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Emerging Church Hermeneutics and the Historical-Grammatical Method¹

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Introduction

The emerging church (EC) has received assessments and critiques in a variety of forms, far too many to count. Most of these have been scattered throughout the covert blogosphere by various well-known and anonymous individuals. Many of these assessments appear to lack much genuine and extensive interaction with EC literature, EC people, EC organizations, and emerging churches in all their complexity,² lending the critical comments varying degrees of validity. However, appraisals of the EC have also been made by some within the evangelical academic community.³ These assessments

¹The present essay was originally written in 2007, which accounts for the datedness of some of the material, as well as the integration of updated material consonant with developments in the emerging church and evangelical biblical hermeneutics.

²This indictment against EC critics has been made by Tony Jones, former Coordinator of Emergent, who gave a blanket-dismissal of many criticisms made against the EC and Emergent: "Honestly, I care little about these critiques. They come from those who either have no idea what Emergent is all about and/or could not possibly be persuaded from their position anyway," http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html (Accessed 6 November 2006). While Jones has certainly not been able to read or listen to every criticism of the developing EC, his frustration may have warrant, especially since many of the concerns against the EC are brought from those who could bring more substantial criticisms if their assessments were more thorough, requiring perhaps that they enter into the "conversation" more fully.

³A sample of assessments and critiques from the evangelical academic community include the following: Talbot School of Theology's "Conversations with An Emerging Church" (13 May 2005); The Master's Seminary's Spring Lecture Series, "The Emerging Church Movement" (Spring 2006); Dallas Theological Seminary's podcast, "DTS Dialogue: The Emerging Church Movement" (30 May–1 June 2006); The 2006 Fall Contemporary Issues Conference at Westminster Theological Seminary, "Eternal Word in an 'Emerging World'? An Emerging Church Forum" (26–28 October 2006); an entire issue devoted to the EC in *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2 (Spring 2006); engagement from evangelical scholars D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005); R. Scott Smith, "Post-Conservatives, Foundationalism, and Theological Truth: A Critical Evaluation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.2 (June 2005), 351–63; and the recent essays in Bill Henard and Adam Greenway, eds., *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the*

made by scholars in the academy were partly beckoned by members of Emergent in their 2005 response to their critics.⁴ And while important areas of concern that exist and are developing within the EC have been examined (e.g., ecclesiology, soteriology, preaching, views of truth, postmodernism, atonement theories, etc.), an important area of assessment that has been largely neglected is the realm of biblical hermeneutics.

Importance of this Study

Biblical hermeneutics has received little focused attention both by those in the EC and their critics.⁵ This is disconcerting for at least two reasons. First, EC people, even those holding to the traditional consensus of hermeneutics being the “art *and* science of interpretation,”⁶ generally agree that hermeneutics is incredibly important.⁷ Second, hermeneutics provides the “tools” necessary to mine God’s very self-disclosure, the sacred Scripture. Sound biblical hermeneutics, properly applied by grace and the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, guide and drive the interpreter into understanding what God has said.⁸ Without sound hermeneutical principles, there would

Emergent Church Movement (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009). Assessments also continue to be made regularly at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society.

⁴Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Bran McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, Chris Seay, “Official Response to Critics of Emergent,” 2 June 2005, <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2005/06/official-response-to-critics-of.html> (Accessed 3 June 2005).

⁵There is ground for this conclusion, made in 2007, to be a bit softer in light of these works: Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); Scot McKnight, Kevin Corcoran, Peter Rollins, and Jason Clark, *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What’s Emerging* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011). Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes, *Free For All: Rediscovering the Bible in Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009); and by way of critique, Douglas K. Blount, “A New Kind of Interpretation: Brian McLaren and the Hermeneutics of Taste,” in Henard and Greenway, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, 109–28.

⁶Andrew Rogers, “Reading Scripture in Congregations: Towards an Ordinary Hermeneutics” in *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*, ed. Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2007), 81, 97 (italics mine). Evangelicals have also granted that hermeneutics is both a “science” and “art” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002], 314; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970], 11). There has been noticeable recoil in the EC to viewing hermeneutics as a “science.”

⁷Tony Jones has stated to this author, “I think that I and others actually do have a pretty well developed theory of interpretation” (Personal email correspondence, 28 May 2005). Mark Driscoll, referred to as being on the “right wing of the EC” (designation by Jones in conversation with this author), though viewed with reservation by those within and without the EC, is also concerned about the EC’s hermeneutics, which “changes the rules of hermeneutics but keeps the Bible.” Driscoll further states, “In previous generations, the fight was over the inerrancy of Scripture. Today, the fight is over the authority and meaning of Scripture” (Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation* [Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004], 168). Whether Driscoll is correct on this assessment is another issue, but it does show perhaps one reason for his early conflict with the EC.

⁸This “application” of sound hermeneutics, called “exegesis,” deals with the activity of applying sound hermeneutical principles to understand what biblical authors said and why

be no obedience to what God has said, for His very words would be unobtainable. Any person or movement (evangelical, emerging, Baptist, whatever) that receives God's pleasure and favor will be one that has become postured so as to hear and understand what God has said. This was relayed by God to His people in the Old Testament:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh 1:8)

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isa 66:2b)

Conversely, any people (or movement) easily invoking God's displeasure are those playing carelessly with what God has said. Consider how the Bible describes God's people during and after the Babylonian captivity:

But they did not obey your voice or walk in your law. They did nothing of all you commanded them to do. Therefore you have made all this disaster come upon them. (Jer 32:23)

And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. (Neh 9:29, 30)

The importance of sound hermeneutics for anyone, therefore, cannot be overstated. Simply put, without the ability to hear and understand God's Word, everyone is hopelessly lost.

Limitations of this Study

Three disclaimers are in order at the outset of this paper. First, this study will not engage the contemporary hermeneutical debate ongoing

they said it (cf. Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, rev. ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993], 27). Wayne Grudem, ETS past President, refers to "exegesis" as "the practice of interpreting Scripture," when one "applies" hermeneutical principles to the biblical text" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 108–09). See esp. the significance of the coinherence of Spirit and Word in Pilgram Marpeck's theology, Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 82–90.

within the evangelical world that began with Thiselton's work,⁹ except with the following point of clarification. Whereas evangelical hermeneutics formerly was entirely a field of study devoted to articulating sound principles for understanding the biblical text, it has now become a field given over to the impulses of non-evangelical scholars,¹⁰ concerned primarily with philosophical, epistemological, and ontological issues revolving around author, text, and reader. One free church evangelical has identified this trend as focusing on "meaning as an existential reality," rather than on principles helping interpret what the author said, meant, intended, and why.¹¹

Second, there has been a tendency by those in the EC and others to view the historical-grammatical method of interpretation with measured disdain.¹² This often occurs when evangelical, emerging, and other scholars characterize or ignore the historical-grammatical method, its role in history, and arguments for its plausibility.

Third, this essay is written by someone who has been a pastor and church planter, from an evangelical, free church perspective. Having served in a variety of Baptist and free churches as church planter, pastor, and layman, this author stands in the middle of an evangelical tradition with a rich hermeneutical legacy. And having labored for three years seeking to see a community of believers established among the emerging, postmodern generation in California's central valley, a generation at present largely detached from any religious tradition, the perspective of this author is very sensitive and sympathetic to issues raised by the EC. However, without sustained correction, poor hermeneutics may be a major downfall in the EC, limiting the ability to hear and obey God, thus spoiling their ministry in the church and the world.

Goal of this Study

This essay's goal is to compare and contrast some of the more important hermeneutical trends operative in the EC with those of the historical-grammatical method. Four dominant hermeneutical principles in the EC will be given. After a presentation of these principles is made, along with statements from representative EC writers, contrasting principles from the historical-grammatical method will be presented. With each historical-grammatical principle, accompanying scriptural references will be given where appropriate. After making comparison, a petition for more sound exegetical practice

⁹Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). Thiselton's work has been described by one evangelical scholar as that which brought evangelicals into "the new age of hermeneutics" (William W. Klein, "Review of 'Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*," *Trinity Journal* 2.1 [Spring 1981]: 71–75).

¹⁰E.g., Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer Wittgenstein, Ricoeur, Levinas, Derrida, Fish, Rorty, etc.

¹¹Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 27.

¹²Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 116; Brian D. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), 159–63; Idem, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 44.

will be made to those within the EC. Before presenting EC hermeneutics, the important role the historical-grammatical method has played in evangelical Bible interpretation will be briefly established.

The Historical-Grammatical Method and Evangelicals

The historical-grammatical method is the established hermeneutical method of evangelicals.¹³ It was the method of interpretation espoused by Milton Terry.¹⁴ Three Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) past Presidents said Terry's work "became a standard hermeneutical manual at the turn of the [nineteenth] century," was seen as "the standard work on biblical hermeneutics for most of the twentieth century," and into the twenty-first century "continues to enjoy considerable influence amongst evangelicals."¹⁵ After Terry, the Baptist Bernard Ramm's work (1950) was what Wilbur Smith predicted would become "the accepted text for hermeneutical studies in the majority of conservative schools in this country."¹⁶ It became a standard work representing historical-grammatical hermeneutics, articulating with clarity and precision the method guiding the interpreter "to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God."¹⁷

During early battles over the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, Montgomery stated that "the evangelical sine qua non" is "biblical authority defined hermeneutically." He went on to show how the view of biblical authority and inerrancy held by evangelicals necessarily generated "concrete hermeneutical guidelines." In line with the historical-grammatical method, these guidelines begin with taking the Scripture "in its natural sense (*sensus literalis*), unless the context of the passage itself dictates otherwise."¹⁸ A decade later conservative evangelicals formed the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI),¹⁹ affirming that the only method of interpretation

¹³This is not to say that the *consistent* application of the historical-grammatical method is the hallmark of evangelicals. That would only be the case with dispensationalism specifically, which "claims to employ principles of literal, plain, normal, or historical-grammatical interpretation consistently" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and exp. [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 20). Therefore, the historical-grammatical method (albeit not always consistently applied) is the hallmark of the broad spectrum of evangelicals.

¹⁴Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: 1890; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

¹⁵Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 123; Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 9; and Southern Baptist John H. Sailhamer, "Johann August Ernesti: The Role of History in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44.2 (June 2001), 204.

¹⁶Wilbur M. Smith, "Preface" to Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, xvii.

¹⁷Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2 (italics his).

¹⁸John Warwick Montgomery, "The Approach of New Shape Roman Catholicism to Scriptural Inerrancy: A Case Study For Evangelicals," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10.4 (Fall 1967), 221–22, 224.

¹⁹With over three hundred scholars, pastors and laymen, ICBI's purpose was to "to define, defend, and apply the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element of the

compatible with inerrancy was the “grammatico-historical.”²⁰ Proponent of the ICBI’s Chicago Statement (1978), ETS past President Carl Henry affirmed that the evangelical consensus of his day would generally agree with Harold Lindsell and Bernard Ramm’s description of the historical-grammatical method. He stated that “evangelical Christianity . . . understands words in their basic usual sense,” and further, “The rule among evangelicals is to follow the natural meaning of the Scripture text.” Summarizing, he states, “In brief, evangelical Christianity espouses grammatical-historical interpretation rather than alternatives that attach to the Bible passages exotic meanings that depend upon reader decision.”²¹

Having briefly observed the historical-grammatical method’s important role in evangelical hermeneutics in the last sixty-plus years, and that it has served as the established hermeneutical method of conservative evangelicals in America, this paper now turns to examine the main operative components in the EC’s hermeneutics.

Hermeneutical Trends of the Emerging Church

Specific hermeneutical principles operative within the EC have been designated as such after observing identifiable hermeneutical trends existing in multiple individuals/leaders/organizations as they are seeking to interpret and relate to the biblical text. While it is not always easy to identify every trend that exists in the EC, one can observe its leaders, official EC groups, and others engaged in the conversation. Tony Jones has stated, “I’m on the record on this blog and in other places about my hermeneutic positions.”²² Also on record are those whose voices can be heard in the conversation.

Four principles are worthy of note for this paper, and for the sake of contrasting EC hermeneutics with the historical-grammatical method. They will be treated in the following order: (1) Preunderstanding as Variable Starting Point; (2) Scriptural Ambiguity; (3) Authoritative Community; and (4) Personal and Contextual Influence.²³

authority of Scripture and a necessary ingredient for the health of the church of Christ in an attempt to win the church back to this historic position” (Norman L. Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], ix).

²⁰Article 18 of the Chicago Statement (1978) says, “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking into account its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture” (Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 497). This was also significant with the 2006 annual ETS meeting, where the majority affirmed the proposed inerrancy resolution, which predicated an implied affirmation of the plausibility of the historical-grammatical method by the majority of the ETS full membership.

²¹Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982; reprint, 1999), 4:103–04.

²²<http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2006/10/keller-on-emergent.html#comments> (Accessed 1 November 2006).

²³Principles in this list are chosen due to the significant effects each of them has in generating subsequent hermeneutical decisions.

Emerging Church Principle #1: Preunderstanding as Variable Starting Point

Preunderstanding has much in common with Gadamer²⁴ and (in the evangelical world) Thiselton's "two horizons" of interpreter and text belonging in different contexts and traditions, providing horizons needing to converge together to synthesize/generate/ascertain meaning.²⁵ But preunderstanding is more than influential factors; it is about decided leanings and determined precommitments that are fixed before coming to a text for interpretation. For example, some in the EC have decidedly assumed the hermeneutic of "exile." From the 2003 Emergent convention Jason Clark and John Green state their thesis: "Exile is the context for our biblical interpretation; that Christian eschatology plays a significant part in shaping the theology of an exiled community. . . . Exile has some essential theology for us today."²⁶ Here, the interpretive "grid" was suggested and determined before the Bible was even engaged. Consider also the missional hermeneutic advocated by Conder and Rhodes, which is a necessary component enabling believers to read the text together and "hear it as God's Word."²⁷

Preunderstanding is also seen in Ray Anderson, who references the early church controversy over Gentile conversion and concludes, "To use the Word of God to forbid the work of God was to misread the Scripture text. Paul then had to go back deeper into the narrative of the Scripture text to find a basis for affirming the narrative text of the work of God."²⁸ His starting point for Scripture's interpretation is based on what is determined to be a "work of God," and not on what is read outright in the text. Scot McKnight, lecturing on the EC, with reference to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, stated, "Bible study piety emphasizes 'inspired by God' while the emerging movement emphasizes 'equipped for every good work.'"²⁹ While his point may have validity,

²⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002).

²⁵Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 11. One writer stated that so many as eight following factors are influential in determining meaning: authors, audiences, contexts, communities, languages, texts, truth conditions, and cultural functions (Jorge J. Gracia, "Meaning," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 495). Each one of these factors can contribute to one's "preunderstanding." See also Conder and Rhodes, *Free For All*, 21–42, albeit they would take issues with a number of the "lenses" they list; and the premise of Franke, *Manifold Witness*.

²⁶Jason Clark and John Green, "Hermeneutics and Eschatology," posted on Emergent podcast, 25 August 2006, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast> (Accessed 6 November 2006).

²⁷Conder and Rhodes, *Free For All*, 229–30.

²⁸Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 122.

²⁹"What is the Emerging Church?" Fall Contemporary Issues Conference, Westminster Theological Seminary, 26 October 2006, <http://www.foolishsage.com/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf> (Accessed 12 November 2006), 24. It appears that what McKnight means by "Bible study piety" is those who embrace and perform historical-grammatical exegesis as a beginning point to knowing and loving God.

he makes the unnecessary dichotomy in order to show an assumed starting point for the EC. According to McKnight, the EC is looking to be involved in activity that pleases God without having to emphasize the necessary attention that must be paid to what God has said in the Bible.

Emerging Church Principle #2: Scriptural Ambiguity

Brian McLaren has said of himself, "I have often gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often simulate more thought than clarity."³⁰ While dealing with the "medium" of Jesus' message, McLaren places emphasis on the parables, which, according to him, allow for "interactive readership" and show Jesus to be "subtle, indirect, and secretive." He sees Jesus invoking some of McLaren's own methods in the usage of parables. In New Testament parables, McLaren asserts that Jesus means: "*Don't just listen with your ears; listen with your heart. Don't just hear my words; hear my deeper meaning. Don't listen for the literal meaning accessible to your rational mind; seek deeper for a meaning that requires that you make a personal investment of your sincere effort and your imagination.*"³¹

Carl Raschke is committed to a "polymorphous nature of the text and meaning as sign-play," forcing the reader into a radical reader-response role, where the text addresses the reader in the *vocative*.³² Anderson also contributed to EC hermeneutical ambiguity, stating, "Without consideration of the narrative of the work of God, the Word of God takes precedence. However, when the narrative of the work of God's Spirit through Jesus Christ is taken into account, we now discover what I have called an 'eschatological preference.'" Again he states that "where apostolic teaching and practice is clearly governed by the readiness or openness of the situation to experience full freedom in Christ, the hermeneutical criterion of the resurrected Christ as a continuing presence in the church is, in my opinion, indispensable."³³ He gives further examples of this hermeneutic at work, including those surrounding the historic changes at Fuller Seminary. And then, while emphasizing that Scripture and experience do not share "the same revelatory status," he states explicitly:

These contemporary narratives of the work of the Spirit do not become holy Scripture, nor do they become revelation in the same way that Scripture itself is. However, the contemporary narratives as evidence of the work of Christ serve as *hermeneutical*

³⁰McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 23.

³¹McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 44 (italics his).

³²Raschke, *The Next Reformation*, 142.

³³Anderson, *Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, 126–27.

criteria in reading and applying the Scripture narratives as Word of God.³⁴

Due to a strong desire to be open to God's working in the world today, this approach to inspiration affirms that there are simply many issues in life that Scripture either has not addressed, or else is not entirely clear on, or else it *is clear*, but simply needs to be reinterpreted under the rubric of the contemporary working of Christ.³⁵

Emerging Church Principle #3: Authoritative Community

The EC believes that the Bible is to be interpreted by the people, for the people. EC Bible interpretation allows "interactive relationship"³⁶ and is seen as a social, community venture where conversation allows life to flow while living amongst one another.³⁷ Jason Clark and John Green state, "We all approach texts from a certain point of view; each method reflects the goals, habits, beliefs of the different communities."³⁸ Grenz and Franke write that this task "emerges out of the process of give and take, as participants in the community converse over their shared cultural meanings as connected to the symbols they hold in common as Christians."³⁹ And Conder and Rhodes affirm, "The living community shapes the way we read and understand the Scriptures."⁴⁰ What is striking about Conder and Rhodes's position is the minimal role they attribute to the Spirit in this process. Not that they affirm his absence in the process of community interpretation, but they find particular evidences of transformation and the coming together for interpretation to be certain guarantees or "unmistakable markers of a divine presence." And they advocate a seeming contentedness with a sort of community-empowered rather than Spirit-empowered reading of the text.⁴¹

Stating that their "greatest desire" is to follow and serve the Word of God while they "love, have confidence in, seek to obey, and strive accurately to teach the sacred Scriptures," members of Emergent state further, "We are radically open to the possibility that our hermeneutic stance will be greatly enriched in conversation with others."⁴² Doug Pagitt's church, Solomon's

³⁴Ibid., 135 (italics mine).

³⁵See also Conder and Rhodes, *Free for All*, 122–30, for how the application of familiar biblical texts to specific threads in the shared life of the community becomes a means of interpreting texts anew. Further, they also wish to avoid immediate interpretive conclusions (148), while elsewhere affirming there are places where the Bible does speak clearly (200). Consider the complex and altogether different thesis in Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 73–89.

³⁶McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 45.

³⁷Ched Myers, "Stories to Live By: Reading the Bible in the New Millennium," <http://www.theooze.com/articles/print.cfm?id=91> (Accessed 2 August 2005).

³⁸"Hermeneutics and Eschatology."

³⁹Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 166.

⁴⁰Conder and Rhodes, *Free for All*, 63.

⁴¹Ibid., 71–73, 189–93.

⁴²Tony Jones, et al., "Official Response to Critics of Emergent."

Porch, takes this idea of community as an interpretive principle one step further. Solomon's Porch includes the Bible as "a member of our community of faith—an essential member that must be listened to on all matters on which it speaks. . . . Yet we try to treat the Bible as the sort of best friend to whom one gives the benefit of the doubt."⁴³ Part of Pagitt's weekly sermon preparation involves an intimate Bible discussion group during which insights and ideas are gleaned from church members in preparation for Sunday's message. He says, "I'm just suggesting what is normally done between the pastor and a commentary be done between the pastor and the community."⁴⁴

For some in the EC, the individual believing "communities" also include the tradition of the church.⁴⁵ Jones has stated that Emergent Village seeks to be "a catalyst of conversation, community, and ultimately, interpretation." Clarifying Emergent's hope, he says, "We want the church to reclaim its place as the authoritative community of interpretation of scripture, culture, and human existence."⁴⁶ As such, the community determines truth.⁴⁷ While arguing for the need to preserve a "Rule of Faith" and a "hermeneutical tradition" simultaneously, Andrew Rogers makes the same suggestion, that the church should become the authority in doctrine and hermeneutics.⁴⁸ On one hand, this idea seems very similar to the Roman Catholic idea of authority, where interpretive authority is centralized in the church. On the other hand, it also seems similar to the Orthodox idea of *sobornost*, signifying "catholicity" and "conciliarity," which Russian writers claim as "a special characteristic of the Orthodox Church, contrasted with the emphasis on juridical authority in the [Catholic] Church and the excessive individualism of the Protestant communions."⁴⁹ It is the Orthodox means of safeguarding the truth, with the corporate church being the authorized interpreter of the Bible. *Sobornost* is based on the idea that "the Church as a whole is being led by the Holy Spirit," and therefore "all who are truly led by the Spirit will necessarily come to the consensus in all matters of faith and practice."⁵⁰ Similar to this idea of

⁴³Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 122–23.

⁴⁴Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 186–89.

⁴⁵Nathan Humphrey, "A Baptist Benediction," <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=271> (Accessed 12 August 2005).

⁴⁶Tony Jones, "Is Emergent the New Christian Left 2: Tony Jones Takes on Chuck Colson and 'true truth,'" 25 May 2006, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the_1.html (Accessed 1 November 2006).

⁴⁷Incidentally, there might be some recent change in Jones's position. See his interview with Christian George, "Restless Pilgrim Podcast #3: Tony Jones," 17 November 2009, where in speaking about Bible interpretation, Jones corrected himself using the term "discern" rather than "determine," <http://restlesspilgrim.com/2009/11/restless-pilgrim-podcast-3-tony-jones/> (Accessed 8 January 2010).

⁴⁸Rogers, "Reading Scripture in Congregations," 99–102.

⁴⁹"Sobornost," in F.L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3d ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1522.

⁵⁰Alexey Kolomytsev, "Bible and Tradition as Sources of Authority in Eastern Orthodox Theology," (unpublished paper). These notions are consistent with one of Emergent's values: "Commitment to the Church in all its Forms," <http://www.emergentvillage.com/Site/>

an authoritative community (which seems to run contrary to the EC's push for decentralization of authority and communities) is the influential factor of one's own context.

Emerging Church Principle #4: Personal and Contextual Influence

For the EC, hermeneutics does not take place in a vacuum. Early on, Dave Tomlinson spoke of his approach to interpreting the Bible in this way: "I realized that every reading of the Bible involved an interpretation, and that taking Scripture seriously necessitated a constant dialogue between the text, the historical teachings of the Church, and my own thoughts and culturally conditioned presuppositions."⁵¹ Tony Jones goes further, stating plainly: "[m]y approach to the text varies, depending on the particular text and, quite honestly, what side of the bed I woke up on."⁵²

For a succinct definition, Jason Clark and John Green state, "Hermeneutics is about the lenses we use to interpret texts; our interpretive grid." With a purported 1% of people in the United Kingdom attending churches, they feel a great spiritual depression providing their minds with reason to embrace an appropriate predetermined hermeneutic. In their case and for their context, they believe that the appropriate hermeneutic is "exile."⁵³ Here again is Anderson's idea of letting contemporary narratives serve as "hermeneutical criteria" for how the Bible is interpreted.⁵⁴ While making strides to maintain the need for exegesis and a role for authorial intent (something hugely neglected in the EC), John Franke, leaning on literary theorists, advocates that "once an author writes a text, it takes on a life of its own as it is read and interpreted in new and constantly changing situations." With a pneumatological account that makes way for "the fullness of the speaking of the Spirit," who intends to guide the church throughout its history, Franke finds that this speaking "always involves the response of the reader."⁵⁵

Having examined four of the most important areas for EC hermeneutics, this paper now turns to make a responsive presentation of hermeneutical principles from the historical-grammatical method.

Historical-Grammatical Emphases in Light of Emerging Church Hermeneutics

Historical-grammatical principles that contrast those in the EC are: (1) Inspiration as Starting Point; (2) Scriptural Perspicuity; (3) Authorial Intentionality; and (4) Piercing Objectivity. These principles will be explored because they are counter-emphases offered by the historical-grammatical

Belong/Order (Accessed 10 December 2005).

⁵¹Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 111.

⁵²Personal email correspondence, 12 June 2005.

⁵³"Hermeneutics and Eschatology."

⁵⁴Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, 135.

⁵⁵Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 77. See, however, the thoughtful thesis throughout this work, including the advocacy of "interdependent particularity" for the church(es) (134–47).

method. Throughout this section, an attempt will be made to show how the principles set forth in this method are consistent with how the Bible prescribes itself to be interpreted.

Historical-Grammatical Principle #1: Inspiration as a Starting Point

The Bible is an inspired book. This is the starting point for evangelicals. Ramm says, “The divine inspiration of the Bible is *the foundation* of historic Protestant hermeneutics and exegesis.”⁵⁶ Being inspired, the reader’s “overriding concern” should be “to read it for what it really is: the word of God.”⁵⁷ It has moral/spiritual, supernatural, and revelational aspects to it.⁵⁸ It is different from any other book, “its chief value” being that it is “divinely adapted to be profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).”⁵⁹ EC sympathizer Andrew Rogers finds himself searching for some method for “objectifying the text,” though not necessarily viewing it as “inspired.” He asserts that “if it is to address us as God’s word, then it needs to have that otherness in order to arrest our current horizon and transform it.”⁶⁰ It is the absolute authority, and as such has been described as the book “before which we sit judged rather than judging.”⁶¹

Sailhamer suggests that the classical orthodox view of biblical inspiration should effect a hermeneutical method that is faithful to the very *words* of Scripture. It was the words (ῥαφή, 2 Tim 3:16) that God inspired and therefore this method of Bible interpretation should be devoted to “reading the *words* in terms of their grammatical, namely historical sense.”⁶² Paul described Scripture as “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

In contrast to the EC’s starting point, the notion of “pre-understanding” seems to be a relatively new principle. It appears to have been first observed by evangelicals in the mid 1980’s, by Baptist Don Carson. This principle makes a distinction between the interpreter’s mental baggage (which everyone has to some degree) and the preunderstanding that means “something like ‘immutable non-negotiables,’ a function of an entire world view at odds with Scripture,” which will not allow Scripture to bring it into question. Though there is a fine line between the two, Carson correctly asserts that with the latter preunderstanding, “it becomes *impossible* for the Scriptures to exercise authority over our thoughts and lives where our ‘pre-understanding’

⁵⁶Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 93 (italics mine).

⁵⁷Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 176.

⁵⁸Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 94.

⁵⁹Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 141.

⁶⁰Rogers, “Reading Scripture in Congregations,” 101.

⁶¹Frances M. Young, “Patristic Biblical Interpretation,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 570.

⁶²Sailhamer, “Johann August Ernesti,” 206 (italics his).

is immutably non-negotiable.” In this case, the reader begins with “epistemological limitations imposed by ‘pre-understanding.’”⁶³

Evidencing distaste for this approach by his former EC colleagues, Driscoll refers to this postmodern view of interpretation as believing “the interpreter ultimately has authority over the text and can use it as he or she pleases rather than submit to it.”⁶⁴ If the Bible is inspired, interpreters must be able to interpret and understand the text clearly before proper application can be made. Moreover, British Baptist Steve Holmes notes the Scottish Baptist Declaration of Principle’s affirmation that a sort of belief in inspiration is necessary for the reader as well as the author, indicating the need for the present “guidance of the Holy Spirit.” Emphasizing Bible reading as a gathered community, he says, “In church meeting, in being together around the Bible, we discover the guidance of the Holy Spirit and properly use our liberty to follow Christ as best we can discern.”⁶⁵ This leads to the next hermeneutical principle.

Historical-Grammatical Principle #2: Scriptural Perspicuity

“God’s revelation is always clear,”⁶⁶ which is true precisely because it cannot be otherwise. If the contrary occurred, the resultant lack of clarity would force symbols and descriptions into “emotive preferents, and this would raise the specter of illusion.” If statements about God cannot be affirmed as literally true, is God able to be known at all?⁶⁷ But God can be known wherein He has revealed Himself. Mark Thompson has stated that “the ultimate guarantee that God’s word will be heard and understood, that it will achieve the purpose for which it was spoken and written, is the power and goodness of God himself.”⁶⁸

A few comments are in order regarding the nature of hermeneutical ambiguity that EC interpreters see in the Bible. Baptist Carl Henry mentioned that the reformer John Calvin “saw satanic influences at play in the notion that the ‘fertility’ of a text determines its true meaning and nurtures a hidden import.”⁶⁹ Calvin’s notion is relevant since the very question the serpent asked in the garden was the one which tried to conceal and cast doubt on what God had said. This happened by a questioning of God’s Word

⁶³D.A. Carson, “A Sketch of the Factors Determining the Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984; reprint, 1993), 13, 15.

⁶⁴Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation*, 168.

⁶⁵Stephen R. Holmes, “Baptists and the Bible,” *Baptist Quarterly* 43.7 (July 2010), 414. See also the significance of holding Word and Spirit together in Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 74–77.

⁶⁶Cornelius VanTil, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd rev. ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955; reprint, 1967), 197.

⁶⁷Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:121.

⁶⁸Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 111.

⁶⁹Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:105, citing John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:22.

(“Did God actually say . . . ?” Gen 3:1) and then by offering a contradictory statement directly opposed to what God had said (“You will not surely die,” Gen 3:4). It is worth noting that this “conversation,” which included a question, dialogue, and ultimately an antithesis (the serpent’s contradiction of God’s Word), did not actually yield a synthesis, nor any fuller meaning, nor any sound interpretation of what God said. The results of reading God’s Word as ambiguous in this instance were catastrophic. Consequently, God’s Word was not applied by those who actually had heard and understood God’s Word. The first humans experienced consequences of their disobedience.

Paul warned Timothy that in the last days, there would be those who were “[a]lways learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7), which seems descriptive of those who choose to see the text of Scripture as totally unclear, thereby deliberately disregarding what God has said. This can only be the result of either a lifestyle consistent with those described by Paul in the verses prior to 2 Timothy 3:7, or else a precommitment to seeing the text as unclear, having a minimalist desire to want to apply it, or both. At its logical conclusion, the lack of commitment to the major reformational principle of the biblical text’s clarity ultimately yields no text from which to make any personal application. There would therefore be no need for obedience any longer since there would be nothing (i.e., no text) to interpret and obey. On the other hand, God has spoken clearly in the Bible, and the “one qualification and one only for being able to extract meaning from Scripture . . . is the aid of God’s Spirit.”⁷⁰ The Spirit is the One who enables the joyous discerning of the meaning of God’s Word in Scripture, which is determined by authorial intent.

Historical-Grammatical Principle #3: Authorial Intentionality

Tom Wright gives a good description of this principle: “the ‘literal’ sense was *the sense that the first writers intended*.” This involves the pursuit of “‘discovering what the writers meant’ as opposed to engaging in free-floating speculation.”⁷¹ Bruce and Scott assert that the “ultimate objective” of Bible interpretation is “the intent of the human and divine authors.”⁷² Moisés Silva refers to “authorial intent” as the fundamental element of the *sensus literalis* principle:

Grammatico-historical exegesis is simply the attempt to figure out what the biblical writer, under divine guidance, was saying. The basic question is then, “What did the author mean?” The only evidence we have to answer that question is the text itself. In other words, we dare not speak about the Bible’s infallibility

⁷⁰Holmes, “Baptists and the Bible,” 416.

⁷¹N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 73, 135 (italics his).

⁷²F.F. Bruce and J.J. Scott, Jr., “Interpretation of the Bible,” ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 615.

in such a way that it legitimizes random and arbitrary interpretations of the text.⁷³

In the interpretive process of the historical-grammatical method, careful attention must be paid to the Bible's "claims and character as a human production."⁷⁴ Wells reminds the reader that due to the Spirit's inspiration of the Bible and His work in illumination, "the content of Scripture is not subject to being overridden by the interests of the interpreter, or those of a later culture, or those of an ecclesiastical tradition."⁷⁵ This view of authorial intent (which dictates meaning in the historical-grammatical method) runs totally contrary to the EC priority wherein "the meaning of a text is up to the interpretive community."⁷⁶ It is in this postmodern context where "[t]he reader effectively supplants the author and plays havoc with the text."⁷⁷ Yet, as Thompson skillfully reminds, "the divine author has not relinquished this text." He goes on to say,

To speak of the vulnerability of the written word, adrift on a sea of interpretations, is a strangely romantic notion when the word concerned is the very word of God. The Bible is not merely the record of God's activity long ago in human history; it is the means by which, through the illuminating and convicting work of the Spirit, God directly and personally addresses his people in the world today. Contemporary reading of Scripture . . . exists within that redemptive history in which God is continuously active and never absent.⁷⁸

As Luke told Theophilus, the intent for which he wrote his gospel account was as follows: "it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3–4). And the apostle John also clarified the intention of his writing: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

Authorial intent has much to do with purpose, meaning, and content. The biblical authors had and have something to say, which are one and the same. Much different than the historical-grammatical hermeneutics' emphasis on authorial intent, the conversation taking place within the EC *is the means* of interpretation, which causes the most influential interpretive factor to be those in the community with the loudest voice, and when new members

⁷³Moisés Silva, "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50.1 (Spring 1988), 70.

⁷⁴Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 500.

⁷⁵David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 174.

⁷⁶Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, 100–01.

⁷⁷Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 128.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 133.

come into the community, it will further change the community's conventional, ever-changing, subjective understanding of what the Bible has said. It is certain that these leaders and their followers will be active in generating different meanings of the things that God has clearly said. And if those with the louder (and more influential) voices in the conversation become mute at any point (or worse, they stop dealing with the Bible in its original context altogether), then nobody will interpret anything in the EC. Andrew Rogers's attempt to synthesize a "Rule of Faith" and "interpretive tradition" as a community guide⁷⁹ would ultimately also end up being left to the louder-voice elites in the community. And this will ultimately be the result of Jones's desire for the church to be the authority in conversation as well. No doubt, Jones's voice will be among the loudest of the bunch.

In Orthodoxy's *Sobornost* and in Roman Catholic interpretation, everything also of significance is left up to the official clergy and historical statements. There is little need for emphasis on biblical exegesis. Lay involvement in the matters of hermeneutics and doctrine (and almost everything else unless it is giving money) can become bothersome and largely insignificant. The interpretive idea of authoritative community appears to be moving in a direction that will ultimately muzzle or else attempt to swallow the Bible's transcultural effectiveness completely. For each community would have its own contextual, theologically-driven hermeneutics and rule of faith. If this becomes the case, and the Bible were only read to confirm one's beliefs or the beliefs of a community, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Muslim, and every other community would never be confronted with the life changing truths in God's Word. They would all be left alone without a witness to the gospel of grace and the true salvation that is revealed in God's Word. And in a post-modern context, interaction between communities would be forbidden, unless one enters another community. This would be devastating. For it would eliminate evangelism, the Christian's responsibility to make disciples and to obey what Paul exhorted Timothy to do for the entirety of his ministry: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2).

Positively speaking, God has given His people His Word as a stewardship. Local Christian communities are not to "determine" the meaning of the text, according to the radical EC position, but they are to discern it, by the Spirit's enablement. The Bible, then, does not need to be "related to," but must be understood, applied, submitted to, and preached. This brings the present section of this paper to the final principle under consideration.

⁷⁹Rogers, "Reading Scripture in Congregations," 81–107.

Historical-Grammatical Principle #4: Piercing Objectivity

Instead of being defined by a theological grid that isolates/marginalizes evangelicals from the rest of the world, evangelical Christians are defined as such because the God of the Bible, the only God who is God, has saved them through the hearing of His Word (see Rom 10:13–15) when they believed. He has spoken by His Word and by grace believers have heard, believed, and are growing in grace so as to increasingly obey that Word. It is a fixed Word, not changing while confronting any individual or community, for God has revealed Himself therein. Peter referred to this objective Word by saying,

And we have something more sure, the prophetic Word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. (2 Pet 1:19)

Congregationalist David Wells has described the objectivity of God's word in this way:

Revelation, then, is public, not private. It is public in the sense that God's primary locus of communication is not within the self nor are his intentions accessed by intuition. He has spoken and he continues to speak, through the words of Scripture which constitute the Word of God. . . . This revelation . . . is a history which took place apart from human consciousness, and not within the human psyche, and though it has to be understood and interpreted, its meaning is always objective to the interpreter.⁸⁰

In this Word, brought to bear by the divine invasion and illumination of the Holy Spirit, believers hear God, see Him, know Him, and love Him. Vanhoozer stated, "To come to Scripture is to be confronted with a truth that is both objective and rational on the one hand and personal and relational on the other."⁸¹ Accordingly, Holmes proffers, "It captures us in unexpected ways; it subverts our expectations, evades our classifications, and overturns our assumptions. Our task is, in humble, prayerful dependence on God's Spirit, to be open and attentive to the way in which Christ shall choose to address us today."⁸²

The Bible is a fixed canon, a sacred and determined text, inspired by God and without error in the autographs. God has spoken and His people must not look any place else for Him to speak. He has spoken with words, in time and history. The remaining responsibility subsequently is on the interpreter

⁸⁰Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 174.

⁸¹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.1 (March 2005), 110.

⁸²Holmes, "Baptists and the Bible," 422.

to humbly engage the exegetical task—i.e., reading. The importance of being acquainted with the Scriptures through sound exegesis cannot be overstated, for sound Bible interpretation plays a huge role in soteriology. Consider Paul's words to Timothy: "from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). And this *objective word* can be interpreted *objectively*. Consider prescriptions for approaching the Word from other New Testament writers:

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (Jas 1:21)

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord remains forever." And this Word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation. (1 Pet 1:22–2:2)

Thompson affirms, "We have our own issues and interests and we can just as easily read these into the text as heed its call to repent of them. God's word might not be far from us, but it always confronts us as a word *outside* us."⁸³ The remaining task for believers then is to begin to interpret that external, fixed Word, and to apply that text liberally. This will not be adequately done with any postmodern hermeneutic, which neither allows the interpreter to know when he has heard God, nor when he has obeyed God. But evangelicals have a hermeneutic faithful to guide one into the hearing of the Word of God: the historical-grammatical method. God has spoken with words in time and history. Now God's people, under the guidance of and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, have the responsibility of engaging increasingly in exegesis so that they might be able to hear that Word more clearly in order to be more faithful to it.

Having examined four of the most influential hermeneutical principles in the EC, along with their counterparts from the historical-grammatical method, the final, concluding section of this paper will be devoted to encouraging those within the EC towards a more sound exegetical praxis.

⁸³Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 128.

Conclusion

There are certainly those in the EC who are acutely aware of their hermeneutics. But actively being aware of one's hermeneutical position, and seeking to nurture a more sound, faithful exegesis are different things altogether. While the EC has been addressing many issues in the church and broader culture, focused attention on EC hermeneutics has largely been disregarded.⁸⁴ This has often left EC hermeneutics to a default mode, or else hermeneutics have been driven by other influential factors indicative of those in the EC. But as pastors and leaders in the broader church, the only way forward that will bring honor and pleasure to God is a direction that will cultivate a more faithful and careful approach to God's Word. This must be done through faithful exegesis rooted in the sound hermeneutical principles articulated by the historical-grammatical method.

A Plea for Sound Exegesis in the Emerging Church

Bernard Ramm stated, "Only in the priority of literal exegesis is there control on the exegetical abuse of Scripture."⁸⁵ Warfield has elsewhere stated that "what the Scripture says, God says."⁸⁶ Therefore, this paper advocates an approach to the Bible as God's Word that encourages the EC to engage exegetical practices consisting of the following:

Grammatical Exegesis. Every statement written has some form of grammatical construction. It is up to the reader to identify grammatical features employed by the author, for every grammatical sentence is made up by certain linguistic laws and principles. The *autographa* (original text) is inspired by God, and therefore the original languages are critical for approaching the sacred, inspired text. Being aware of Greek and Hebrew grammatical features will enhance one's understanding of the text as it is studied, whether in a community or individually.⁸⁷

Lexical Exegesis. This is a study of the words from the Bible. "Literal," and "lexically-based" exegesis has been the hallmark of evangelical exegesis. Biblical inspiration is limited to the words of Scripture. In language, words usually represent units of thought. In the Bible, words must be studied according to their context and normal usage. Again, knowing or having a

⁸⁴Rogers, "Reading Scripture in Congregations," 102, shows steps to correct this by generating focused thought in the area of EC hermeneutics. He suggests that communities embrace the responsibility of developing and passing down both "belief and hermeneutical tradition together" so that the subsequent generations of congregations might be able to carefully observe what might have been lost, gained, or corrupted through mediation. Rogers continues this work amongst a variety of churches, and by working with the UK's Bible Society.

⁸⁵Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 124.

⁸⁶Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University, 1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 283–332.

⁸⁷Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 136–42.

working knowledge with the languages that the Bible was originally written in will assist one's discovery of what the text said.⁸⁸

Historical Background. Not only is a study of the Word's context important, but utilizing information that can elucidate the original text's historical background will be helpful as well, whether based on internal or external evidence. Reconstructing a text's historical background can be incredibly helpful in clarifying what the author said.⁸⁹

Interpretation before Application. Whereas those in the EC have often failed to do this, the more sound approach is to come to the text in the same way the Old Testament describes going to the house of the Lord: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil" (Eccl 5:1, 2). Before any application is made, the interpreter needs to understand what the Bible says so as to ensure the sacred text is sacredly interpreted, by the Spirit's enablement. Exegesis must take place prior to application, otherwise it may not be the Bible that is applied at all, but only one's (or a community's) personal ideas of what the Bible may or may not say.

Practical Steps for Those in the Emerging Church

Some further preliminary suggestions are offered as a way forward for those in the EC:⁹⁰

- Read your Bibles more often, not less.
- Nurture, cultivate, free up, and appoint leaders who love and know the Bible well.
- Learn Greek and Hebrew.⁹¹ Use the languages often. Make available and encourage people in your community to learn the biblical languages.
- Encourage teachers and leaders to prepare from the original text of Scripture.

⁸⁸Wright, *The Last Word*, 74, 128; Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 128–36.

⁸⁹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.1 (March 2005), 11; Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 154–61.

⁹⁰By way of qualification, the EC, by definition, is a fluid conversation among a diverse group of people and organizations. From the time this essay was constructed, a number of those within the EC have modified their positions (not just on biblical hermeneutics), including those who align ideologically with Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009). Among these is Jason Clark, "It was the best of years and worst of years," 4 January 2010, <http://deepchurch.org.uk/2010/01/04/it-was-the-best-of-years-and-worst-of-years> (Accessed 10 January 2010). See also the relational adieu that Anthony Jones gives to Emergent Village in "Goodbyes to Emergent Village," 7 January 2010, <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2010/01/goodbyes-to-emergent-village.html> (Accessed 10 January 2010).

⁹¹This should be paramount for those who believe the Bible is inspired.

- Repent of anything that might prevent you from honestly reading what a text says. I.e., know your own context well and repent of any self-aware preunderstandings.
- Rest in the goodness and sovereign power of God, Who has spoken and speaks by His Word, wants us to pay attention to it and, by grace and the Spirit's enablement, obey it.

This paper has examined four of the most important hermeneutical principles operating within the EC. These principles were then contrasted with those of the historical-grammatical method, which has been the accepted evangelical and free church hermeneutical method. This is a much more biblical method of interpretation. Accordingly, the hope of this paper is to encourage those in the EC (at whatever spectrum in the "conversation") to learn from historical-grammatical method, from how the Bible consistently prescribes itself to be interpreted. Just as evangelicals have learned much from the EC, especially with regard to social involvement and missionary impetus, among other things, it is hoped that those within the EC would also learn from evangelicals by attempting to be more faithful to sound biblical hermeneutics in order to understand more clearly what God has said in the Bible so that they might obey it and Him more fully.