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Hans-Georg Gadamer: His Philosophical Hermeneutics and Its Importance for Evangelical Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer's influence on hermeneutics can hardly be understated. This article offers an evangelical perspective on the importance of his work and how it can be used to interpret the biblical text more faithfully. It discusses his influences and some of the major aspects of his work and offers suggestions for applying his work to biblical hermeneutics. The article concludes that his work is vitally important and should be utilized by the biblical interpreter, though not without caution.

Cover Page Footnote

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<div align="center">INTRODUCTION</div>

Hans-Georg Gadamer stated that World War I destroyed the idea of progress and opened the door for him to think; hermeneutics has been definitively changed as a result.[1] Gadamer revolutionized hermeneutics by showing that the Enlightenment focus on rationalism and empiricism in hermeneutics was misguided. The Enlightenment had deified rationality, subjecting all texts to it rather than letting texts speak for themselves. Gadamer argued that this approach to hermeneutics robbed texts of their communicative power, relegating them to nothing more than mirrors that reflected the thoughts and ideas of the interpreter. Instead of this approach, he maintained that interpreters must approach the text humbly, submit to it, and allow it to expose their prejudices, for good or bad. In this way, the interpreter will arrive at a genuine understanding of the text that results in appropriate application and change.

This article examines the hermeneutical principles that Gadamer developed, arguing that many of them can be utilized by Evangelicals to better interpret the biblical text. The first two sections focus on Gadamer's unique contributions to hermeneutics and how they can be applied to biblical hermeneutics. The final section discusses his conception of meaning and evaluates it from an evangelical position.

<div align="center">THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE, PREJUDICE, AND TRADITION</div>

The hermeneutical circle, prejudice, and tradition are interrelated, so the three will be considered together. The hermeneutical circle, or as Grant Osborne has called it, the hermeneutical spiral, is the essential component that ties together all of Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy.[2] He states that "the task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding" that happens when an interpreter engages a text.[3] The path to this clarity is the hermeneutical circle, through which the interpreter determines the meaning, through dialogue, of the whole text (the outer circle) from the meaning of the parts of the text (the inner circle). Correct understanding occurs when the parts fit with the whole and the whole fits with the parts. Any disharmony between the whole and the parts is the result of misunderstanding, and the interpreter must return to the beginning of the circle and begin again with a fresh set of questions until he asks the questions the text intends to answer. A necessary part of this dialogue is that the interpreter allow the text to question him, thereby revealing his prejudices, which helps him to understand the text on its terms.[4]

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1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Geog Gadamer*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court 1997), 3.

2. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* 15. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 1991).

3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 260.

4. Ibid., 259-261.

The interpreter approaches a text with a certain set of prejudices, or as Thiselton states, "pre-understanding."[5] Gadamer maintains that there are two significant prejudices that must be overcome if understanding is to occur: prejudice against tradition and prejudice that deifies reason.[6] Here Gadamer specifically argues against radical Rationalism, which maintains that an objective, correct interpretation of texts can only be achieved by submitting them to the authority of the intellect, or reason, which protects the interpreter from his own prejudice. This radical Rationalism thus rejects prejudice and tradition because the knowledge that comes from these is neither objective nor pure. Gadamer states that this objectivity, though, is impossible—even the Enlightenment was prejudiced against prejudice.[7] Prejudice determines which text one studies, how ones studies them, and the questions that one asks. These are all aspects of one's place in history that cannot be avoided.[8] The crucial task is to understand one's prejudice, one's "historical consciousness," so that one can use his prejudice to attain understanding. Granted, one's understanding is always provisional—always historically conditioned—but it comes much closer to true understanding if one's prejudices are exposed and examined through question-and-answer dialogue with texts.[9]

The interpreter must examine his prejudices before he discards them, for many of them will be legitimate. The process of the hermeneutical circle reveals whether one's prejudices are correct or incorrect, legitimate or illegitimate. When the interpreter engages a text by submitting his prejudices to the superior knowledge of the text (which is why one must reject the Enlightenment—it does the opposite, forcing the text to submit to the interpreter's reason) his prejudices are clarified. If the prejudice is correct, it leads to a fuller understanding of the text and is incorporated into the interpreter's hermeneutical circle. If it is incorrect, the interpreter discards the prejudice and returns to the inner part of his hermeneutical circle to begin the process again. This movement back and forth through the hermeneutical circle continues for the interpreter's life.

The concept of tradition is interwoven with the concepts of prejudice and the hermeneutical circle. For Gadamer, tradition forms one's prejudices and locates a person within a historical framework, which for him is positive. It forms one's historicality, which in turn forms the questions one asks. For example, a student in a Southern Baptist seminary is conditioned, whether he acknowledges it or not, by

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5. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 13-15. Pre-understanding is probably a much better term for prejudice because the term prejudice has a negative connotation in English. For Gadamer, prejudices are not necessarily bad or good. The process of hermeneutics will expose one's prejudices as either correct or incorrect, at which point the interpreter should either discard or retain the prejudice in question.

6. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 245.

7. Ibid., 239-240.

8. Ibid., 251.

9. Ibid., 241-245.

the Conservative Resurgence.[10] Thus, the texts he chooses to read and the questions he asks of those texts are inextricably linked with the tradition of the Conservative Resurgence. A student at another seminary will ask different questions and approach different texts. Each is conditioned by his place in a tradition—by his historicality. To achieve understanding, the student must recognize his tradition and engage it fully.[11] He must acknowledge the questions that his tradition asked of texts, recognize that those questions and answers are part of him, then move on to ask questions that arise from the ones already answered in his tradition.[12]

These three aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics—the hermeneutical circle, prejudice, and tradition—are important for biblical interpretation. The interpreter of the biblical text risks eisegesis if he fails to acknowledge his prejudice and he deludes himself if he thinks he has no prejudice. It is crucial to recognize his historicality if he is going to open himself up to the text and submit to its authority, lest the Bible be reduced to a relic of the past that cannot speak to its interpreters.[13] Biblical interpreters would do well to heed Gadamer's advice, submit to the superior knowledge of the text, allow it to interrogate them and reveal their prejudices, and engage in dialogue with the text until the parts and whole harmonize—until understanding occurs. Doing this supports an evangelical interpretation of Scripture because it makes the Bible, not the interpreter, the final authority in interpretive matters. It encourages a submissive posture towards the biblical text that allows it to change the interpreter as he engages it. The hermeneutical circles also place an important control on interpretation, because it forces the reader to reconcile each portion of the text with the entire text, which limits the possibility for erroneous interpretation and application.

The hermeneutical circle is also important for explaining how the same biblical text can be interpreted differently, yet validly. Parris shows that Gadamer's appropriation of Collingwood's theory of the rightness of question-and-answer into his hermeneutics answers the question of multiple interpretations. One generation may ask a question that the text can rightly answer, while the next generation may ask an equally valid, yet different question, thus arriving at two different interpretations, neither of which is wrong. Parris also points out that the logic of question and answer does not necessitate the acceptance of all interpretations as true, for interpreters could fail to allow the subject matter of the text to dictate the questioning, which would lead to answers of the wrong questions, and thus invalid interpretations.[14]

These three principles, then, are foundational for accurately interpreting texts. The following principles, horizon and effective historical consciousness, also

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10. Gadamer would also argue that the tradition neither stops nor begins there. In this case, one's tradition would include all of church history. The questions that a Christian asks are shaped by all of Christian history.

11. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 258.

12. Ibid., 259-261.

13. Ibid., 160ff.

14. Parris, *Reception Theory*, 46-47.

help interpreters to determine meaning in texts. The concepts are similar to prejudice and tradition, but the role of horizon and effective historical consciousness vary slightly.

Horizons and Effective Historical Consciousness

Gadamer states that everyone exists in and approaches texts from his particular "horizon," or place in history. He calls this "historicality," "effective historical consciousness," and "tradition."[15] One's horizon is comprised of one's philosophy, education, place in society, the texts one has read, the media one has consumed, etc. These factors combine to form the starting place from which one interprets a text. The text also has a horizon that is made up of the historical factors that give rise to and operate within the text. For example, the introductory statements in biblical commentaries that examine the historical context, literary conventions, date and provenance of authorship explain the horizon of the text.

The first step in understanding a text is bringing one's horizon into relationship with the text's horizon.[16] This step is similar to the awkward conversation that often characterizes a first date: What do you do? Where are your parents from? Where did you go to school? What did you study? This in itself is not understanding. It is fact finding. Understanding occurs only when something needs to be understood—when the horizon of the text (or date) confronts or challenges one's own horizon.[17] For example, if on that first date, the girl realizes that the boy prefers peanut M&M's, a preference she staunchly opposes (she likes plain M&M's) and one that her prejudices prohibit her from understanding, then her horizon has been challenged. The two must now engage in dialogue in which she asks questions regarding his preference. According to Gadamer's earlier concept of question and answer, the subject matter governs the questioning. She must pursue a line of questioning related to the point of contention and allow the answers to lead to new questions along the same lines. If understanding is to occur, she cannot ask questions about Skittles; the questions must relate to his preference for peanut M&M's. Understanding occurs when she enters into his situation, his "otherness" and sees the M&M's from his perspective. Agreement is not necessary.

At this point Gadamer makes an important distinction regarding the otherness of the other. The girl does not engage the boy's otherness (his taste for peanut M&M's) in an act of empathy. Neither does she blindly assimilate his view— she does not automatically begin liking peanut M&M's, or impose her view onto him—he remains free to prefer peanut M&M's.[18] Instead, she fuses her horizon with his, thus creating a new horizon that includes both plain and peanut M&M's. Now

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15. Gadamer, "Reflections," 55. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 267ff. It is difficult, and perhaps superficial, to separate effective historical consciousness, historicality, and tradition. The three concepts are interconnected, and much of what is said about one can be said about the others.

16. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270.

17. Ibid., 270.

18. Ibid. 270-272.

that the horizons have been fused, she can see further—her horizon has been expanded.

Gadamer opposes the idea that the historical context, or horizon, of a text can be reconstructed to give the interpreter an exact replica that allows him to access original meaning of the text. When one attempts such a reconstruction, the meaning that arises is dead meaning.[19] The present interpreter is removed from the original—once an event occurs, once a text has been written, it becomes a part of history and all attempted reconstruction is only imaginative.[20] The interpreter can and should, however, attempt to discover the horizon of the text and use it to help mediate between the text and the interpreter. This is the place where the text speaks.[21] Historical context is thus important for delimiting the field of inquiry. It helps the reader to know to which question(s) the text was addressed and therefore what questions the interpreter should ask to arrive at a legitimate meaning.

The concept of horizon and the critique of the importance of historical context have several implications for evangelical biblical interpretation. When an interpreter approaches a biblical text, it is paramount that he is aware of his own horizon. First, knowing one's own horizon means that one knows what questions have already been asked and answered by the text, acting as a safeguard against heresy. For example, when a Southern Baptist reads Romans 1:1 he knows that the question "Did Paul write Romans?" has already been asked and answered in the affirmative. If he answers the question in the negative, then he must reckon with his tradition. Second, knowing one's horizon will make him aware of his own prejudices, positive and negative. In the example of the Southern Baptist interpreter, he will know that he approaches the text with the prejudice that it was divinely inspired and will interact with the text from that perspective. Third, the fusion of the text's horizon with the interpreter's horizon reminds the biblical interpreter that the text must be incorporated into his life. It is insufficient to say that a certain text was written at a certain time to a certain audience and meant a certain thing. One must move beyond this first level of understanding—getting to know the text—and fuse it with one's own horizon, creating a type of understanding that causes change in the interpreter's life and worldview.

Gadamer's critique of the primacy of historical context also addresses this concern. Admitting that one is removed from the original setting of the biblical text gives the interpreter epistemological humility that allows him to hear dissenting opinions and warns against dogmatism on issues of lesser importance. Furthermore, it encourages the interpreter to move beyond questions of historical context, important as they are, and engage in applying the biblical text to the interpreter's own context. There is, however, a danger in Gadamer's devaluing of historical context. Interpretation benefits from an understanding of historical context that illuminates cultural practices and linguistic differences, among other

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19. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 149.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 149-150.

things, that are not readily apparent to the interpreter. Just as Gadamer criticizes those who turned the text into a dead relic by focusing solely on a text's historical context, those who ignore historical context entirely are in danger of misinterpreting the text for lack of pertinent information.

<div align="center">THE MEANING OF MEANING</div>

Having evaluated Gadamer's hermeneutical principles, it is now important to discuss Gadamer's understanding of meaning. This is a crucial aspect of his hermeneutical system, as well as the aspect that is most problematic for an evangelical understanding of the biblical text. We saw that Gadamer argues that relying on historical context alone results in dead meaning. He also argues that one's understanding is never value-neutral and always affected by one's historicality, which makes it impossible to arrive at an objective understanding of the meaning of a text. At the same time, he states that the task of hermeneutics is to elucidate meaning. So, what is meaning?

Since Gadamer advocates approaching a text through dialogue, he argues that a final, complete meaning can never be reached.[22] Dialogue with a text continues in the same way that dialogue with one's spouse does; the questions and answers are never exhausted. Furthermore, since people are historically conditioned, a text is never approached in the same way twice. No two questions are ever exactly the same. As a result, a text contains an "inexhaustible multiplicity of answers" and "to understand at all is always to understand differently."[23] He is quick to assert, however, that the text is not the creation of its readers.[24]

Gadamer maintains that there are correct and incorrect meanings of a text—understandings and misunderstandings.[25] Here he draws in many of the hermeneutical principles discussed so far. The hermeneutical circle protects the text from meanings that do not cohere with the whole of the text. If a "meaning" is contradictory or unintelligible, then it is not a legitimate meaning. The dialogic method protects the integrity of the text. If a question is asked of a text that it does not intend to answer, then any answer given is not a legitimate meaning of the text. Tradition protects the text. It acts as a buffer against interpretations that have been proven wrong. Recognition of one's prejudices, horizons, and effective historical consciousness are important for an evangelical hermeneutic because it protects the text by showing the reader which questions are appropriate and which are not.

How, then, can a text have multiple meanings? For Gadamer application and understanding are meaning. Therefore, when Walter Kaiser reads Deuteronomy 28:8 "If you build a new house, make a railing around your roof, so that you don't bring bloodguilt on your house if someone falls on it" (HCSB) and argues that it applies to the building of fences around pools, Gadamer would say that the text

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22. Gadamer, "Reflections," 43, 50.
23. Ibid., 44.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 45.

means that one should build a fence around one's pool.[26] The meaning "build a fence around your pool" was imbedded in the text from the time it was written. The question was not asked until modern times, so the text could not yet provide that answer, or meaning. Note that the "meaning" offered by Kaiser passes the test of Gadamer's hermeneutical principles. The meaning fits with the larger context of loving one's neighbor. The meaning does not contradict the text. The question, "Should I build a fence around my pool to protect the life of my neighbor?" is a legitimate question in the context of the passage. The meaning does not oppose tradition. The meaning reflects the horizon of the modern interpreter, bringing the text to bear on his life. Kaiser has arrived a legitimate "meaning" of the text. Of course, Kaiser would say that he is offering an application of the text, but for Gadamer application and meaning are the same.

Is Gadamer's understanding of meaning consistent with an evangelical approach to Scripture? Evangelicals by and large distinguish meaning from significance, or application. Thiselton points out that the primary problem with Gadamer's conception of meaning is that it lacks any criteria for determining meaning.[27] If meaning and application are fused, as Gadamer would have it, then texts can be construed to mean virtually anything.[28] The consequences of this are innocuous in the example of the fence and the pool, but it is not hard to imagine a situation where the biblical text could be used with devastating consequences, such as was the case when the Ku Klux Klan supported its rhetoric with the Bible. Under Gadamer's hermeneutic, the group could argue that its (erroneous) application of the Bible is what the Bible actually means. Gadamer would likely argue that theirs is an illegitimate meaning of the text, but the problem of lack of criteria remains.

Vanhoozer states that reading "for the original meaning only is to confine the text to its own time."[29] However, like Thiselton, he objects to the fusion of meaning and application, stating unequivocally that the biblical text was intended to be read and interpreted throughout history, but that this does not imply that the text has multiple meanings.[30] Rather, the text has a single meaning, that can (and should) be applied in as many situations as warranted by the text.[31] Such a distinction is crucial for evangelical hermeneutics for it protects the biblical text from the chaos and abuse that result from a multiplicity of meanings. As in the example cited

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26. Walter Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2003), 144.

27. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 226.

28. Ibid.

29. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 421.

30. "Ascertaining the significance of a text is an indispensable aspect of interpretation. It should not be confused, however, with grasping the intended meaning. The latter is a matter of historical and literary knowledge; discerning significance, on the other hand, is a matter of wisdom, for it concerns not the achieving of knowledge, but the appreciation of knowledge and its right use." Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 423.

31. Ibid., 421-423.

above, it is nonsensical to think that the author of Deuteronomy foresaw that people would one day have pools that needed to be fenced-in. However, the meaning of the passage, which is that one must protect one's fellows from falling off one's roof, is easily applied to similar situations throughout history. Thus, the meaning of the passage is constant, but its significance, or application, changes.

Gadamer's concept of meaning in texts is helpful in that it calls attention to the need for application of the text to daily life. It is problematic, though, because it lacks clear criteria for meaning, which in turn opens up the text to a multiplicity of meanings that may result in the abuse of the text. It is better then, to maintain a distinction between meaning and application. As Vanhoozer argues, the meaning of a text will be determined through rigorous hermeneutics, and the application of a text will be achieved through wise application of the knowledge learned. [32]

CONCLUSION

The importance of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy can scarcely be understated. He undermined the Enlightenment's enthronement of reason and rehabilitated the concepts of tradition and prejudice. He offered interpreters a way to "listen" to texts through dialogue and to apply the text to their present context through the fusion of their horizon with that of the text. The biblical interpreter will do well to submit to the superiority of the text, allow it to expose his prejudices, learn his and the Bible's tradition, and immerse himself in the hermeneutical circle for the duration of his life, always seeking more appropriate questions to ask the text that will lead to greater understanding of the text and the fusion of his horizon with the Bible's horizon. In adopting these aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics, though, one must also take caution. While it is important to take into account tradition and prejudice, the interpreter should be diligent not to elevate these things above the biblical text itself. Furthermore, Gadamer's notion of meaning is inconsistent with an evangelical understanding of Scripture. The task of interpretation is to discover the meaning of texts, then apply that meaning to life. To posit a multiplicity of meanings, rather than a multiplicity of applications, would be to denigrate the text itself and place authority in the hands of the interpreter rather than in the text.

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32. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 423.

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