church in the social and political arenas. The movement that started in Medellín in 1968 was stopped in Puebla. The Catholic Church had a new pope who had experienced a totalitarian regime in Poland and was, accordingly, less enthusiastic toward and more critical of Marxism.

In the evangelical world, two important organizations were formed in 1982 that represented the polarization among evangelicals in Latin America: El Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI, Latin American Council of Churches) and the *Confraternidad Evangélica Latinoamericana* (CONELA, Latin American Evangelical Fraternity). While the first represents the progressive and ecumenical wing, the second expresses the attitudes and mentality of the reactionary and conservative sector.

B. *Boletín Teológico*

A second series of the official publication of the FTL, the *Boletín teológico* (Theological Bulletin), was launched in 1981. Issues 1, 5, and 10-11, published in 1981, 1982, and 1983, respectively, were devoted to hermeneutical topics. Some of the works of the previous decade were published here for the first time.

The first issue (January–March, 1981) included an article by René Padilla on contextual hermeneutics in which he summarized his ideas on the hermeneutical circle. Estuardo McIntosh, Samuel Escobar, and Beatriz Melano Couch (who wrote a very substantial article on interpretation theory)⁴⁵ analyzed areas such as the pre-understanding of the interpreter, the Latin American reality, and the

⁴⁵ Beatriz Melano Couch, “Teoría de la interpretación,” *Boletín teológico* 1:20–29, 1981.

biblical text, which are all considered part of the dialectical process in which biblical interpretation takes place.

In January–March, 1982, the fifth issue of the *Boletín* appeared and included key articles mainly from the second consultation on hermeneutics held in Buenos Aires in 1977. The articles by Rolando Gutiérrez-Cortés, “Hacia una hermenéutica teológica,” and Emilio A. Núñez, “Carta a jóvenes teólogos,” also appeared.

In April–September, 1983, issues 10 and 11 of the *Boletín*, dedicated to hermeneutics, were published in one volume. The articles presented fresh outlooks and perspectives to the reader. A group of writers, representing a “new” generation of FTL members, brought different insights to the understanding of the hermeneutical process and both enriched and made more complex the task.

The “new” writers presented their themes on several topics: Edesio Sánchez Cetina wrote on hermeneutics in the Old Testament from the perspective of historical criticism. Juan Stam showed how the Bible is understood differently depending on the historical context of the reader. A similar line of argument was followed by Luciano Jaramillo. Guillermo Cook presented a powerful argument to show that “Scriptures have their own hermeneutical key.”⁴⁶

Evaluation

While some of the articles published in the *Boletín teológico* during the first three years of the decade came from the hermeneutics consultations of the previous years, others were new and advanced the research in areas previously outlined but only lightly explored. They also represented different approaches that had not been used or considered up to that time (such as the critical methodologies of Sánchez Cetina).

Perhaps there was a deliberate purpose in the selection of the articles published in 1983, in terms of advancing the discussion of

⁴⁶ Guillermo Cook, “La Biblia, la historia de la salvación y la consumación del Reino,” *Boletín teológico* 10/11:144–45.

the previous years. Yet, in light of other events which we will analyze shortly, it seems that the FTL's thought and concerns in the previous decade were put aside in the face of more urgent and demanding needs.

Another possibility is that, in some ways, those who started the process of hermeneutical reflection were content with their achievements and started to apply them to the different facets of the Latin American crisis. Independently of their self-assessment and understanding of the process, which we cannot know, they in fact moved to different fields of reflection where the proposed model was applied.

C. Tlayacapan, México

From November 24–29, 1983, a conference was held in Tlayacapan, Mexico, with the general theme: “Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas.” Thirty-five scholars from Latin America and North America gathered for five days under the sponsorship of the FTL and the Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) to examine some crucial hermeneutical issues. One of the main purposes of the conference was to establish dialogue with North American scholars and to analyze together key hermeneutical issues.

Some of the difficulties and dynamics of the event are indicated by the editors in the foreword of the book that resulted from the conference:

We had to work developing a better understanding of our own cultural “baggage” before we could proceed . . . we learned, among other things, that there are more than two cultures in the Americas and that none of the cultures has a monopoly on either radical or conservative politics/economics . . . Throughout all the sessions we sought to learn about the varieties of contexts we work in and how they affect the task of interpreting Scripture . . . As we explored the papers, Bible expositions, and other topics in our discussions, it became apparent that no consensus document was forthcoming. We were only

beginning to grasp relevant concerns and had little to offer others in the way of guidelines. Yet the richness of the event needed to be passed on.⁴⁷

This was the last event organized by the FTL in which hermeneutical concerns per se were broached. Other concerns very soon started to gain the FTL's attention and energies.

Evaluation

The conference on Hermeneutics in the Americas took up again some basic concerns and facilitated discussion with colleagues, especially those from North America. One of the main results of the conference was to make very clear the fact that cultural biases affect and shape one's approach to Scripture. Questions such as the following were addressed: How does a church's cultural context affect its interpretation of the Bible? What impact does this have on such basic theological concepts as Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology? What dangers exist in contextual hermeneutics? What checks and balances can be helpful?

It is true that the answers given were not acceptable to everyone and that no consensus was reached, yet a dialogue was begun, and some progress was achieved at least in terms of reaffirming insights and receiving new understanding regarding some of the basic difficulties of the hermeneutical process.

D. Parallel Events Organized by the FTL

In 1983, in Jarabacoa, Dominican Republic, a consultation was held on the theme "Theology and the Use of Power." This was an encounter of evangelicals with experience in the political arena in Latin America

⁴⁷ Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla, *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), x–xi. It is important to highlight the fact that in 1982 in Bangkok, Thailand, a productive dialogue was established with missiologists and theologians of the Two-Thirds World. Also in Oxford, England a fruitful dialogue was held on the topic "Faith and Economy."

that had already articulated a reflection on Christian social and political responsibilities.⁴⁸

In 1984, in Tlayacapan, Mexico, another consultation was held on the theme “Life in the Spirit,” one of the first efforts to articulate a spirituality from a contextual perspective in Latin America. Some of the major papers and the official document were published in the *Boletín teológico*.⁴⁹

In 1988, in Mexico City, the FTL organized a consultation on urban mission. Some of the pertinent documents which articulated a theology for and reflected on the issue of urban ministry were published in the *Boletín teológico*.⁵⁰

In September 1988, a very important consultation was held in Santiago de Chile on the theme “Christian Faith and Social Sciences in Latin America Today.” Its importance owed to the contributions made towards the development of a hermeneutical model, many of which were published in the *Boletín teológico*.⁵¹

In 1990 in Quito, Ecuador, the twentieth anniversary of the FTL was celebrated under the general theme: “Faith and Theology in Latin America.” Prior to the Quito gathering, regional consultations were held on the main topics which were later addressed in Quito. The topics included violence and non-violence; poverty and stewardship; oppression and justice; authoritarianism and power; and economic dependence. The documents and declarations produced in

⁴⁸ A book was published with the papers and the final “Declaración de Jarabacoa” which became for the next decade a seminal document on the subject (see Pablo Deiros, ed., *Los evangélicos y el poder político en América Latina* (Buenos Aires/Grand Rapids: Nueva Creación, 1986).

⁴⁹ *Boletín teológico* 21–22 (June 1986).

⁵⁰ *Boletín teológico* 32 (December 1988), 33 (March 1989), and 35 (September 1989).

⁵¹ *Boletín teológico* 31 (September 1988).

the regional consultations and in Quito appeared in various volumes of the *Boletín teológico*.⁵²

V. Hermeneutical Reflection in the 1990s

A. 1992: Quito, Ecuador: CLADE III

In many ways CLADE III represents a significant landmark in the development of the FTL. There was a broad representation of the Latin American evangelical world, and representatives from CLAI and CONELA sat down together to dialogue in front of the attendants. One of the gathering's trademarks was the acknowledgment of the diversity, creativity, and commitment to the evangelization of Latin America. Serious and deep reflections were offered, and an encompassing dialogue enriched the many workshops and plenary sessions. Women, indigenous peoples, children, and creation figured at the center of the discussions. The fruits of serious hermeneutical reflection are evident in the papers presented by the members of the FTL. All the documents of the congress were gathered and published in one large volume in 1993.⁵³

B. 1996: Santiago de Chile: The XXV Anniversary, "The Word of God and the Reality of Latin America"

The two key elements of the FTL's hermeneutical model formed the theme for this conference. One final effort was made to bring back the centrality of hermeneutical reflection to the theological task, but no new developments were achieved.

An Analysis of the FTL's Hermeneutical Model

In this second section we will briefly describe the hermeneutical reflection of the FTL and critically assess its paradigm for the inter-

⁵² *Boletín teológico* 37 (March 1990), 38 (June 1990), 39 (September 1990), 40 (December 1990), and 42–43 (September 1991).

⁵³ *CLADE III. Tercer congreso latinoamericano de evangelización. Quito 1992. Todo el evangelio para todos los pueblos desde América Latina* (n.p., 1993).

pretation of Scripture. We cannot, of course, discuss each detail of such reflection; we are interested in the elements that contribute to traditional evangelical hermeneutics and that constitute an important advancement in the hermeneutical discussion. The FTL's concept of the *hermeneutical circle* encompasses such elements.⁵⁴

While the model is not shared by all FTL members, since the FTL is more a forum than a "school," it is safe to affirm the formative character that the FTL's hermeneutics has had on many of its members, new and longstanding, and accordingly, it may be said that there is a shared hermeneutical perspective.

A. The Basis of the FTL's Hermeneutical Model

A central feature in the FTL's development of a hermeneutical model is the *sola Scriptura* principle. Far from being sporadic or secondary, *sola Scriptura* permeates the thinking of the FTL in its hermeneutical reflection. In this section, due to the limitations of space, we will merely outline what the FTL means by *sola Scriptura* and what its implications are in areas such as epistemology, presuppositions, principles of interpretation, and, of course, the hermeneutical circle.

1. A Starting Point

The Bible has been central in the FTL's hermeneutical reflection from the start.⁵⁵ Accordingly, the necessity for an adequate hermeneutics was established in the "Declaration of Cochabamba."⁵⁶ Such

⁵⁴ For a more detailed analysis see Ávila, "Towards a Latin American Contextual Hermeneutics."

⁵⁵ Savage, *El debate*, 15.

⁵⁶ This is a key paragraph in the declaration: "To assent to the authority of the Bible could be considered as one of the more general characteristics of the evangelical movement in Latin America. This is to be expected of a movement whose large majority is theologically conservative. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the real use of the Bible by the majority of the Latin American people is not always in accordance with that assent that distinguishes them. The Bible is revered, but the voice of the Lord that speaks through it is not always obeyed; and such disobedience is rationalized in

conviction resulted in the elucidation of the main presuppositions held by the FTL in the beginning of its hermeneutical reflection.

Key contributors to the development of the theoretical framework for the hermeneutical task of the FTL were Andrew Kirk,⁵⁷ Pedro Arana,⁵⁸ René Padilla,⁵⁹ Rolando Gutiérrez,⁶⁰ and Samuel Escobar.⁶¹

Kirk summarizes the main poles of the hermeneutical model in the following way:

It is a basic hermeneutic premise that only by immersing ourselves in the biblical world and being prepared to accept biblical thought-forms shall we ever be able to hear fully the biblical message.⁶²

Yet, at the same time, he points out the necessity of taking seriously enough the present reality in order to produce a sound interpretation of the text.

. . . biblical hermeneutics should be conducted between two objective and separate poles. There is the pole of man's contemporary situation, scientifically analyzed (assuming the control of a true scientific methodology), and the pole of the biblical message, interpreted according to its own criteria.⁶³

diverse ways. *We need a hermeneutics that is ever faithful to the biblical text.* Frequently, preaching lacks biblical roots. The evangelical pulpit is in crisis... The biblical message is without a doubt pertinent to the Latin American people, but its proclamation does not have the central place it needs to have among us" (quoted by Escobar, *La fe evangélica*, 135–36; emphasis added).

⁵⁷ Kirk, *Liberation Theology*; and "Crítica y creatividad: Hacia una nueva fase en la teología latinoamericana," *Boletín teológico* 3/4 (1977): 48–50.

⁵⁸ Arana, "La revelación de Dios."

⁵⁹ Padilla, "La autoridad de la Biblia"; "Lugar de la revelación en la epistemología" (n.d.).

⁶⁰ Rolando Gutiérrez-Cortés, "Hermenéutica y epistemología" (n.d.).

⁶¹ Escobar, *La fe evangélica*.

⁶² Kirk, *Liberation Theology*, 192.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 193.

Thus Kirk delineates his conception of the hermeneutical circle, which he sees moving away both from liberation theologies and from traditional theology:

Our hermeneutical methodology therefore, cannot be that of the theology of liberation. Even less does it agree with that of traditional theology, for it is clearly done from a practical commitment to a demand made by both poles of our hermeneutical circle.⁶⁴

Samuel Escobar indicates that in the evangelical conviction the “primacy of the Word of God” is essential. He also develops his defense of the authority of the Bible along the lines of the rest of the members of the FTL. He has indicated that the foundations placed in the formative years of the FTL, with respect to the authority of the Word of God, remain for him normative and relevant.⁶⁵

2. Epistemological Implications

The *sola Scriptura* principle has important epistemological implications, several of which have already been mentioned. The FTL has fostered rich discussions and reflections on epistemology.⁶⁶ It is beyond the purpose of this study to touch on all the issues dealt with through the years, yet we are interested in exploring one very

⁶⁴ Ibid., 193–94.

⁶⁵ For a comprehensive treatment of this topic see Escobar, “Herederero de la reforma radical,” 66 and *La fe evangélica*, 132–78.

⁶⁶ Here follows a representative list of the articles on the subject: Rolando Gutiérrez-Cortés, “Hereménéutica y epistemología” (n.d.); René Padilla, “El lugar de la revelación en la epistemología” (n.d.); Elsa Powell, “Hacia una epistemología de la experiencia religiosa” (n.d.); Juan D. Rogers, “Ideología y conocimiento de la realidad socio-económica-política,” *Boletín teológico* 31 (1988): 189–204 and “Reflexión teológica para la acción misionera: Los dos contextos de una teología interdisciplinaria,” *Boletín teológico* 50 (1993): 109–23; John Cobb Kent, “La epistemología de las ciencias sociales: ¿Ilusión o sueño alcanzable?” *Boletín teológico* 31 (1988): 151–73; Moira R. de Rogers, “Crítica cristiana de la epistemología positivista,” *Boletín teológico* 31 (1988): 175–87.

important implication that *sola Scriptura* had in the development of a hermeneutical model.

As a consequence of balancing the poles of humanity's needs and the Bible's message in the hermeneutical task, the FTL said that the *sola Scriptura* principle determines not only the point of departure for our knowledge of ultimate reality, God, but also for our understanding of present social reality. It is through the Bible that we can approach the present historical context and know it.

It is through the Bible that we can approach the present historical context and know it.

a. *An important framework.* To better appreciate this position, it is important to remember that liberation theologies were yielding to the social sciences not only the autonomy and exclusivity of approaching and understanding social reality but also the privileged point of departure for understanding Scripture.⁶⁷ On the other hand, conservative evangelical approaches showed no concern at all for the understanding of the social context.⁶⁸

b. *A distinct position.* The consultation held in 1988 in Chile, "Christian Faith and Social Sciences in Latin America Today," expressed a consensus regarding epistemology: the Scriptures are the

⁶⁷ Thus, Severino Croatto, *Liberación y libertad: Pautas hermenéuticas*, ed. rev. (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1978), *Exodus: A hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981), *Hermenéutica bíblica: Para una teoría de la lectura como producción de sentido* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1984), and *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberación de la teología*, Cuadernos Latinoamericanos (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1975); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La verdad os hará libres* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1990), 69–101; Clodovis Boff, *Teología de lo político: Sus meditaciones* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1980); Jon Sobrino, *Cristología desde América Latina (esbozo)*, Colección teología latinoamericana (México: CRT, 1977), 13–28.

⁶⁸ For a more complete description of this phenomenon, see Pablo Deiros, *Historia del cristianismo en América Latina* (Miami: Logoi, 1986), 241, 232.

norm that controls and regulates social sciences. In other words, all knowledge of social reality must be subordinated to the biblical *weltanschauung* with regard to God, man, and history. While we must use the social sciences, it is important to exercise a constant purification of their tools and premises in the light of the basic teachings of Scripture.⁶⁹ René Padilla provides an excellent summary of the perspectives expressed in the consultation and points out the limitations of the social sciences: They are descriptive but cannot explain all the factors and relations which make up reality. He then speaks of faith as a perspective on reality.⁷⁰

Both theology and the social sciences must operate within their respective limits. Theology may not propose political alternatives (such as Constantinism) in the name of God. The social sciences may not absolutize their descriptions and consider them the ultimate explanations of different phenomena, valid for all fields of knowledge. Yet, there is a faith perspective, what Padilla calls “Christian commitment.”⁷¹

Some important questions for Padilla’s proposal are who or what controls theology? Which theology? How can we establish, as a final criterion, a product of the human mind? In my understanding, making theology the controlling factor in the use of the social sciences does not resolve the epistemological problem in a satisfactory way. In the

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⁶⁹ Contributors to this rich discussion at the consultation included John Cobb Kent, “La epistemología de las ciencias sociales”; Moira R. de Rogers, “Crítica cristiana a la epistemología positivista”; Juan D. Rogers, “Ideología y conocimiento”; Rubén Tito Paredes, “Fe cristiana, antropología y las ciencias sociales,” *Boletín teológico* 31 (1988): 215–30; Oscar Pereira, “La relación de la teología con la historia,” *Ibid.*, 231–46; and René Padilla “Ciencias sociales y compromiso cristiano,” *Ibid.*, 247–51.

⁷⁰ Padilla “Ciencias sociales y compromiso cristiano,” 248.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

final analysis, it does not make a significant difference how biblical the theology claims to be.

As we said before, this is a distinct perspective which has determined the development of the hermeneutical circle in the FTL. As a fundamental epistemological principle, *sola Scriptura* wants to establish the hermeneutical methodology not only of the theological task but in some respects of the scientific one as well.

3. Exegetical Principles

In line with the *sola Scriptura* principle, the FTL affirmed that the Bible provides its own hermeneutical principles. Kirk points out several instances where such principles can be found: the semantic aspect (the use of the LXX by the early church), the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament, the several types of interpretation found in the Bible (typological, analogical, historical, promise and fulfillment, etc.).

The following biblical principles were acknowledged in the FTL as normative:

1. Priority must be given to principles of interpretation that the Bible itself provides.⁷²
2. The *analogia fidei*: To maintain as a hermeneutical rule the criteria of the totality of the biblical message.
3. It is impossible and illegitimate to build our hermeneutical principles taking into consideration *only* the present historical situation. The biblical text should always be a corrective in our handling of social reality (as opposed to liberation theologians).

Kirk points out the necessity of keeping clear the frontiers between the social sciences and theology. He reacts against the use of sociological descriptions as normative for the life and mission of the church, without denying their importance for the understanding of social reality. While serious attention was given to the search and

⁷² Escobar and Savage, "Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana," 13.

elucidation of the Bible's own principles in the decade of the 1970s,⁷³ no further development of this search is found in the next decade.

4. Resources for the Hermeneutical Task

Resources relevant for the development of an evangelical hermeneutics, and also in line with the *sola Scriptura* principle, are:

1. Self-consciousness: To recognize the elements, theological and cultural, which condition our understanding of the text, to be suspicious of our personal biases.
2. Awareness and constant confrontation of our worldview with the biblical one.
3. Learning from the lessons of the history of biblical interpretation.
4. Use of scientific tools (the Ricoeurian approach as a model).⁷⁴ An integration of the human sciences which contribute to the hermeneutical task and that facilitate a dialogue with the world

⁷³ See Kirk, "El uso de la Biblia en la interpretación de la salvación hoy" (n.d.); Mervin Breneman, "El uso del Antiguo Testamento en el Nuevo Testamento" (n.d.); and "El Éxodo como tema de interpretación teológica," *Boletín teológico* 5:30–76. Further developments can be made in this point if some of the modern discussions on the subject are taken into account. See C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952), E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1981), R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), S. Lewis Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New: An Argument for Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), and Moisés Silva, "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Text Form and Authority," in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 147–65.

⁷⁴ As far as I can appreciate, the Ricoeurian approach (represented in the early FTL's hermeneutical reflection by Beatriz Melano Couch), although recognized, was not pursued and developed with all its implications in the 1980s and 1990s.

was proposed. Nevertheless, their limitations must be recognized; they are not to be absolutized. Rather, it is necessary to evaluate the scientific character of the social sciences, especially of Marxism.⁷⁵

5. The evangelical perspective: to appreciate and value the richness of the evangelical tradition. The Reformation and recent emphases on the authority of Scripture, our missionary practice, the totality of the biblical message, and an evangelical attitude towards culture were mentioned as part of such perspective.

5. Evaluation

The FTL members who proposed these points certainly considered them to be preliminary, more like working theses than finished products. As a matter of fact, the ideas were expressed in a programmatic fashion, and many remained that way: unpolished, incomplete, and in need of further development and systematization.

At the same time, though no further theoretical elaborations about a hermeneutical model were advanced (with the exception of in a few articles), the fruits of the reflections of the decade of the 1970s may be appreciated in the exegetical works of those who consciously adopted the model.

As a preliminary evaluation it is reasonable to conclude that a basic peculiarity of the hermeneutics developed by the FTL is its epistemological stance which places it not only in contrast with liberation theologies but also with traditional evangelical theology.

For the FTL, *sola Scriptura* defines not only the presuppositions and principles for the interpretation of the biblical text but also those needed to interpret social reality. This reality must be under-

⁷⁵ This position stands in sharp contrast to that of Míguez Bonino (*Toward a Christian Political Ethics* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983]), who considers that without the use of the social sciences, theology has no access to social reality.

stood and approached by all the people of God (the interdisciplinary aspect), using both scientific and participative methodologies.

This point stands in sharp contrast to modern attempts to approach the present historical context from an ideological perspective or only from a scientific point of view. At the same time, it speaks to those who do not consider the interpretation of social reality a necessity for the hermeneutical process.

B. The Hermeneutical Circle

Padilla's article "Hermeneutics and Culture—A Theological Perspective"⁷⁶ is the most elaborated summary of the diverse discussions and historical development of the hermeneutical model of the FTL. There are four basic elements in the hermeneutical circle that can be easily indicated:

1. The interpreter's historical situation
2. The interpreter's worldview
3. Scripture
4. Theology

These elements are interrelated in the interpretative process and possess a dynamic relationship. Another term to describe the dynamics of the circle is spiral. It describes more accurately the continuously deepening and dynamic relationship between the understanding of Scripture and of social reality.

Padilla indicates what he calls "the basic problem of hermeneutics," namely, "to transpose the biblical message from its original context into the context of the modern readers or hearers so as to produce in them the same kind of impact that the message was meant to produce in the original readers or hearers."⁷⁷ This description

⁷⁶ In *Gospel and Culture*, eds. J. R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 83–108. In Spanish, "Hacia una hermenéutica contextual," *Encuentro y Diálogo* 1 (1984): 1–23.

⁷⁷ Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture," 83.

of the hermeneutic problem, says Padilla, also provides the main features for an understanding of hermeneutics as such:

Hermeneutics is essentially the science and art of explaining in a contemporary situation the Word of God which was originally explained in a Hebrew or a Graeco-Roman milieu, for the purpose of bringing the lives of readers or hearers into conformity with the will of God.⁷⁸

Padilla underlines the importance of being aware of the particularities of the “concrete historical context of the modern interpreter” in the hermeneutical process and how “the Word of God can only be understood and appropriated as it becomes flesh in a specific situation with its particular culture and all the political, social, and economic factors present in it.”⁷⁹ If such awareness does not exist, he says, “the final result is the confusion of culture-Christianity with the Gospel.”⁸⁰

The purpose of the hermeneutical task is to bring our lives into conformity with the will of God.

We must emphasize an important element in Padilla’s definition: The purpose of the hermeneutical task is to bring our lives into conformity with the will of God. This is an ethical dimension in hermeneutics which is usually lacking in traditional approaches that emphasize only the cognitive aspect of biblical interpretation.⁸¹

Padilla concludes his introduction by underlining the importance of the present situation of the interpreter. His attempt, therefore, is

To suggest a hermeneutic which takes the situation seriously and makes it possible for the biblical message

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The proposal of R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton, and C. Walhout in *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) deeply explores the ethical character of the hermeneutical process.

recorded in ancient texts to engage with the situation of the modern readers or hearers, yet at the same time to remain true to its original purpose.⁸²

After a brief review of the “intuitive” and “scientific” approaches to biblical interpretation, in which Padilla indicates their strengths and weaknesses, he proposes the “contextual” approach, explaining that its purpose is that

the horizon of the contemporary historical situation be merged with the horizon of the text in such a way that the message proclaimed in the contemporary situation may be a dynamic equivalent of the message proclaimed in the original context.⁸³

A basic assumption in this process is that “no interpretation of the biblical message is possible except one which is necessarily conditioned by the particular contemporary context in which the interpreter finds himself.”⁸⁴ Because of that, Padilla starts his exposition of the hermeneutical circle with a consideration of “the interpreter’s historical situation,” a key element in the hermeneutical process.

1. The Interpreter’s Historical Situation

Padilla’s basic argument is that the interpreter is a cultural being and, therefore, God’s Word will reach him as such. This point relativizes our interpretations since there is no possibility that a complete coincidence may occur between the Bible and our theology. Each culture has elements which conspire against the understanding of God’s Word and others which are favorable to it.

Insights from anthropology have been very helpful in making us aware of the culturally conditioned character of our interpretations

⁸² Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture,” 84.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

and theologies. Elsewhere, Padilla reflected on this fact and offered valuable insights. For example, he says:

There is no place for the assumption that one section of the Church has a monopoly on the interpretation of the Gospel and the definition of the Christian mission . . . [therefore] I continue to be convinced that theological cross-fertilization among Christians representing different cultural backgrounds is essential to mission.⁸⁵

This calls for a substantial change in our approach to the interpretation of Scripture. One of the implications suggested by this point is that hermeneutics

Hermeneutics must be an interdisciplinary task, a communal interpretation, which can be practiced at an international level but also at the level of the local church.

must be an interdisciplinary task, a communal interpretation, which can be practiced at an international level but also at the level of the local church. Usually there is enough diversity in each congregation to make this task possible and rewarding.⁸⁶

The final formula that Padilla offers is this: “The deeper and richer his [the interpreter’s] understanding of the life situation,

⁸⁵ Padilla, “Partnership in Mission,” *Theological Fraternity Bulletin* 3 (1978): 10–11.

⁸⁶ The FTL has developed models of interdisciplinary teams in several ways and places which already are producing valuable results. The Comunidad Kairós in Buenos Aires and the Centro de Estudios Superiores de Integración Cristiana in Mexico are helping professionals to integrate their Christian faith with their different areas of scholarship. The same is true of CREE (Círculo de Reflexión y Estudios Evangélicos) in Chile and the missiology courses offered at the Seminario Evangélico and CEMMA in Lima, Peru. The consultation on “Christian Faith and Social Sciences in Latin America Today” held in Santiago de Chile, in September 1988, was a good example of such an effort (see also the *Boletín teológico* 31 [September 1988]).

the deeper and richer will be the questions he asks from the Bible and the answers he finds in it.”⁸⁷

In the syllabus of the hermeneutics’ course⁸⁸ we find a more detailed description of this step in the hermeneutical circle. In the final section that deals with the existential level of the hermeneutical process, we find its main components: keys for a “reading” of our reality are provided at different levels (my personal reality, my micro-reality, and our macro-reality). The authors suggest the use of “those instruments of the social sciences which may be helpful in our reading of reality.”⁸⁹

The following step is to present a preliminary and coherent understanding of reality (where cause and effect, micro and macro realities are related and placed in the proper interpretative perspective). Out of this understanding a “set of questions” emerges. The authors go on to indicate the necessity of an immersion in the reality studied in order to enrich our previous perceptions and be able to produce a “more authentic hermeneutics.”⁹⁰

Then, our reality must be related to the principle or hermeneutical key which has more affinity with it (in the FTL, “the kingdom of God”).⁹¹ Even after we have done our homework it is necessary to exercise a healthy suspicion.⁹²

This point is closely related with the next one, which deals with the interpreter’s world-and-life view, something we need to look at

⁸⁷ Padilla, “Partnership in Mission,” 10–11.

⁸⁸ Escobar and Savage, “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana.” See above pp., 55-59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Rogers, “Reflexión teológica para la acción misionera.”

⁹¹ The use of this key, “the kingdom of God,” as the main avenue to relate our reality to the biblical message has been very useful. However, a fast changing reality demands more appropriate keys.

⁹² Escobar and Savage, “Hacia una hermenéutica bíblica latinoamericana,” 18.

squarely in order to carry out a responsible exegesis of the biblical text.

2. The Interpreter's World-and-Life View

Returning to Padilla's article, here he elaborates the basic premise that states, "Every interpretation of the text implies a world-and-life view which is religiously determined."⁹³ He reacts mainly against the materialistic and mechanistic world-and-life view which has gained hold of the West and its denial of any kind of supernaturalism. He calls it to a "real epistemological conversion." In other words, it needs to adopt the biblical worldview centered around the living God who acts purposefully *in* and *through* history, that speaks about human beings as image of God, affected by sin and redemption.

It may well be that what prevents them from entering into the "strange world of the Bible" is not its obsolete world-and-life view but their secularistic and unwarranted assumption with regard to the powers of reason!⁹⁴

While theologians and social scientists in the FTL had, from the beginning, used important elements of a critical social theory, the FTL avoided choosing an ideological option.

One of the basic controversial issues in the model proposed by the FTL is "the ideological option." The usage of certain tools of the social analysis of reality (for example, dependency theory) meant, for many, taking sides in the ideological war in Latin America between the

conservative and revolutionary forces in the continent. While theologians and social scientists in the FTL had, from the beginning,

⁹³ Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture," 93.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

used important elements of a critical social theory,⁹⁵ the FTL avoided choosing an ideological option. Many would label this avoidance the FTL's major weakness. For others, it is a great strength.

3. Scripture

Following James Smart, Padilla describes the grammatico-historical method as the means to carry on the dialogue between Scripture and the contemporary situation. Later on he “answers” the objection of some (as Taber) that claim that such an approach is not binding on non-Western cultures since it depends on presuppositions which are culturally defined in the West.⁹⁶

In my opinion, Padilla did not adequately answer the insightful question posed to him. In the course of his answer he mentions that:

1. No interpreter, regardless of his or her culture, is free to make the text say whatever he or she wants it to say;
2. Western theology has also used a dogmatic approach, and competing theological systems have muted Scripture;
3. We must not appeal to the New Testament use of the Old as a model, thus minimizing the grammatico-historical approach.

I consider the three points that Padilla makes to be correct, and I appreciate his concern for a fixed meaning in Scripture. He is responding to specific questions which are behind his three points. But still I do not find his answer satisfactory. I would like to see him

⁹⁵ See for example, Escobar, “La nueva generación evangélica,” *Pensamiento cristiano* 16:186–93, “La situación latinoamericana,” “Hacia una hermenéutica evangélica,” and *Evangelio y realidad social: Ensayos desde una perspectiva evangélica* (Lima: Presencia, 1985); Edesio Sánchez Cetina, *Fe bíblica: Antiguo Testamento y América Latina. Ensayos exegéticos* (Mexico D.F.: El Faro, 1986); and Robinson Cavalcanti, *Itinerario de Robinson Cavalcanti*, personal testimony given by the author at the consultation on “Theology and Life” held in Quito, Ecuador, December 3–14, 1990, organized by the FTL, cassette.

⁹⁶ Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture,” 95.

addressing the question not only from a theological perspective but also with the cultural sensitivity he shows on other occasions.

Although Padilla recognizes that this approach appears to result in a widening of the gap between the interpreter and the world of the Bible, he mentions that, in the last resort, the Spirit “enlightens the mind, thus enabling it to see Jesus Christ in Scripture and its relevance to life in a specific historical context. The testimony of Scripture is inseparable from the testimony of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁷ This kind of comment is characteristic of Padilla’s early reflections on the authority of the Bible,⁹⁸ and it shows the evangelical character of his thinking, in terms of making the Bible the only source of authority in the hermeneutical process.

4. Theology

The last element of the circle is theology. “Theology is the result of the merging of the horizons of the contemporary historical situation and the horizons of the text.”⁹⁹ It is what Gadamer calls “understanding.” Padilla adds that such theology must be expressed “in symbols and thought forms which are part of that situation and it addresses itself to the questions and concerns which are raised in that context.”

Therefore, not only the medium must be contextualized; the content itself must be a specific response to specific questions. It is then that God’s Word becomes “incarnate.” Again, “the historical context plays a decisive role in the formulation of a theology which is both biblical and contemporary.”¹⁰⁰

Padilla provides the necessary balance to what was just said. Otherwise it would seem that he is giving to the historical context a dominant role in the process, which is not the case.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁸ See Padilla, “La autoridad de la Biblia.”

⁹⁹ Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture,” 97.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

If theology represents a real merging of horizons, old and new, however, it will not be limited to dealing with the questions raised within the concrete situation, *but it also will communicate the questions that the Word of God poses to that situation*. The hermeneutical task is not completed *until the whole of reality is placed under the Word of grace and judgment* and people in it are able to hear that Word from within their own historical situation.¹⁰¹

This point, as we have mentioned before, is one of the distinctive emphases of the hermeneutical circle proposed by Padilla.

5. The Dynamics of the Hermeneutical Circle

Padilla summarizes the interpretive process in this way:

A genuine hermeneutics involves a dialogue between the historical context and Scripture, a dialogue in which the interpreter approaches Scripture with a particular perspective (his worldview) and approaches his situation with a particular comprehension of the Word of God (his theology).¹⁰²

As previously indicated, Padilla places the priority in the hermeneutical process not on the intellectual understanding of the truth but on social transformation. “The aim of the interpretative process is the transformation of the historical situation.”¹⁰³ In this context, it is imperative to have a good understanding of the real issues involved in living a particular situation, an understanding that continually must be “refined” in order to express “richer and deeper questions,” which in turn yield “richer and deeper answers” provided by Scripture.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 98; emphasis added.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 99.

There are, granted, questions that the Bible does not address directly, but it provides guidelines which are sufficient for the interpreter to deduce what Scripture would say if it specifically dealt with those problems. Also, the help of the Spirit to walk in obedience is vital, even if no a priori answer exists. Here, as before, the role of Scripture is normative. Some initial questions may have to be reformulated, letting the Bible speak, but the Bible's worldview is normative. Therefore,

The deeper and richer our comprehension of the biblical text, the deeper and richer will be our understanding of our historical situation and of the meaning of Christian obedience in that particular context.¹⁰⁴

Padilla concludes his exposition of the hermeneutical circle describing its dynamics as having a spiral structure in which there is a continuous enriching and deepening of perspectives.

The more the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, the more the questions which are posed to it from within the concrete situation will be the questions that really matter; the more congenial the world-and-life view from which Scripture is approached, the more relevant will be the theology formulated in response to the burning issues which the interpreter has to face in the concrete situation. The interpreter progressively approaches Scripture with the right questions and from the right perspective, and his theology is in turn more biblical and more relevant to his situation.¹⁰⁵

6. Evaluation

Padilla's paper is seminal and programmatic. It needs to be "refined" and "enriched" by new perspectives. He has set the agenda for us, and we must explore, correct, and develop the insights he offers.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 101–102.

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There is no question that this contextual approach to hermeneutics opens the door to understanding this essential task of the church in a new light. It offers the framework for a new paradigm in biblical interpretation in which its ethical dimension is restored; the concrete historical situation is not only the receiving end of the whole process but an integral part of it; the task, as such, is carried out not only by the professionals and experts but by the whole community of believers; and the aim is not only a new understanding (fusion of horizons) but a new obedience and a transformation of this very same concrete historical situation.