METHOD IN LIGHT OF SCRIPTURES AND IN RELATION TO HERMENEUTICS

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The conversation was becoming somewhat intense at Faith Community's church monthly council meeting. The nine elected congregational leaders along with the pastor were exploring possible next steps to address their overcrowding problem. The congregation's growth had been on a plateau for over five years. The building was full, even with three worship services on the weekend. In addition, there was no room to expand either the facilities or the parking on the four acres of land the church owned. The discussion continued to unfold as various persons contributed the following comments.

John, a realtor, stated, "This is a no brainer. The facts are self-evident. We are landlocked and the demographics and growth trends make it absolutely necessary for us to relocate. If we don't, we will end up declining in our present location."

Evelyn, a social worker, commented, "I'm not sure the congregation is up to speed on this issue, but my perception is that they are not ready to hear a recommendation to relocate. I think we should conduct some focus groups among our members and see where their perceptions are in terms of our space needs and future options."

Bill, a school teacher, offered, "Rather than try to discern where the congregation is on this, let's be more proactive and do some intentional leading in helping our members understand the issues and come to a decision with us."

Harold, a banker, countered, "The important thing is that we come to a good solution, and soon. We've already wasted too much time talking about this. Let's identify what needs to be done, and do it."

Pastor Ron, who had been quietly listening to this conversation, reflected, "I'm wondering where God is in all of this. I really appreciate your various perspectives, but how does scripture inform our decision and how do we discern God's leading for our congregation in this matter?"

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THE CHALLENGE FACING CHURCH LEADERS

The real dilemma facing the leaders of Faith Community is more systemic than just trying to solve their space problem. The deeper issue relates to how these leaders are approaching the interpretation of reality in their situation. It involves the diversity of methods they are using in seeking a solution. Embedded in the various comments by these leaders are five fundamentally different methods - hermeneutically-shaped approaches for interpreting reality, regarding how to engage the resolution of their congregation's overcrowding.

The first method draws primarily on a scientific worldview where it is accepted that objective facts inform and determine our decisions. The second incorporates a constructionist approach which understands reality to be the shared interpretation persons bring to it. The third utilizes an advocacy approach which is designed to change how people interpret their shared situation and then act on it. The fourth relies on a pragmatic approach in an effort to get to an effective solution in a timely manner. And the fifth brings God into the conversation as an acting subject with an expectation that persons can discern the leading of God's Spirit in relation to specific situations. The real question facing this council is not primarily, "How do we solve our space problem?" but rather, "What method, or perhaps combination of methods, should we use to make this decision?"

In referencing method, the issue of epistemology is introduced into the discussion, which involves the approach that one uses to learn something. Everyone relies on some type of method to learn anything. But what is becoming increasingly clear today, is that there is a hermeneutically-shaped character to the methods that we employ. The use of any method to learn something always involves two types of interpretation. First, there are interpretive assumptions we hold about what constitutes reality that influences the method we use. Second, the information that we learn through the use of any particular method is always interpreted through the lenses of these same assumptions. This means that epistemology is inseparably linked to hermeneutics.

In regard to the hermeneutically-shaped character of method, it is clear that a diversity of alternative approaches now pervades the world in which we live. Not only that, but

this diversity of methods is further complicated by the different perspectives persons bring to the interpretive process in light of their social location, i.e. gender, race, class, and sexuality. Factors such as these show up regularly in church life today in the form of adjectival theologies that are often organized around competing interest groups - i.e. feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, GLBT theology, etc. The diversity of hermeneutically-shaped methods, further complexified by the perspectival differences embedded in persons' social location, now complicates efforts to come to shared understandings. All too often, the result is that people end up speaking past one another. How, then, are Christian leaders to lead in the context of a hermeneutically-shaped, multi-perspectival world?

This diversity makes the challenge of trying to pursue public discourse complex, whether within the church or in relation to the broader society. A recent book named this new situation well in its title, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*.[2] Other authors have suggested that this new reality of diverse methods, complicated by differences in social location, is related to the postmodern turn where we have experienced a shift from an emphasis on epistemology - how do we know something, to an emphasis on hermeneutics - how do we interpret both how we encounter and what we encounter.[3] In the aftermath of the influence of the Enlightenment, and especially a reliance on the scientific method, this represents a shift from trying to find the one right method that can be shared in common, to having to deal with the multi-perspectival character of what we know. This shift is now becoming more evident for everyone, but for Christians there are additional complicating dimensions in a world that is increasingly recognized as having a hermeneutically-shaped interpretation of reality. These further complications include: (a) how to incorporate an understanding of God's purposes as revealed in scripture, and (b) how to understand the active leading of God's Spirit in the life of a Christian community.

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[2] J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

[3] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guildford Press, 1997).

SOME STARTING POINTS FOR CHRISTIANS LEADERS
TO CONSIDER IN REGARD TO METHOD

Method has been an issue for Christians since the inception of Christianity. It surfaced early in the movement in regard to how to interpret scripture. Most accepted the inherent authority of scripture, that there was something *special* about *special revelation*. But significantly different approaches emerged from time-to-time that competed for how to interpret scripture - i.e. Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament, Origin's allegorical system, and Tertullian's adoption of the Montanist approach. In the face of such challenges, the grammatical-historical method of interpretation became the accepted norm over the centuries. This approach assumed that there was one right interpretation for each scriptural text, and that one could come to know this by employing the right set of grammatical-historical interpretive principles.[4] Competing methods for interpreting scripture, however, often involved lengthy debates over the centuries. This was true all the way through to the Protestant Reformation, which in many ways was a debate about method, "How should the authority of scripture be understood in the life of the church, and who has the responsibility to interpret it?"

The whole issue of method took on a deeper level of complexity, however, during the 17th century and following with the rise of the Enlightenment, and with the development of the scientific method as the reigning epistemology. In the face of the increasing challenge of the natural explanation of reality by science, trying to maintain the inherent authority of scripture became a constant struggle. Interestingly, it was Schleiermacher at the beginning of the 19th century who embodied the divergence of these two interpretive approaches. On the one hand, he is commonly acknowledged, although incorrectly, as being one of the first to develop a general hermeneutics of the principles of interpretation of ancient texts, especially biblical texts, by using the grammatical-historical approach. On the other hand, he clearly shifted the method of how one comes to know

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[4]   A recent example of someone working from this perspective, while also taking into full consideration the recent developments in hermeneutics is Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 5-15.

God, by relocating knowledge about God away from an objective understanding of scriptural truths, to a subjectivist approach of trying to understand our experiential encounter of God.[5]

It is important to note, however, that because of the influence of the Enlightenment, the focus shifted to trying to establish a foundational epistemology. The search was underway to find a methodology that would move authority away from divine revelation (scripture), in order to ground human knowing within some form of objective foundation. Competing positions included such methodologies as rationalism (Descartes) and empiricism (Hume). Inherent in these proposed methods was a shared understanding that the use of the right method would result in an objective and accurate understanding of reality. Gradually, the scientific method with its emphasis on objectivity, facts, the natural laws of cause and effect, and the use of particular forms of logic became the dominant epistemology. At this point in time, those employing the scientific method assumed they were able to utilize it without bias, a position that was later demonstrated to be impossible, and unnecessary, first by Heidegger with an understanding of the hermeneutical circle and later by Gadamer with his understanding of fruitful prejudices.

The influence of the scientific method was greatly enhanced because of the knowledge that it generated, especially knowledge produced by the natural sciences. The conclusion that the *God-hypothesis* was no longer required to explain reality came to dominate the accepted scientific worldview, first in the form of Deism and later in a more radical secularism. The accepted view was that the universe was a closed system, and that everything in the world was subject to the natural laws of cause and effect. Then during the 19th century, with the rise of historicism and its method of approaching all our understanding of reality as being historically shaped, there was a further challenge to the notion that there was anything *special* about what had been known as *special revelation*. The Bible became just one more book

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5   Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 204-236.

about a historically-shaped religion of a particular racial group (Israel) and a particular movement (Christianity).

The influence of the Enlightenment with its reliance on the scientific method, and the development of historicism as an interpretive method, both worked to shift the discussion for Christians away from how to understand the meaning of scripture, to one of how to even approach the study of scripture. Some, due to the influence of Enlightenment assumptions, continued to search for ways to ground the study of scripture and the Christian faith within an epistemological certainty. This is perhaps illustrated best by the 19th century Princeton Seminary theologians Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and B.B. Warfield. They drew the battle line around inerrancy in their effort to establish an objective epistemology.[6] Interestingly, their work still informs much of the epistemology that is employed today by conservatives who continue to wage the war about scriptural authority around claims of it being both infallible and inerrant.[7] For many who take this approach, they also tend to ascribe the same type of authority to their historical confessions.

In contrast to those arguing for biblical inerrancy, there were persons who sought to preserve the value of scripture by bringing its message and insights into alignment with a scientific worldview. Usually associated with the movement know as liberalism, this effort gained ascendancy during the 19th century, all the way up to World War I. At that point, the perils of embedding a theological perspective too deeply within a particular scientific worldview became all too evident, and resulted in the subsequent marginalization of liberalism in the 20th century. This was first evident in the challenge that came from neo-orthodoxy during the early part of the 20th century. Later, it also became evident through the hermeneutical, linguistic turn that is represented in the work of such persons as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.[8]

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6   Moisés Silva, "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," ed. Harvie M. Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 67-80.

7   See for example, D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

8   See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and*

As noted above, variations of this battle over epistemology still continue in some quarters, especially among the conservative fundamentalists.[9] But the development of a hermeneutical perspective, especially in light of the postmodern turn, has significantly reframed the discussion for most Christians. In contrast to the Enlightenment's scientific worldview, which relied on an epistemology that assumed the natural explanation of all phenomena, a hermeneutical perspective no longer requires that the God hypothesis be cancelled out a priori. Claims regarding the special nature of scriptural revelation can once more be made with integrity, but only by also acknowledging the hermeneutical and multi-perspectival character of all human knowing. Interestingly, in a hermeneutically-shaped, postmodern context, faith claims regarding the leading of God's Spirit in a Christian community have taken on a renewed viability. But it is important to note that such faith claims are not limited to Christians alone. The re-enchanted Western worldview now displays an appreciation for spirituality and the supernatural that pervades not only the popular media[10] but also finds increasing support in the academy.[11]

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING REALITY

So what does a Christian worldview look like from a hermeneutical perspective, and how does scripture function in framing such a worldview for the church? A vibrant debate about how to answer these questions has emerged over the past several decades among Christian scholars. These persons are seeking to redefine theological education in the face of the hermeneutically-shaped character of our world in the

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Theology in a Post-Liberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

[9] This has been particular evident in recent decisions in the Southern Baptist Convention related to matters of gender. See http://www.bible-researcher.com/tniv4.html (accessed February 13, 2005).

[10] A good example of this is the current TV program *Joan of Arcadia,* which has a young teenage girl regularly speaking to God through a variety of different characters.

[11] See for example Larry Dossey, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1997).

midst of the emerging postmodern condition.[12] While the reality of perspectival differences is evident in this debate, most of those participating appear to share in common a desire to make faith claims about a God who can be known through the witness of scripture.

Among the various perspectives regarding how to understand God, and God's work in the world as made known through scripture, there is one in recent years that has seen a significant level of convergence among a wide range of Christian faith traditions. This is a missiological perspective. It involves understanding God's work in the world as the missio Dei - the mission of God, which takes place in relation to the redemptive reign of God in Christ - the Kingdom of God.[13] The convergence around this understanding includes Christian scholars from such diverse faith traditions as Ecumenicals, Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and even Pentecostals.[14]

While not all these scholars will agree on every point, the following missiological framework represents, for most of them, the center of the Christian story as revealed in scripture. It is offered here as a perspective that seeks to understand the larger Christian story. It is an understanding that clearly presents normative truth claims that have universal applicability, while also always being open to further insights that come from other perspectives. Interestingly, one of the key insights from scripture is that the particularity of a perspectival understanding of God's story in scripture does not necessarily limit its ability to bear witness to the larger message of this story as having universal applicability (what is referred to in some confessional traditions as the finite can bear the infinite). The incarnation is the prime example of this. Christ's particularity in coming into the world as the Jewish Messiah is presented as having universal relevance for

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[12] A helpful summary of this debate is provided by Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1-70.

[13] The best example of this perspective is found in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

[14] See James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church, & Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987); and also Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

all humankind. This is identified by one well-known missiologist as the "scandal of particularity."[15]

The following six assertions are offered as a summary of the larger framework of God's story as represented within an understanding of the missio Dei in relation to the Kingdom of God. The premise is that God's story has profound implications for Christian leaders as they seek to relate the purposes of God in the world as revealed in and through scripture to their particular congregations and contexts.

1. God is a Triune God - Father, Son, and Spirit, and these persons of the Godhead are in a perichoretic relation with one another, representing a social reality within the Godhead.

2. God is a creating God who has a passion for all the world to be in right relationship with God in light of creation design. This is rooted in the perichoretic nature of God. God seeks to be in relational community with all people in God's creation, which intent is often referred to as the missio Dei - the mission of God in the world.

3. In the midst of sin that corrupted the world, God is a sending God who seeks to redeem, and who sent God's Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to defeat the power of sin and bring about the possibility of reconciliation of all persons and the redemption of every dimension of life within creation. The church is to participate in this redemptive work of God by unmasking the powers that have already been defeated, but to do so through suffering service and cruciform discipleship.

4. This reconciling and redemptive work of God was announced by Jesus as being present in the Kingdom of God, which, as the redemptive reign of God in Christ, places a high Christology at the center of the missio Dei. This means that God is seeking to bring back to right relationship all that was lost in

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[15] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 72.

the fall, such that redemption extends to every dimension of human life and every aspect of created existence.

5. God is working out the *now* of this redemptive reign in the world through the work of the Spirit in relationship to a gathered community, the church. This church is called into reconciled relationship with the Triune God, and with one another, and is sent into the world to participate fully in God's mission. The church is therefore a *sign* to the world that the *now* is already present, a *foretaste* for the world of the eschatological future that has already begun, and an *instrument* to share this good news with everyone, everywhere.

6. The *not yet* of this redemptive reign will one day come to consummation in God's time resulting in removal of the presence of sin within the world and the creation of a new heaven and new earth.

These truth claims are framed from a missiological perspective. They understand God as being a missionary God who is passionate about the world in seeking reconciliation throughout all creation so that all of life can flourish. A missiological perspective provides a helpful framework for Christian congregations to utilize as they seek to participate in God's mission in the world. The value of having such a framework can be seen by going back to the opening example of the council meeting of Faith Community. If they reframed their question about solving their space problems within such a framework, they would be better able to engage in a discernment process to address their question. In doing so, it would be imperative that they rely on the active leading of the Spirit in guiding them into a decision, a decision that needs to flow out of and be responsive to this larger framework of the purposes of God in the world.

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16 Although Gilbert Ryle was the first to use the phase, "thick description," Geertz was certainly the one to popularize it. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

It is important to note that within such a discernment and decision-making process that we are still dealing with the issue of epistemology since there are a variety of methods for interpreting reality. But it is also important to understand how hermeneutics creates a larger frame for understanding how the perspectives offered by these diverse methods can help shape a thicker description of reality.16 This has significant implications for how Christians utilize method not only in their efforts to understand scripture but also in understanding the leading of the Spirit within their communal life.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SHIFT FROM ENLIGHTENMENT EPISTEMOLOGY TO PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Having noted something of the unique character of the role of method in the life of the church, it is important now to take a closer look at the shift that took place over the past several centuries from a reliance on the Enlightenment's scientific epistemology to an emphasis on hermeneutics. With this shift, the question of method today has increasingly changed from, "What is your method?" to the question of, "What pre-understanding informs your method?"17 With this shift, a transition has taken place from the study of an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology to the reality of hermeneutics.

Enlightenment epistemology is primarily concerned with how specific knowledge claims are grounded and verified. The question to be answered is, "What is the foundation, or basis, for the claims that are being asserted?" Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is about interpretation. The question to be answered is, "How is it that we bring an understanding to something?" Or, more substantively, "What is our understanding of how we understand?" The key to gaining perspective on this shift from focusing primarily on an Enlightenment-shaped (foundationalist) epistemology to trying to comprehend hermeneutics is to take account of how developments in philosophical hermeneutics have reshaped human knowing.

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17 This is the argument proposed by Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, translated 1994).

A seismic shift in human knowing took place over the past 100 years, although the implications of its influence on our public discourse have only begun to become evident in the past several decades. Many today label this shift as the postmodern turn, where human knowing is now recognized as being both situated and perspectival.[18] While a variety of sources helped birth the postmodern condition, one of the more important relative to the discussion of hermeneutics was the rise of the post-structuralists in France during the 1960s. Structuralism was a post-World War II movement that, while decentering the privileged subject of the modern project, sought to use linguistic approaches to secure an objective understanding of reality. Key figures such as Levi-Strauss, Lucan, and Althusser sought to identify the "underlying rules which organized phenomena into a social system," thereby hoping to secure a scientific basis for explaining social realities.[19]

Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, post-structuralists like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Barthes agreed that it was necessary to decenter the privileged subject, but they proceeded, as well, to deconstruct the "scientific pretensions of structuralism" through noting the relative, perspectival, and historical character of our understanding of all social reality.[20] The key perception now shared among most who acknowledge the postmodern condition is our need to recognize the relative nature of all human knowing. With this shift in perspective, one has entered the world of hermeneutics and the interpretation of interpretation.

While most in the natural sciences now accept that values and interpreted facts are embedded in our use of the scientific method, many would argue that the use of careful controls allows us to make reliable truth claims.[21] However, most of those working in the social sciences clearly recognize the relativity, though not necessarily the relativism that is associated with making any knowledge claims within their fields of study. This shift in perspective has huge implications

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18   Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn.*
19   Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guildford Press, 1991), 18.
20   Ibid.
21   Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Thought* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 28-49.

for biblical studies, as well as in raising the question, "What authority does a perspectivally interpreted text have in guiding our understanding and practices?" This has led to proposals such as a reader-response approach to the biblical text.[22] To unpack the fuller implications of the shift to a hermeneutical interpretation, it is important to understand something of the journey to this juncture in the field of human knowing.

THE RISE OF THE HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVE IN RELATION TO HUMAN KNOWING

The development of philosophical hermeneutics is a complex subject, the details of which are too extensive to be adequately addressed in this short essay. So, of necessity, the approach taken here will be summary in character. It should be noted, first, that there is no clear chronological and sequenced development of hermeneutical thinking.[23] However, there are a number of major developments that can be identified in the shift that took place from an effort to ground human knowing in some objective manner through an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology, to an understanding of all human knowing as being perspectival interpretation. This is usually referred to as what Heidegger named as the *hermeneutical circle*, meaning that no one stands outside of the process of knowing and that there is "a circular relation between interpretation and understanding."[24] Everyone, being perspectivally situated, already enters the process of interpretation with foreknowledge that includes a variety of assumptions, perspectives, values, dispositions, and a worldview. How did this reality of human knowing come to be recognized as such?

Fredrick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) - A helpful starting point in understanding the shift from an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology to philosophical hermeneutics is Fredrick Schleiermacher. He worked within

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22 See Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

23 Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 3.

24 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 153; and as quoted in Grodin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 97.

the overwhelming influence of the Enlightenment in the German context at the beginning of the 19th century, where there was an emphasis on reason (rational first principles) and science (empirical evidence) as the basis for objective human knowing. The rationalism set in motion by Descartes and the skepticism of Hume's empiricism were brought into a deeper critique by Kant at the end of the eighteen century who carried these starting points to their logical conclusions. The result was that the ethical content of Christianity no longer required a supernatural God or divine revelation.[25]

Schleiermacher's reading of Kant, however, led him in a different direction as he sought to understand the Christian Faith. His *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers* (1799) set in motion his efforts to ground Christianity within religious experience, what eventually in *The Christian Faith* (1831) came to be known as a sense/feeling of absolute dependence.[26] This shift from reason to experience is foundational for later developments in hermeneutics. Though Schleiermacher moved the discussion to human experience, he "linked it, from the very start, in a relational way to transcendent reality . . . he opted for a form of inter-subjectivity in which God and human interact."[27] To rely on one's experience as the basis for knowing something was a radical departure from the objectivist method. This emphasis on experience was later picked up and expanded in the development of phenomenology.

Schleiermacher also contributed to the development of hermeneutics. He is often recognized as the first to try and develop a general or universal hermeneutical approach, although there were some prior to him who attempted the same.[28] Working extensively with both biblical and classical texts, he sought to codify the principles of interpretation. Schleiermacher still held to the possibility of being able to reconstruct an accurate or representative understanding of the author's intent. He took primarily a grammatical-historical approach in pursuing this by codifying the hermeneutical

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[25] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: Tyndale Press, 1969), 48-106.

[26] Ibid., 110-116.

[27] Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains,* trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 24.

[28] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 63-67.

principles of interpretation.[29] But with his primary focus being on the use of language, he also introduced a "technical (or psychological)" approach to hermeneutics, something that would also profoundly influence later hermeneutical developments.[30]

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) - An important transition figure in the rise of a hermeneutical perspective is Wilhelm Dilthey, the biographer of Schleiermacher who worked during the latter half of the 19th century. Dilthey developed further the hermeneutical principles that Schleiermacher had codified by applying them to the social sciences. He did this by attempting to use inner experience and "the universal 'principle of phenomenality'" to ground the social sciences in human consciousness, what he referred to as "exploratory psychology."[31]

Taking exploratory psychology as his starting point in developing his hermeneutical approach, Dilthey attempted to develop a bridge between interpretation (hermeneutics) and explanation (objective empirical methods). He ultimately failed to find a satisfactory way to integrate these two approaches, but his contributions to the journey toward a hermeneutical perspective were significant. They include: (1) broadening the focus of hermeneutical interpretation beyond the study of biblical and classical texts to exploring understanding through the social sciences; and (2) establishing psychological as the starting point for this pursuit. This approach was later developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in a "phenomenological direction" which became the basis of philosophical hermeneutics.[32]

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) - It was Martin Heidegger who took what was begun by Dilthey and further developed by Husserl, and turned it into a hermeneutical understanding of human knowing. Heidegger's work is usually broken into earlier and later contributions, with most of his contributions to hermeneutical understanding being in his earlier work, especially his Being and Time.[33] Heidegger is a complex figure, so what follows here is only a brief summary of his contributions.

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[29] Ibid., 69.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 85.

[32] Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 181-190.

The primary insight of Heidegger toward a hermeneutical perspective was his clarifying the interpreted character of all knowing. What he referred to as our "fore understanding" is rooted in our fundamental human existence (our "facticity"), and relates to all interpretation representing a "hermeneutical circle."[34] No one can escape the reality of already having a view, or a pre-understanding, that is an interpreted knowing of something. This means that all knowledge is preconditioned by what one already knows. This is the character of all human knowing. Heidegger took this powerful insight deeper into the process of human knowing by opening up the basic structures of our Being (Dasein) through which we become aware of our existence and the possibilities of knowing.[35] With this development, the conversation shifted from interpretation of either a text or context, to the interpretation of interpretation.[36]

While some would move from these insights into a full blown view of individualistic relativism, what later came to be known as existentialism, such was not the case for Heidegger. He placed the reality of Dasein within the social reality of human existence and called for persons to seek to live authentically as they continued the process of interpreting their being in the midst of Being.[37] For Heidegger, it is our consciousness of our temporality which helps us anticipate the future, which in turn takes us back to remembering our past, and therefore opens us up to possibility of our shaping the present.[38]

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) - It was Hans-Georg Gadamer in his now classic work, *Truth and Method,* who took insights from the earlier Heidegger and developed a more comprehensive hermeneutical understanding of human knowing.[39] The use of the word "method" in the title of his book is interesting, because in reality, Gadamer was

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[33] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. J. Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

[34] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 97-98.

[35] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 53.

[36] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 98.

[37] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 220.

[38] Heitink, *Practical Theology,* 134.

[39] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* eds. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

collapsing the possibility of using method to ground human knowing.[40]

Several key insights drawn from Heidegger, but which are usually dismissed by modern science, are used by Gadamer to develop his thorough-going philosophical hermeneutics. These include the hermeneutical circle and the concept of "foreknowledge," which Gadamer refers to as "biases" or "prejudices."[41] Such biases are seen as simply the reality that exists, since there is no objective standpoint that can be established.[42] What is important is to be aware of one's biases as one approaches the interpretive process, and to be open to having one's biases reframed. For Gadamer, there is a social character to this interpretive process, one which necessitates the importance of dialogue in coming to a fuller awareness of what one is encountering and interpreting, as well as in discerning between true prejudices and false prejudices.[43]

While there is much in Gadamer's approach that is interesting, what is most significant for our purposes here is his emphasis on the relationship between the world of the text and the lived world of the interpreter.[44] While the author's intent is still a part of the equation, it does not play a primary role for Gadamer. Drawing on the ancient tradition from Augustine, his interest is more in the "inner word" that the interpreter experiences as the worlds of the text and interpreter intersect and fuse into an apprehending of the text (a fusion of horizons).[45] This places the focus on language as the medium for understanding, and the dialogue that takes place between the text and the interpreter within community as the process for developing our understanding.[46]

Paul Ricoeur (1913-   ) - Gadamer's work stands somewhat in contrast to that of one of his contemporaries, Paul Ricoeur, who focused attention on both the interpretation of the text and the interpretation of a social

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[40]   Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 108-109.
[41]   Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 250ff; and as quoted in Heitink, *Practical Theology,* 184.
[42]   Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 112.
[43]   Ibid., 112, 116-117.
[44]   Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 273.
[45]   Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 119.
[46]   Ibid., 117, 120.

context. In regard to the latter, he included context as a text in a hermeneutical interpretation of texts.[47] This treatment of a context as text introduces *action as event* into the hermeneutical interpretive process, and provides the basis for incorporating learning from the social sciences into human knowing.[48] Accepting the author's intent as important for both types of texts, Ricoeur presents the relationship of understanding and explanation as a dialectic process that moves in both directions - from understanding something to being able to explain it, and from explaining something to be able to interpret and understand it.[49]

The dialectical challenge of interpreting and explaining texts requires, for Ricoeur, a process of guessing and validation where the interpreter searches for deeper structures of meaning.[50] Critical to accessing these deeper structures is the use of metaphorical language, which shifts the focus on the role of language to being one of hermeneutics rather than semantics, to interpretation rather than representation.[51]

Other contributions by Ricoeur to hermeneutics are his concepts of "the hermeneutic of suspicion" and "the hermeneutic of confidence."[52] The former draws from the tradition of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx who sought to identify underlying inconsistencies embedded within truth claims. While this looking back to what exists is an important dimension of the hermeneutical task for Ricoeur, he also proposes the need to look forward to discover the possibilities that might exist. The result is a critically-informed faith that brings the insights of critical theory into conversation with a hermeneutical understanding of what is possible.[53]

Jurgen Habermas (1929-   ) Jurgen Habermas is one of the most influential figures in the field of philosophy, whose work also bears on issues related to hermeneutics.

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47 Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics,* II (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 144-145. See also discussion by Heitink, *Practical Theology,* 140-141.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 144-145.

50 Ibid., 145-146.

51 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Mult-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language,* trans. R. Czerny et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 219.

52 Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* 15.

53 Ibid.

Coming out of the important tradition of the Frankfurt School with its development of critical theory, Habermas took critical theory a different direction from some of his protégés. He sought to develop a new social theory that could reclaim what he saw as an unfinished dimension within the Enlightenment project - developing a shared social order where the true autonomy of persons was in balance with their necessary interdependence.[54] This society would be a democratic social order that was based on reason and shared deliberation.

According to Habermas, one of the key areas where the Enlightenment went astray was in taking primarily an instrumental approach to reason, which resulted in an obsession with technical knowledge and technique.[55] In seeking to reclaim the democratic ideals of the Enlightenment for constructing a shared social order while maintaining the importance of the individual, Habermas proposed a theory of what he called "communicative reason."[56] What is required is intense interaction with one another that involves both remembering the past and anticipating the future. The remembering utilizes critical theory for the emancipation of the society from the misuse of power, while the anticipation brings the use of reason into the constructive development of an agreed upon society.[57]

Habermas views societies as existing through the linking actions that come with the use of language. The process of communicative action allows societies to negotiate their shared commitments. The necessity of negotiation being an on-going process is evident because of the different, and sometimes conflicting, *life worlds* that persons have constructed in their interpretations of life. In addition to negotiating these different symbolic interpretations, communicative action must also address the tendency of the material systems of society to colonize and dehumanize person through the over reliance on technique.[58]

This overview of the development of hermeneutical

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[54] As quoted by Heitink, *Practical Theology,* 133.

[55] Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests,* trans. J.S. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

[56] Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action,* 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 and 1987).

[57] Heitink, *Practical Theology,* 133-135.

[58] Ibid., 135-137.

thought provides a helpful backdrop for understanding the variety of perspectives that are now operating in the various disciplines of the social sciences. This has important implications for understand both method and interpretation, topics that have received increased attention in recent decades in regard to social science research.

HERMENEUTICAL INFLUENCE ON THE DIFFERENT RESEARCH APPROACHES TO HUMAN KNOWING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

One important arena where the shift from an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology to philosophical hermeneutics is emerging is in social science research and the methods that are employed. Some suggest that a truce has now been declared in the paradigm wars that raged among those who engaged in social science research during the 1970s and 1980s.[59] What is currently being proposed is a mixed-method approach to social science research.[60] This paradigm debate was given impetus through the contribution of Thomas Kuhn and his now classic work, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, published in 1970.[61] Kuhn's thesis was that significant advances in scientific understanding take place not through empirical methods of building theory upon theory, but rather through a fundamental interpretive change of evidence that is available. Over the past several decades, this perspectival insight has continued to cascade throughout both the natural and social sciences, and has fostered disruption, debate, and a reframing of methodological discussions.

The paradigm debates began in the social sciences primarily between those who were committed to quantitative research methods over against those who were committed to a qualitative approach to studying reality. It is now recognized by most that these represent multiple lenses that are available for studying any phenomenon, and that these lenses take not

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[59] Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches,* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 3-5.

[60] See Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology,* and John W. Cresswell, Research Design: *Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003).

[61] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

only different approaches, but that they also utilize different assumptions regarding purpose and approach.

Examining an overview of the primary approaches to social science research methods is helpful at this point in gaining perspective on the influence of hermeneutics in addressing both method and interpretation. Such an overview helps to clarify how the various methods used can be, in fact, complementary to one another. One might conceive of these various approaches as being on a continuum.

MIXED METHOD RESEARCH PRAGMATISM TWO

Quantitative		Qualitative			
Positivism	Postpositivism	Constructivism	Advocacy	Pragmatism One	Postmodern

THE DIVERSITY OF RESEARCH METHODS

Positivism - The positivist approach to social science research the necessity of objectivity in order to arrive at a real understanding of the world. As a child of an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology, it has a long tradition and is based on the foundational work of such persons as Comte, Mill, Durkheim, Newton, and Locke.[62] It is now clear to most that the classical understanding of positivism, with its sole reliance on the scientific method for engaging in social science research, is no longer viable. The assumption that there is a world that exists that can be directly and accurately known is no longer accepted as being valid. Claims to the possibility of objectivity in human knowing and value-free observations of the world are no longer sustainable.[63]

Positivism sought to measure reality by constructing instruments such as questionnaires. In order to do this, they had to operationalizing key concepts into variables that could be scored on various scales. These instruments always raised the questions of both validity (does it actually measure want

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[62] J.K. Smith, "Quantitative versus qualitative research: An attempt to clarify the issue," *Educational Researcher* 12 (March 1983): 6-13.
[63] Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology,* 8.

it purports to measure), and reliability (does in measure this consistently). Addressing these issues was necessary in order to help insure higher confidence levels of objectivity.[64] But it is now clear that there are deeper issues that need to be addressed. The direct representation of objective facts about social reality can no longer be sustained in a hermeneutically-shaped world of human knowing.[65]

Postpositivism - Significant critique of the inadequacies of the assumptions of positivism began in the post-World War II period with publications by Michael Polanyi (*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*)[66] and Karl Popper (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*).[67] The recognition of the social construction of reality began to become the accepted approach.[68] A modified understanding of the basic direction that positivism established is now found within a postpositivist approach. There is still an assumption that a real world exists that can be encountered and interpreted, but there is also recognition that the interpretation of this world is always condition by perspective.

This view accepts the following - that research designs are always value laden; that interpretations of facts are always theory laden; and that an understanding of reality is always interpreted.[69] Although these limits are acknowledged, postpositivists claim that they can be largely accounted for through the careful use of research controls. So, in their pursuit of human knowing, they still rely primarily on empirical methods and the use of quantifying instruments for gathering data, along with the use of sophisticated statistical testing procedures to manipulate that data. What has changed for postpositivists is the clear recognition that they share many of the same assumptions about method that are held by those

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64 D.T. Campbell and J. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Design for Research* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966).

65 Benton and Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science,* 73-74.

66 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958).

67 Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1972).

68 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Tiptree, England: Anchor Press, 1967).

69 Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology,* 8.

researchers who utilize qualitative approaches to social science research.[70]

Constructivism (also known as Interpretivism or Naturalism) - While some may object, there is a reason to include interpretivism and/or naturalism within the approach of constructivism. This is because both of these methods work from a similar assumption of the constructed nature of our understanding. While constructivism is more radical in its formulation, its logic is simply an extension of that used by interpretivism. Both seek to construct an interpretation of reality, even though they may differ over what constitutes reality. This overall approach represents the classic form of qualitative social science research, an approach that relying primarily on the observations and perceptions of the observer for gathering data. During the paradigm wars, some took the position that quantitative and qualitative approaches were fundamentally incompatible.[71] However, other researchers have more recently argued for a both/and approach, recognizing that each approach has yielded helpful research results.[72] Constructivism starts with the understanding that the world we live in is an interpreted world, one which we socially construct within our interpretation of our contexts within human community.

The research resulting from the use of this method is most often referred to by the term "qualitative," although this term also applies to several other research approaches. The researcher is primarily interesting in trying to construct an understanding of how those situated within a particular context interpret their reality. This interpreted reality may, or may not be the interpreted reality by other persons or groups, but it is assumed to represent that of the group being studied. A variety of specific methodologies have been developed to pursue such a constructivism approach, including ethnography, narrative analysis, grounded theory, life history,

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70 Ibid., 8-9.
71 Y.S. Lincoln and E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985).
72 See both Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology*, and Creswell, Research Design.

and participant observation.[73] The data that is collected is usually narrative or textual in character and less subject to being translated into numbers and interpreted through statistical testing.

Advocacy/Participatory - This approach is grounded in the social critical theory that flows from such figures as Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire,[74] in addition to some of the poststructuralists discussed earlier. Critical social theory was developed by what later came to be known as the Frankfurt School as key theoretical insights ware adapted from Marx reframed with greater subtlety for critiquing the social order.[75] Advocacy/participatory research takes as its point of reference a social condition in a context that needs to be changed. This brings into the research process the issues of politics and power dynamics in relationship to critiquing the reasons for the conditions of those who are perceived as oppressed or marginalized. A dialectical framework is employed that utilizes a strategy for introducing change that will bring about emancipation.

The researcher enters this context with a research methodology that is intended to bring about change in addressing the social condition that has been identified as problematic. The assumption embedded in this approach is that the researcher will proceed to work collaboratively with those from among the oppressed and marginalized group in seeking change in their social condition. The research that is generated comes to represent a type of voice for these persons in the pursuit of a realignment of power dynamics.[76] A variety of research methodologies might be employed by the researcher. But the key to understanding this approach is to recognize that in many ways the researcher is, in fact, the intervening variable that is being studied with a view towards the social change that is being sought.

Pragmatism One - Pragmatism is both a particular research approach similar to the others being discussed here,

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[73] A variety of such methods are listed in Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology,* 37; Cresswell, *Research Design,* 13; and Lawrence F. Locke et al., Reading and *Understanding Research,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 149.

[74] Cresswell, *Research Design,* 9.

[75] Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory,* 215-304.

[76] Cresswell, *Research Design,* 10.

but also provides the philosophical foundations for understanding the larger framework of mixed-method research, as will be noted below. The pragmatic tradition, which is represented primarily within Anglo-Saxon philosophy, stands in contrast to the phenomenological tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that is more characteristic of European philosophy. Related to the linguistic turn introduced by Wittgenstein into the use of social sciences,[77] the pragmatic tradition has a long history in the U.S. and is usually associated with such figures as Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey.[78] A more contemporary person working from this tradition is Richard Rorty.[79] In this approach to research, the focus is on developing knowledge claims that grow out of human actions, concrete situations, and particular consequences that occur. Whereas postpositivism assumes that there are prior conditions that shape these realities, pragmatists are not interested in establishing such correlations. Rather, they are concerned with finding solutions to actual problems.

The phase "whatever works" is too trivializing to capture the full intent of pragmatism, but it does convey an important notion. Pragmatists entered the paradigm wars by claiming that a variety of research approaches were available and should be used in pursuing a resolution to a problem.[80] While it is similar in design to advocacy, it is not necessarily working from a political perspective in redefining power relationships. The focus on using a pragmatic research approach is on trying to get at an understanding and explanation of reality that helps get to desired outcomes.[81]

Postmodernist - A recent development in research methods is the proposal of a postmodernist approach. It takes its cues from the relative nature of all human knowing, and that the researcher is just one more voice of interpretation in

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[77] Hans-George Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. D.E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 173-177.

[78] C.H. Cherryholmes, "Notes on Pragmatism and Scientific Realism," *Educational Researcher* 14 (August-September 1992): 13-17.

[79] R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

[80] Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology*, 11-13.

[81] Ibid.

the midst of many voices.[82] The more radical postmodernists believe that there are many interpretations of reality, and that it is not possible to find agreeable criteria for privileging one over the other. This view is what might be referred to as relativism. In this method, research focuses primarily on creating a forum for the voices of the persons being researched to be heard. Some go so far as to suggest that "interviewees' voices should be presented through unedited videotapes or transcripts of recordings of what was said."[83] While a variety of methodologies might be employed in a postmodern approach, the deeper issue concerns what value the interpreted results have to any shared human knowing, especially as it relates to a particular social context. Postmodernist research tends to radicalize relativity into relativism, and therefore like positivism, does not tend to provide a serious voice today for pursuing shared human knowing.

MIXED-METHOD RESEARCH

Mixed-Method Research and Pragmatism Two - There

is a second level on which the pragmatic approach functions in regard to social science research. The philosophical underpinnings of pragmatism also provide a framework for developing what is called mixed-method, or mixed-model research.[84] In this approach, one might employ any number of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to engage in research. In employing a mixed-method research approach, the researcher recognizes that all methods have limitations in their use, since each has its own assumptions and philosophical underpinnings.

What is important to the researcher, both scholars and leaders of Christian communities, is to expand the number of lenses being used to study a particular issue. The intent is to use the variety of methods to overcome or neutralize particular biases inherent within particular methods.[85] The concept of "triangulating data sources" has become the

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[82] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 27.

[83] Ibid.

[84] See both Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology,* and Cresswell, *Research Design.*

[85] Cresswell, *Research Design,* 15.

common way to discuss such a strategy.[86] In such an approach, alternative research methods are employed in different patterns to study the same issue or social condition. These patterns include such strategies as sequential, concurrent, and transformative approaches.[87]

BRINGING THE DISCUSSION BACK TO METHOD
FOR THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Christian leaders who are seeking to help the church interpret scripture and discern the leading of the Spirit of God face a complex task. In approaching this task, they need to understand, first, what is *special* about the revelation found in scripture. Second, they need to understand how God is present in the world as an acting subject, especially through the person and work of the Spirit of God. What is critical, though, is that they also understand the hermeneutical character of both of these realities. Some may still long for the days when it was possible to assert an objectively formulated view of scriptural teaching on the basis of an epistemological foundationalism. But it is now evident these days are long over for the church in the aftermath of: (a) the rise of modernity, (b) the collapse of foundationalism in relation to an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology, (c) the development of the hermeneutical perspective, and (d) the emergence of the postmodern condition. There is no going back.

So how do we move forward? How do we bring a hermeneutical understanding into the process of biblical interpretation and Spirit-led discernment and decision making in congregations without falling into either just personal opinion or an endless relativism? This is the challenge facing Christian leaders in terms of method today. This is the challenge facing the leaders of Faith Community. It is a challenge worth taking up, and it is a challenge for which there are significant resources available to engage the task.[88]

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86 T.D. Jick, "Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24 (December 1979): 602-611.

87 Cresswell, *Research Design,* 16.

88 This is the challenge that is taken up by this author in another essay in this issue that is entitled, "The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission."

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