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THE RELATION OF PURPOSE AND MEANING IN INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

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The central idea of this article is to show that the widely held hermeneutical practice of using the alleged purpose (why) of an author to determine the meaning (what) of a passage is wrong. First of all, we try to show how it is unfounded, since meaning can be known apart from purpose. Further, we point to ways in which this practice has led to unorthodox conclusions which undermine the authority of Scripture.

* * *

DOES purpose determine meaning, or does meaning determine purpose? Which is the cart and which is the horse? It is common among evangelicals to appeal to the purpose of the author to determine the meaning of a passage. Is this legitimate? Are there any dangers in so doing?

In this study I propose two theses in answer to these important questions: (1) Purpose does not determine meaning. Rather, meaning determines purpose. (2) Using purpose to determine meaning sometimes leads to unorthodox conclusions, including a denial of the full verbal inspiration (inerrancy) of Scripture.

I. THE MEANING OF THE WORD INTENTION

A. *Several Meanings of the Word Intention*

Evangelicals often refer to the *intention* of the biblical author in order to determine the meaning of a passage. According to one meaning of the word *intention*, this is certainly important, for surely the meaning resides in what the author intended by the passage as opposed to what the readers may take it to mean to them.¹ However, the word

¹See E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1961), chap. 1.

intention, like most words, has several meanings. Not all of these usages are legitimate in this connection. The following sentences provide examples of four different meanings of the word *intention*. *Intention* may mean:

- (1) *plan*, as in: "I intend to go tomorrow";
- (2) *purpose*, as in: "My intention was to help you";
- (3) *thought in one's mind*, as in: "I didn't intend to say that";
- (4) *expressed meaning*, as in: "The truth intended in John 3:16 is clear."

B. *The Legitimate Sense of the Word Intention in the Context of Hermeneutics*

First, evangelicals who believe in verbal² inspiration of Scripture should not use *intention* in the third sense when referring to the meaning of Scripture, for the locus of meaning (and truth) is not in the author's mind behind the text of Scripture. What the author meant is expressed *in* the text. The writings (γραφή) are inspired, not the thoughts in the author's mind.

Second, when we speak of understanding the meaning of a text we do not refer to some *plan* which the author had to express this meaning, whether or not it got expressed (no. 1 above). All we know of the author's intention is what the author did express in the text, not what he planned to say but did not express. Our knowledge of the author's plan (intention) is limited to the inspired text itself. So to speak of an intention which did not get expressed is to shift the locus of authority from the text to the author's mind behind the text.³

Third, the word *intention* can mean purpose (no. 3 above). This raises the question of whether we should look for the purpose of the author when we seek to find out what he really meant. Before we can answer this question properly we must define what is meant by the word *purpose* in this connection. The following contrast will clarify how we are using these terms:

- (1) Meaning is *what* the author expressed.
- (2) Purpose is *why* the author expressed it.

If this is so, then the question we pose is this: does the purpose (why) of the author determine his meaning (what)? Or, does the meaning determine the purpose? Our thesis is that purpose does not

²Tim 3:16 refers to the *writings* (γραφή) as inspired. Paul spoke of "words taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:13). Over and over again the NT authors use the phrase "It is written" to describe the locus of divine authority (cf. Matt 4:4, 7, 10).

³This shift from the text to the author's intention behind the text is evident in Jack Rogers (who follows G. C. Berkouwer). See Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 393, 430.

determine meaning. Actually, as I shall show later, the reverse is true, namely, meaning determines purpose.

Finally, the proper meaning of the *intention* of the author is the *expressed meaning* in the text (no. 4). Just as we do not say that the beauty is *behind* the painting, so the hermeneutically discoverable meaning is not located *behind* the text in the author's intention (no. 3). Rather, the meaning (*intention* no. 4) is expressed *in* the text the way beauty is expressed in the pigments on the canvas of a painting.⁴

The misuse of the word *intention*, to stand for the purpose (why) of the author, rather than for the meaning (what) of the author, often leads to unorthodox conclusions. One such conclusion is the denial of the full inspiration (inerrancy) of Scripture. This will become apparent in the discussion of the relation between meaning and purpose which follows.

II. THE RELATION OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

Meaning can be known independently of knowing the author's purpose. Of course, there is a sense in which one always knows the purpose of an author: his purpose is to convey his meaning. But in this sense it would be circular to claim that purpose determines meaning, for *purpose* in this sense simply means to convey the meaning. One can know the meaning (what) of a passage (including what we should *do* as a result of knowing the meaning) apart from knowing the purpose (why) the author had in mind for expressing that meaning. If this is so, then purpose could not possibly determine meaning, for if it did, then one could not know the meaning unless he first knew the purpose.

A. *Select Passages Illustrating the Relation of Meaning and Purpose*

Some "difficult" passages of Scripture will serve as illustrations of the point that purpose does not determine meaning. Exod 23:19 is a good test case: "Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk." Checking only three commentaries (Lange, Keil and Delitzsch, and Ellicott) yielded numerous different suggestions as to why the author said this. But despite the lack of unanimity or clarity as to the *purpose* of the author there is absolutely no question as to the *meaning* of the author.

⁴This is to say that language (i.e., a sentence) is not an instrumental cause of meaning; it is the formal cause. Individual words (symbols) are the instruments *through* which meaning is conveyed. But language (sentences) is that *in* which meaning resides. The failure to understand this distinction leads some wrongly to think of meaning as being *behind* language rather than being expressed *in* it.

The *meaning* (what) of Exod 23:19 is simply this: Do not put a baby goat into a kettle of its mother's milk and heat it up to the boiling point. There is no word in the passage of doubtful meaning (usage), and every Hebrew who could read (or hear) this command knew exactly what it meant. And they knew precisely what he/she should do in obedience to this command.

Furthermore, the *meaning* would not be different, even if this statement were found in a cookbook. It would still mean that baby goat's meat should not be boiled in goat's milk. Of course, if it were found in a cookbook the *significance* would be different. Its significance is gained from the fact that it is a command of God in Scripture, not merely a human recipe, and from the overall context of this command in the Levitical legislation, which imparts theocratic significance that it would not have in a cookbook. However, the *meaning* is the same in both cases; only the *significance* differs. The *affirmation* (or command) is the same; only the *implications* differ. Further, even these broader implications are not determined by purpose; they are determined by the overall *context* of *who* said it, to *whom* it was said, and under *what* circumstances, etc. But *why* it was said (other than the purpose to communicate this *meaning*, what) has no determinative effect on the meaning of what was said.

However, despite the perfect clarity of the *meaning* of this passage, it is not at all clear what *purpose* the author of Exodus (Moses) had in giving this command. Here are eight of the speculations about purpose found within a few minutes in three commentaries. The prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk was given:

- (1) because this was an idolatrous practice;
- (2) because it was a magical practice to make the land more productive;
- (3) because it was cruel to destroy an offspring in the very means (milk) which sustained it;
- (4) because it showed contempt for the parent-child relation;
- (5) because it would profane (symbolically) the Feast of Gathering;
- (6) because God wanted them to use olive oil, not butter, for cooking;
- (7) because it was too luxurious or epicurean;

The truth of the matter is that we do not know for sure the purpose of this text. In fact, it doesn't really matter what the purpose is. The meaning is clear, and this is all that matters. Meaning stands apart from purpose. Understanding purpose is not necessary for knowing the meaning of a passage. One can know what is meant (and what to do) without knowing why God gave this command.

The same point can be made from numerous "difficult" passages. The meaning in these passages is clear even if the purpose is not. Note the following OT examples:

- (1) Do not eat shrimp (Lev 11:10).
- (2) Do not wear a garment which mixes wool and linen (Deut 22:11).
- (3) Do not have sex during the woman's menstrual period (Lev 20:18).

Despite the fact that we do not know the purpose for these commands, the *meaning* is perfectly clear. The fact is that knowing their meaning is not dependent on knowing their purpose.

B. *Several Reasons Why Purpose Does Not Determine Meaning*

The thesis that purpose does not determine meaning can now be supported by several additional arguments.

First, if purpose determined meaning, then we could not know the meaning (what) of a passage apart from knowing its purpose (why). But the above illustrations show clearly that meaning can be known apart from knowing purpose. So in spite of whatever added light may be cast on a passage by knowing one or more of the author's purposes, in no sense is the basic meaning of the passage dependent on knowing these purposes. Knowing the purpose can help illuminate the significance(s) of a passage, but it does not determine its meaning. That is, knowing the purpose(s) may aid understanding *how* the author intended the meaning to be applied to the original readers (hearers), but it no more determines meaning than *application* (how) determines *interpretation* (what). In short, *how* does not determine *what* any more than *why* the author said it determines *what* is meant. What is meant stands independently of the many ways a truth may be applied, for a single interpretation may have many applications as well as many implications. For example, the meaning (what) of the great commands is to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. But this meaning does not limit us in the many *ways* (hows) this love can be expressed. Nor does our understanding of this meaning guarantee that we see all the implications of this love. The significance of love is deeper than the meaning.

The second reason that purpose cannot be used to determine meaning is that there are often many purposes for a text. If meaning were determined by a specific purpose of a text, then we would have to know which of the many purposes of a text is *the* purpose. That is, how do we know which purpose is hermeneutically determinative? Take, for example, the book of Philipians: there are at least four

purposes for which it was written: (1) to thank them for their gift (4:16, 17); (2) to inform them of Paul's well-being (1:12-26); (3) to encourage them to rejoice in their faith (3:1; 4:4); and (4) to help resolve the conflict between two feuding women (4:1-3). Now which of these is *the* purpose? How do we know for sure? Which purpose would we use to determine the meaning of the text? This leads to the next reason.

Third, many times we do not know what purpose(s) the author had in mind. Not all authors state their purpose as clearly as John did (John 20:30-31). Thus, the purpose of an author is often only a matter of conjecture. But if it is conjecture, then understanding the meaning of the passage is dependent on our guesses! Surely God did not plan that the meaning of so much Scripture should be subject to our widely divergent guesses. At any rate, to claim that purpose determines meaning and to acknowledge (as finitude and humility demand) that much of the time it is possible only to conjecture as to the central purpose is to admit that frequently we cannot know what the meaning of Scripture is.

Fourth, if our conjectures about purpose are often based on extra-biblical data (such as conditions, beliefs, or practices of the group addressed), then the meaning of Scripture is not self-contained. The meaning of Scripture would in fact be dependent on factors not found in the biblical text.⁵ This is unacceptable for several reasons. First of all, it would sacrifice the very heart of protestant hermeneutics, for it would make extra-biblical protestant scholarship into a kind of teaching magisterium of its own. Further, it would make it practically impossible for the "laity" to understand the Scripture without the aid of "professional" interpretation, since only the latter are in command of the extra-biblical data on which the interpretation would depend.

Fifth, if purpose determines meaning there can be no systematic theology. For example, it would be impossible to treat traditional subjects, such as angelology and demonology. It is probably correct to say that it is not the central purpose of any book or section of Scripture to teach about angels or demons. But if the central purpose determines the meaning, then systematic theology is wrongly collecting and systematizing all of the incidental aspects of various passages which were not part of the determinative meaning of the passage. Not only is this true of angels and demons but it is true in most passages

⁵Of course our understanding of any text depends on knowing the meaning of the words used. So in this sense all the "parts" (words) of the meaning are known apart from the text. However, the "whole" of the meaning itself stands alone and is independent of extra-textual factors (see discussion on the hermeneutical circle below under "Context Determines Meaning").

of Scripture relating to pneumatology, anthropology, and eschatology, for few passages have these subjects as their central purpose. In point of fact, the very concept of *systematizing* various truths is contrary to the purpose of most (if not all) passages of Scripture. In short, the bulk (if not whole) of systematic theology would be built on teachings which were not meant (purposed) by any author in any passage of Scripture. So if purpose determines meaning, then systematic theology would be meaningless.⁶

Finally, if knowing the purpose (apart from what the text affirms) determines the meaning of that text, then we cannot know the meaning of any passage of Scripture. Since human interpreters do not have supra-human knowledge, their understanding of the author's meaning is limited to *what* is expressed in the text. But purpose is not *what*; it is *why*. If all we know is what is expressed, then we can never really know why. And if knowing what a text means is determined by knowing why it was written, then we can never know what it means.

In summary, if purpose determines meaning then the final authority for determining meaning does not reside in the text itself but in factors outside the text, such as the alleged purpose of the author. In this case we would not have a firm objective basis for knowing the absolute truth of God on which man's eternal destiny is dependent. If, on the contrary, meaning is not determined by purpose, but is expressed objectively in the text, then all men who can read (or understand by hearing) are capable of knowing the basic message from God in Holy Scripture.

III. HOW STRESSING PURPOSE LEADS TO UNORTHODOX CONCLUSIONS

A brief survey of the use of the principle that purpose determines meaning brings some sobering results for orthodox believers. Several examples will suffice.

A. *Non-literal Interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2*

Evangelicals have always claimed that Genesis 1 and 2 convey information about God's creative acts in the space-time world. While evangelicals differ about the details of the time of creation and number of the kinds of animals created, there is general agreement that cosmological truths about creation are expressed in these chapters, not simply religious truth.

⁶Systematic theology is as meaningful as science is, for theology is to the Bible (God's special revelation) what science is to nature (God's general revelation). Both are a systematic approach to the truths God has revealed in a nonsystematic way. In each case God has given the truths and left it for man to organize them in an orderly way.

Some interpreters of Genesis 1 and 2, however, have generally not recognized the scientific and historical nature of the early chapters of Genesis.⁷ Why? Often the answer seems to lie in their acceptance of the principle that purpose determines meaning. It is sometimes alleged that the purpose of Genesis 1 and 2 is to describe God's creative acts in a way that will lead men to worship him. This *conjectured* purpose is used then in a hermeneutically definitive way to explain away the obvious affirmations about the creation of animals and humans and to open the door for an evolutionary view of origins. In other words, if purpose *determines* meaning, then what seems to be a description of literal creation does not really mean this; it is simply a "myth" of origin to evoke our worship of God. Thus, by using purpose to determine meaning such interpreters have effectively obscured the literal meaning of the text of Genesis 1-2.

The same procedure is used by pro-homosexual interpreters of verses like Lev 18:22. The text says, "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." But according to a pro-homosexual understanding of this verse one must view this obvious prohibition against homosexual acts in view of the *purpose* of the author. Just what was this purpose? According to some pro-gay interpreters the purpose was to preserve ritual purity or to avoid idolatry. It was not to make moral pronouncements about the wrongness of homosexual acts.⁸ Thus, we are told that when one "understands" the prohibition *in the light of this purpose* there is, in fact, no moral condemnation here against homosexual acts.

Rudolph Bultmann's methodology is another example of the purpose-determines-meaning hermeneutic in operation. Bultmann acknowledged that the NT documents present the life of Christ in terms of miraculous stories culminating in the story of the resurrection of Christ. However, when these stories are seen in the light of the central purpose of the author, which is to evoke an existential commitment to the Transcendent, then they must be understood as myths.⁹ These myths do not describe space-time events, but rather, they are religious stories designed to evoke an existential commitment to the Transcendent. Here again, using purpose to determine meaning has led to a distortion and negation of the true meaning of the text.

⁷See Harold De Wolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 147; and Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 33.

⁸See Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 59-60; and Norman Pittenger, *Gay Life Styles* (Los Angeles: The Universal Fellowship, 1977), 80, 81.

⁹See Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Reginald H. Fuller, trans., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (London: Billing and Sons, 1954), 1-8.

Let us take an example of the same procedure practiced by someone less liberal. Jack Rogers is well known for his attacks on the doctrine of inerrancy. What is not as well known is that he launched his attack from this same purpose-determines-meaning basis.¹⁰ Rogers has not carried it as far as others have, but he has used it to deny the historic biblical teaching about the inerrancy of Scripture. Rogers's view is particularly dangerous because he not only claims to be orthodox, but he also claims to believe in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. He even insists that in one sense the whole Bible is true and without errors.¹¹ If this is so, then how is it that he can also insist that some of the scientific and historical statements of Scripture can be mistaken? He can do so because he practices a purpose-determines-meaning hermeneutic. According to Rogers, interpreting in view of the purpose of the author enables one to accept modern higher criticism. He wrote: "Because of his conviction that the purpose of Scripture was to bring us to salvation in Christ, Berkouwer, like Kuyper and Bavinck, was open to the results of critical scholarship in a way that the Princeton theology was not."¹² Here again when purpose is used as hermeneutically determinative of meaning the real meaning of Scripture can be obscured or negated.

Not all evangelicals carry this principle as far as in the foregoing examples. However, the same principle seems to be at work even among evangelicals who believe inerrancy and all major orthodox doctrines. Illustrations of this can be found in interpretations of how the NT uses the OT. One example is Ps 8:5, which reads: *טַעַמְךָ יְהוָה יַחַד מְעַלְמֵי* *מַאֲלָהִים*, "and you made him a little lower than God (*מַאֲלָהִים*)." The NT quotes this verse, following the LXX: ἡλάττωσας αὐτὸν βραχὺ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους, "You made him a little lower than the angels" (Heb 2:7). Some Hebrew scholars prefer to translate *מַאֲלָהִים* in the psalm as "God," but at the same time to maintain that the usage of the LXX translation's ἀγγέλους is appropriate, though not hermeneutically determinative for the interpretation of the OT passage itself.¹³ How then can one believe in the truthfulness of all Scripture (including

¹⁰Rogers, *Authority and Interpretation*, 393, 428, and *Biblical Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 17, 21, 42, 43. Rogers wrote: "To keep to the thoughts and intentions of the biblical writers we must . . . remember that their purpose was to bring us, not information in general, but the good news of salvation" (*Biblical Authority*, 21).

¹¹In an interview in the *Wittenburg Door* (Feb.-March, 1980) Rogers said, "Let's get the record straight. I have never said verbally or in print, that the Bible has mistakes in it" (p. 21). Kenneth Kantzer also cites Rogers' belief in "the complete truth of the Bible . . ." in *Christianity Today* (Sept. 4, 1981), 18.

¹²Jack Rogers, *Authority and Interpretation*, 428, 429.

¹³See Donald Glenn, "Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *Walvoord: A Tribute* ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982) 49.

Hebrews 2) and yet explain how this LXX translation is included in the inspired text of Hebrews 2? According to some evangelicals this can be accomplished as long as we remember "that the author of Hebrews did not intend to say anything about the temporary or permanent inferiority of Christ to angels. His sole purpose in using Psalm 8 was . . . to identify Jesus with man."¹⁴ So it is claimed that the purpose of the writer of Hebrews is not to teach anything about angels in this passage, but is solely to stress the humanity (and humiliation) of Christ.¹⁵ Thus, if this passage is interpreted in the light of its central *purpose* there is no problem. For if this is so then the author is not stressing the mistaken part of the quotation but only the true part. In this way some believe they have retained a belief in inerrancy of Scripture and yet have explained the difference between the Hebrew of Psalm 8 and the inspired text of Hebrews 2. In fact, other inerrantists, including John Calvin, are cited in support of this position.¹⁶ Calvin wrote: "The apostles were not so scrupulous, provided they perverted not Scripture to their own purpose. We must always have a regard to the end for which they quote passages. . . ."¹⁷

Laying aside this debatable statement from Calvin,¹⁸ *in principle* there is no difference between this conclusion and that of the above examples where purpose determines meaning. In each of the above cases there are the following similarities:

- (1) The text says something is so.
- (2) But for some reason it is believed that this is not so.
- (3) Yet the complete truthfulness of Scripture is claimed.

¹⁴Ibid., 48.

¹⁵If only what the author is *concentrating on* is true but not everything he *affirms*, then two serious problems result. First, the classic statement of the inspiration of Scripture would not be true that "whatever the Bible says [affirms], God says [affirms]." This means that the Bible may be affirming some things that God is not affirming. If this is so then the Bible is not the Word of God; it simply *contains* the Word of God. Second, if truth is not centered in what the text actually says (affirms), but only what the author is *concentrating on*, then hermeneutics is reduced to a guessing game about the state of the author's consciousness. In short, the focus has been shifted from the objective text to the subjective area of an author's intention behind the text.

¹⁶Ibid., 47.

¹⁷As cited by S. Lewis Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New: An Argument for Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 64.

¹⁸Calvin may be interpreted another way than implied here. Calvin does not really say that by using the purpose (why) of the biblical author one can explain away a mistake the author makes. Rather, Calvin simply points out that the NT writers did not always use the *exact words* of the OT writers they quoted, but they did remain faithful to the *meaning* of the OT texts they quoted. In Calvin's own words, the biblical writers "have careful regard for the main object so as not to turn Scripture to a false meaning, but as far as words are concerned, as in other things which are not relevant to the present purpose, they allow themselves some indulgence." (*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 12.136; emphasis added.)

(4) This conclusion is justified by an appeal to the purpose of the author as the key to what the text really means.

In short the purpose-determines-meaning hermeneutic is used to explain a "mistake" in the text. For what is not so is believed to be outside the purpose of the text and therefore not contrary to inerrancy.

Of course there is a difference in the "size" or importance of the mistakes thus explained from person to person in the above examples. Bultmann uses the purpose-determines-meaning procedure to deny the essentials of the Faith, and homosexuals use it to justify immoral activity. Others use it to explain minor difficulties in the text. But for everyone there are places in which what the text actually says is considered wrong. So regardless of the size of the error in the various examples, the fact is that in each one the purpose of the author (as the interpreter sees it) is used to justify rejecting what the text actually affirms.

This next example does not fit the above pattern, but it does reveal a misuse of the purpose of the author. It is generally agreed that John states his purpose for writing his Gospel when he says, "that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). So in this case we do not have to guess; we know for sure what his overall purpose is. Since this is the case, if purpose determines meaning, then it would follow that whenever there is any difficulty in knowing what a given passage means one could appeal to this purpose to help explain the difficulty. One writer takes this to imply that we should limit our application of the truths of the Gospel to what the author intended (purposed).¹⁹ For example, some claim that how Jesus approached the woman at the well should not be used to teach how we can witness to others about Christ. For they say the author did not so intend this passage. They insist John intended this passage not to teach us how to witness but to show us that Jesus was the Messiah who could give living water.

Several things seem evident about this understanding of John 4. First, purpose is being used as hermeneutically determinative of meaning. Second, *why* the passage was written is used to limit *how* the passage can be legitimately applied. In short, there is a two-fold confusion. There is the already familiar problem of using the purpose (*why*) to determine meaning (*what*). But there is the additional confusion of using purpose (*why*) to limit application (*how*). But this is wrong. For simply because an author may have envisioned a particular application of the truth he affirmed does not mean that this is the only appropriate application of that meaning.

¹⁹See Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publications Foundation), 70-71.

This hermeneutical mistake violates several principles. First, it is contrary to the inspired usage of one Scripture by other Scripture. For example, the meaning (what) of Hos 11:1 ("Out of Egypt have I called my son") has its application in Hosea to the nation of Israel. However, in Matt 2:15 its application is different; it is to the return of Christ from Egypt. Now if application must be limited to the way the original author applied it, then the divinely authoritative apostle Matthew made a mistake in his inspired writing. Some would justify this kind of error by appealing to a so-called "inspired liberty" of a biblical writer or to imply that he took leave of the Holy Ghost to change the intended meaning of the author expressed in the text.²⁰ But it seems to me this negates the whole evangelical hermeneutic. The inspired writings of the NT cannot be mistaken in how they use the OT.

Further, if the application (how) of a passage is limited to the purpose (why), which really determines the meaning (what), then there is no way to preach (and apply) much of the Bible to most believers in the world today. For *how* a passage is applied will depend on the culture in which the person lives. "Lift holy hands [in prayer] (1 Tim 2:8); "Greet the brethren with a holy kiss" (1 Thess 5:26); and women praying with a veil over their face (1 Cor 11:13) are only a few of the examples which come to mind. In each case the *what* (meaning) is absolute but the *how* (application) is relative to the culture. For example, 1 Thess 5:26 is an absolute obligation to greet fellow believers. Precisely what means (how) this greeting should take will depend on the culture. For some it will be a kiss, for others a hug, and for still others a handshake. The interpretation (what) is the same for all cultures but the application (how) will be different from culture to culture. There is another way to view the fallacy of tying the application to the purpose (and meaning). If the application is tied to the meaning, when the application changes, the meaning must change with it. But if the meaning changes then so does the truth which that meaning expresses also change. And if truth changes then it is not absolute but in process. Thus, we have a denial of the absolute or unchangeable truth of Scripture.

Finally, if application is inseparably connected with the purpose (and meaning) of the author then we have placed a straight-jacket on the Holy Spirit. This would mean that we must apply all Scripture

²⁰The recent "Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics" by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (Nov., 1982) pointedly addresses this issue as follows: "WE DENY that Scripture may be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that one passage corrects or militates against another. We deny that later writers of Scripture misinterpreted earlier passages of Scripture when quoting from or referring to them" (Article XVII).

the same way the original author did. Besides the already noted problem that we are usually only guessing as to what the author's intended application was, this would make some passages of Scripture unpreachable in most churches. How many churches have drunkards at the Lord's Table (1 Cor 11:21)? Or sons cohabitating with their stepmothers (1 Cor 5:1)? Must we limit the Holy Spirit in *applying* the same truth (of the wrongness of these and numerous other acts) to the same kind of situations which occasioned the apostles' original exhortations? Surely a more sensible approach is to concentrate our hermeneutical efforts on getting the right *interpretation* of the passage. Once we are assured of this, then any application of *that* truth to any one who in any way needs that truth will be legitimate. Let us not hermetically seal the Holy Spirit into the container of our hermeneutics so as to suffocate the fresh breath he wishes to breathe on our lives as he applies the unchanging truth of Scripture to our changing situations. Those who oppose this method are ignoring the numerous divinely authorized examples of the same truth being applied in different ways within the Scripture itself.²¹

IV. AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: LOOK FOR MEANING NOT PURPOSE

If we are not to use purpose to determine meaning then what does determine meaning? In order to answer this question properly, we must first make an important distinction. Technically speaking, the interpreter does not determine (cause) meaning by any hermeneutical procedure. Meaning is determined by the author; it is *discovered* by the reader (listener). Only minds cause meaning by (in) a medium of expression which other minds are thereby able to discern. So when we speak loosely of "determining" the meaning of the author we refer to the active hermeneutical process by which we discover the meaning which the author expressed. But since the process of interpretation is an active one there is some sense in which the reader is "determining" what the writer meant.

A. *Context Determines (Helps Us to Discover) Meaning*

Purpose does not determine meaning; context determines meaning. First, this can be seen with respect to how a word is used in a sentence. Although we speak of the different meanings of words, technically speaking, words do not have any meaning. Words have different *usages* in sentences; sentences have meaning. There is no

²¹Zech 12:10 ("They shall look on me whom they have pierced") is applied both to the first coming of Christ (John 19:37) and to his second coming (Rev 1:7). Isaiah's teaching (chap. 53) about Jesus bearing our sickness is applied to both spiritual healing (1 Pet 2:24) and also to physical healing (Matt 8:17).

intrinsic meaning to isolated entities such as words any more than there is a meaning to letters of which words are composed. Like broken pieces of colored glass, words have no meaning unless they are formed into an overall picture or framework which expresses some thought or feeling. When the broken glass is formed into a cathedral window or the individual words structured into a poem they are given meaning by the overall *Gestalt* or order expressed by the mind. The meaning, however, is not in the individual words (or pieces of glass) but in the overall mosaic or structure into which they are intentionally shaped. Thus, it is their form or context which determines their meaning; the whole determines the parts.

What is true of the relation of individual words in a sentence is similarly true of the relation of individual sentences in a paragraph, and of a paragraph in a whole book. That is to say, the same series of words can have a different meaning in a different context. For example, the sentence "Love the world" has a different meaning when used in the context of an exhortation against lust than it has in a paragraph about our need for compassion for the lost.

In the final analysis, the meaning of the smaller unit is determined by the broader context. This same principle applies as we move from word to sentence to paragraph to book to the whole Bible. But in each case it is not why (purpose) the author used the smaller unit in the larger, but how it fits into the overall picture (or meaning) he is portraying. It is misleading to inquire about the purpose for which (why) an artist used a triangular piece of blue glass to portray the sky in an unfilled triangular hole in the section of the mosaic portraying a sky. He used it because of how it fits into that position which conveys the desired meaning he wished to express. Thus the real question leading to the discovery of the meaning of the parts in relation to the whole is how the part fits into the overall picture, not the purpose for which it is there. It is obviously there because the author put it there. And he put it there because of how it fitted into the picture of the overall meaning it was his purpose to express. The question is: how do the small meaning units (m) fit into the larger unit of meaning (M)? The question is never, how does purpose (P) determine meaning? It is, how does overall meaning (M) determine particular meaning (m)?

The situation may be diagrammed as follows:

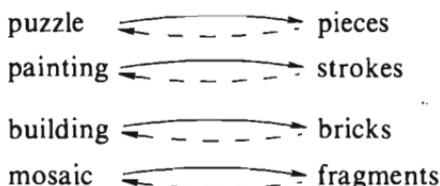
Wrong View
Purpose determines meaning
 $P \rightarrow M$

Right View
Meaning determines purpose
 $M \rightarrow P$

Or to put it all together—including the smaller units of meaning, the overall meaning, and the purpose—the situation could be diagrammed as follows:

AUTHOR → M → PURPOSE (end)

This raises the question of the “hermeneutical circle,” for the whole is made up of the parts. Yet the parts are made up by the whole. Is this not a vicious circle, an impossible situation? It certainly would be if the parts determined the whole in the same sense that the whole determined the parts. Fortunately this is not the case. The following diagram illustrates how the parts relate to the whole in a different way than the whole relates to the parts.



It is obvious from these illustrations that the whole is related to the parts by way of *determination*, but the parts merely make a *contribution* to the whole. That is, the whole gives *structure* to the parts, whereas the parts provide the *stuff* for that form. In short, the parts are the *material* cause but the whole is the *formal* cause of the overall meaning (M). So it is that the small units of meaning (m) contribute to the larger meaning (M) in Scripture, whereas the larger meaning provides the determinative context for understanding the smaller units. It is in this sense that overall meaning (M) determines particular meanings (m). But purpose does not determine meaning.

B. *Meaning Determines Purpose*

Not only does purpose *not* determine meaning, but just the reverse is true. There is a real sense in which the meaning of a passage determines its purpose. For once we know *what* God said in Scripture we automatically know *why* he said it. He said it for the purpose of expressing this truth to us so that we could know and obey it. The purpose of all Scripture is for us to *understand* (and obey) the mind of God on the matter revealed. The purpose (why) of Scripture is always to convey the meaning (what). So, contrary to a widely accepted hermeneutic, meaning is the “horse” and purpose is the “cart.” To claim that purpose determines the meaning is to get the cart before the horse.

C. *Where does the Central Unity of a Passage Reside?*

Many students of Scripture are so accustomed to looking for the central purpose of a book that they feel that the method proposed here will rob them of the primary objective of looking for the central purpose of a book. If we should not look for purpose of a passage, then for what should we look? In brief, the answer is, we should look for the *unifying theme* of the book. We should ask what it is that holds the whole book together the way the picture unifies all the pieces of a puzzle. That overall order is the unifying theme.

To put it another way, we should look for the *overall argument* of the author. This can be done by tracing the premises, by observing how they build, and by noting the conclusions the author draws from them. But whether we call it unifying theme or overall argument we are looking for the *what* (meaning), not the *why* (purpose) of a book. Herein lies the key to understanding the Word of God. On the contrary, seeking the alleged purpose of the author and interpreting the parts in the light of it will be both confusing and misleading. It will inevitably lead to a distortion of the very meaning which we allegedly seek to understand, no matter how sincere or scholarly the approach may be.

D. *Relating Purpose and Meaning: A Summary*

1. Purpose is not hermeneutically determinative of meaning. *Why* something is said never determines the meaning of *what* is said.

2. Purpose is formally independent of meaning. One can understand what is meant, even if he does not understand why it was said.

3. Using purpose to determine meaning leads to a distortion of the true meaning by reshaping the meaning to fit the purpose.

4. Using purpose to determine meaning confuses *application* (why) with *interpretation* (what). It confuses the *content* of the message with the *behavioral* change in the lives of the readers envisioned by the author.

5. Using purpose to determine meaning is a hermeneutical form of "the end (purpose) justifies (validates) the means (meaning)" principle. It is hermeneutical utilitarianism.²²

This is not to deny that understanding purpose is often interesting and even illuminating. For *how* a passage is applied or *why* an author wrote it (that is, what changes he purposed in the readers) can be

²²The end does not justify the means either in ethics or in hermeneutics. The end manifests the means, but it does not *justify* it. The means must justify themselves. If there is no justification for the means then they are unjustified. This applies to meaning as well as to values.

helpful in understanding the significance of the passage. However, to limit the application of the passage to our conjectures about the author's purpose, or to eliminate certain aspects of truth in the passage because they are not believed to be necessary to the central purpose, is hermeneutically illegitimate. It in fact may lead to a denial of the full inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, as well as other teachings.