

THE WORD OF GOD AND MISSIONARY FAITHFULNESS

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Introduction: Seeking Balance in Evangelical Missions

God uses the pattern of teaching in His Word to transform slaves of disobedience into slaves of righteousness, no matter their cultural context (Rom 6:17–19). The Lord Jesus Christ promised in His Great Commission that He will empower His disciples throughout the Church Age to make disciples of all nations by teaching them the content of Scripture (Matt 28:18–20).¹ The didactic nature of the Great Commission requires the missionary to conduct the text-driven, proclamation activities of preaching, teaching, Christian publication, Bible translation, and theological education.²

Scripture is transcendent and supersedes culture (cf. Isa 55:8–9; Rom 11:33–36). So, it is of universal and eternal benefit that the missionary publicly proclaim “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27) from the Bible to people from every culture and generation. The missionary is acting faithfully when he himself understands biblical doctrine, applies it to his own life, and then communicates it to others so that they can apply it to their lives in their contexts as disciples (1 Tim 4:16; Tit 1:5, 11; 2:1).

Given the soteriological focus of global missions, it is no stretch to assert that of all the possible pre-field training options for the missionary candidate, the most important study to undertake is biblical and theological. Yet, he should not shun cultural studies altogether, which might facilitate such proclamation activities. Cultural study and language learning, though subordinate to biblical and theological study, play an initial role in preparing for evangelism and discipleship.³ By observing the target culture, the missionary can more effectively engage his

¹ Schnabel carefully expands the list of content for which the early witnesses (μάρτυρες in Luke 24:48) would be responsible to proclaim. His list helps to establish the range of scriptural content that is to be communicated according to τούτων of Luke 24:48's and πάντα ὅσα of Matthew 28:20: “Jesus’ life and ministry (Acts 1:21–22), his death and resurrection, his vindication and his exaltation (Acts 1:22), the salvation ‘from this corrupt generation’ (Acts 2:40), the word of the Lord (Acts 8:25), the necessity of conversion and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21), the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), the message of Jesus (Acts 23:11), the kingdom of God (Acts 28:23).” Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, Volume One*, 368–70, with quote on 370.

² Proclamation activities are text-driven activities that include presentations of biblical interpretation, exegesis, and exposition through preaching, teaching, publication, Bible translation, and theological education. Hesselgrave and Rommen add to the list “the practical application of Scripture to the matters of church governance and public worship, ministry, and the lifestyle of the local disciple. Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 200; repeated in Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*, 143–44.

³ Still, it is important to ask how the contemporary theories and strategies of sociology and cultural anthropology will actually aid the missionary to represent biblical Christianity more faithfully in the foreign context. Such studies have been elevated in evangelical institutions for several generations. The Christianized discipline of

hearers with the truth of the Bible. The missionary desires for his biblical proclamation to be understood by his audience along grammatical, rhetorical, and conceptual lines, so that he can bring sound doctrine to bear in the new context. Thus, with some level of study of the culture and language the missionary hopes to avoid stepping onto the field as a “cultural imperialist or cultural separatist.”⁴

Nevertheless, the key to conducting missions biblically is to maintain the conservative theological conviction that Scripture is inherently applicable to every culture in every generation.⁵ Missionaries must believe that the Holy Spirit will use His Word to transform sinners into disciples when it is faithfully preached and taught. Furthermore, missionaries who “labor at preaching the Word and teaching” can be confident that their efforts are fully approved in heaven (1 Tim 5:17–21).

Missionaries, church leaders, and those who train them need to be reminded that God reveals His saving will through the proclamation of Scripture. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe hermeneutically and linguistically how Scripture provides all the doctrinal content necessary for the missionary to communicate biblical truth in the cross-cultural context, without needing to rely upon complex socio-cultural strategies that take the priority away from proclamation.⁶

cultural anthropology, for example, emerged in 1950, based on secular developments that began in the 1920s. In the last two decades, particularly, theologians have taken up the task of developing tangible theologies of culture. They have attempted to provide theoretical bases for the more practical areas of study on cross-cultural communication and contextualization. For historical summary of the secular field as it developed in evangelicalism, and its relation to cultural studies in missions today, see Ashford, “The Gospel and Culture,” 215–51 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 215–18. On the variety of schools of cultural anthropology within the secular and Christian institutions, see Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel, *The Tapestry of Culture*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 1–26; Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 69–86. Some more contemporary treatments of Christianity and culture include Michael S. Horton, *Where in the World Is the Church?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007); David Bruce Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope*. 2nd ed. Moscow, ID: Canon, 2007); Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission*, esp. 215–51. But note the much earlier treatment Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

⁴ Ashford recognizes the risk in Ashford, “The Gospel and Culture,” 215.

⁵ Finding the balance between a basic cultural awareness and an unbiblical cultural accommodation requires entering the field with foundational theological convictions. As to the lack of balance in contemporary evangelical missiology, Burns has well stated, “A missionary without a Bible in his hand, in his heart, and in his head is a Christianized philanthropist. . . . The answer for discipleship in missions is not mainly to give away free resources or to provide services, but to go teach the nations to read, think, and observe the Word. We need biblical thinkers, translators, teachers, and theologians, all of which demand the missionary to be a servant of the Word. In missions there are many players but very few stayers, many pragmatists but very few preachers, many anthropologists but very few apologists, many doers of mercy but very few makers of disciples, and many cultural enthusiasts but few courageous evangelists.” E. D. Burns, *The Missionary-Theologian: Sent into the World, Sanctified by the Word* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2020), 117–18.

⁶ Chief among the problematic missiological theories and strategies facing missionary practice today (some of which are identified later in the paper) is “contextualization.” Evangelical missiologists use the term “contextualization” to refer to the process of engaging unbelieving cultures so that their perceived needs are met “meaningfully” by the Christian message (as defined in Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 32). Sociologically based definitions of the term “contextualization” became public fare in the early 1970s, largely

Biblical Missions Defined and Described through “Missiological Propositional Assertion”

This paper operates from a paradigm for biblical missions that is designated technically as “missiological propositional assertion.”⁷ The paradigm underlines the priority of text-driven, proclamational activities in the task of foreign missions. “Missiological propositional assertion” becomes a model for missionaries when it is conducted according to linguistic, theological, and missiological parameters.⁸ The parameters establish ideological and practical boundaries around the foundational activities of textually oriented missionary outreach, with the goal of protecting the missionary from veering toward unnecessary socio-cultural and political activities that take the priority away from proclamation. When hedged by the linguistic, theological, and missiological parameters, the missionary will engage his local audience with theological clarity, textual confidence, and eagerness for spiritual transformation.

This paper limits the presentation of “missiological propositional assertion” to its linguistic parameter, which incorporates discussion from the field of linguistics and hermeneutics, in order to draw out principles for the cross-cultural application of Scripture. A brief description of the compound term “missiological propositional assertion” will provide the rationale for discussing missions along linguistic and hermeneutical lines.

Defining Biblical Missions with a Compound Term

The term “missiological propositional assertion” is a technical compound term that aims to give a clear framework for what can simply be called “biblical missions.” The term is designed to reflect the composite picture of the missionary’s biblically mandated task to preach

through the efforts of the Third World advisory council of the World Council of Churches (WCC), whose Theological Education Fund (TEF) sought a “dialectic between local cultural and religious situations and a universal technological civilization.” See the Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970–77)* (Bromley, UK: Theological Education Fund, 1972), 17–18. For prior research on the topic of contextualization with the goal of exposing its largely non-conservative proposals today, see Chris Burnett, “Contemporary Contextualization Theory through the Lens of Conservative Bibliology” (ThM thesis, The Master’s Seminary, 2017). The thesis evaluated various theological presuppositions throughout modern history that have led Western evangelical missiology in a largely pragmatic direction with little conviction about the role of Scripture in the task of evangelism and disciple-making. The study found that Enlightenment-era anti-missionary sentiment propagated a hindsight bias that has continued to lead many evangelicals in the West to disavow the efforts of their missionary forebears in favor of prejudicial anti-colonial rhetoric and strategy, under the label of postcolonial contextualization. The research further recognized the need for evangelicals to earnestly seek a Scripture-based theological dialogue between the West and Global Church, where the West would not only continue in the role of hearer/learner but would once again be permitted to provide meaningful feedback to local, vernacular expressions of the faith that require an exegetical-theological corrective. To that end, the thesis called for conservative theologians to apply biblical doctrine in a “global” way, so that the content of Scripture would no longer be promulgated as the timeworn product of the West or an unguarded, grassroots innovation. For a summary of the key findings, see *ibid.*, 173–77.

⁷ See the full proposal for the paradigm in Christopher Ryan Burnett, “Defining Biblical Missions Through Missiological Propositional Assertion (PhD diss., The Master’s Seminary, 2022).

⁸ The three parameters are developed in *ibid.*, 366–414.

and teach the propositions of Scripture in foreign cultures, with not only theological and linguistic clarity, but cultural sensitivity as well.

“Missiological propositional assertion” constitutes three terms that set the foundations for biblically faithful cultural engagement. The term “missiological” refers to a range of topics and strategies involving a missionary in the cross-cultural context where he is likely the foreigner. The missionary needs some degree of cultural awareness to conduct effective missionary activities. By binding the term “missiological” to the terms “propositional” and “assertion,” the core focus of the missionary’s activities are those biblically sanctioned activities that facilitate biblical proclamation.

The technical term “assertion” is used technically, to refer to a declarative, verbal statement that a writer or speaker assumes to be true and worthy of adoption by the audience.⁹ An assertion is only possible when the speaker is certain that the knowledge he verbally imparts to his audience is true. Missiologically, “assertion” refers to the verbal, cross-cultural proclamation of the biblical propositions.¹⁰

In the case of the conservative evangelical missionary, there must be the conviction that biblical doctrine needs to reach the minds and hearts of the people for them to be spiritually transformed. The missionary’s assertion of the truth requires more than a morally neutral spiritual knowledge transfer. To speak of “assertion” as “missiological” denotes the proclamation of biblical truth in a context where it is not presently known or believed (Rom 15:20–21). The message must therefore be confrontational in nature. His intention is to provoke the audience to abandon the spiritual knowledge that they have presumed to be true so that they will adopt the new content that is communicated to them as the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13).

By connecting the terms “missiological propositional assertion,” the missionary understands his role to be foremost that of a biblical expositor, who must accomplish confrontational communication through a range of text-based, proclamational, and theological activities. The full use of the term “missiological propositional assertion” thus reflects that the activities of cultural engagement are first and foremost textual in nature and conducted with a cultural awareness that facilitates the communication of the biblical message in a way that intends to disrupt the unbiblical beliefs and customs of the audience.

Describing Biblical Missions through the Compound Term

A few preliminary statements about the missiological propositional assertion model are as follows. First, missiologically, the proclamation of the propositions of Scripture is directed to unregenerate sinners in a social or cultural context that is not innate to the missionary. The biblical expositor intentionally targets a culture’s beliefs and worldviews through the articulation and appropriation of the written propositions of biblical truth. Because the knowledge transfer is

⁹ An assertion is “an act whereby a speaker puts forward a proposition as true.... The main vehicle for making assertions is the declarative sentence, spoken or written.” John Turri, *Knowledge and the Norm of Assertion: An Essay in Philosophical Science* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2016), 2. For a test and defense of the knowledge account of assertion, see John Turri, “Knowledge and the Norm of Assertion: A Simple Test,” *Synthese* 192, no. 2 (2015): 385–92. Turri concludes that the act of assertion is basic and necessary to communication, for “by asserting, we share knowledge, coordinate behavior, and advance collective inquiry.... In short, assertion is fundamental to our lives as social and cognitive beings.” *Ibid.*, 2, with discussion through 3.

¹⁰ Cortez, “Context and Concept,” 94.

confrontational by design, the missionary must not attempt to accommodate the wording of biblical truths culturally in any way that would subordinate Christian thought or practice to the pagan worldview or to the spiritually corrupted practices of the people.

Second, the missionary must be careful to assess the best methods of communicating the biblical propositions in the receptor culture. He must take care to avoid unnecessarily offending his audience with his method of communication.¹¹ Cultural engagement, according to the model of missiological propositional assertion, requires that the missionary be cognizant of the cultural components of the audience to the degree that he can assert divine truth in a way that is always verbally confrontational without being socially offensive.¹²

Third, in terms of indigenization, the goal of missiological propositional assertion is that biblical orthodoxy becomes reproducible in the local context among doctrinally sound disciples. The text-oriented activities of “missiological propositional assertion” begin when the missionary first expounds the meaning of the text evangelistically in a receptor context. Proclamation of the biblical text continues in each stage of local church life, and so the model of “missiological propositional assertion” remains the missionary’s focal point of missions throughout his ministry.¹³ In the most comprehensive sense, missionaries must embrace the propositionally oriented missionary mindset of the apostles and communicate the theological content of Scripture to the target audience in ways that are commensurate with the methods identified in the New Testament.

The next section of the paper presents key linguistic and literary discussions that affect cross-cultural engagement detrimentally or helpfully.

Linguistic and Literary Discussions that Affect Missions

Any discussion about the role of Scripture in cross-cultural engagement must be established on linguistic grounds at the sentence level—at the level of the biblical proposition. Understanding a proposition begins with understanding a sentence as an assembly of the most

¹¹ So affirmed in Burns, *Transcultural Gospel*, 7–9.

¹² It is not the purpose of this paper to present or defend other evangelical understandings of cultural engagement. One example for further research is Abraham Kuyper’s neo-Calvinist theology of culture. For the Kuyperian understanding of cultural engagement, see Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty.” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 461–90. Wolters explains the connection between Kuyperian neo-Calvinism and worldview studies (*Weltanschauung*) in Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–2.

¹³ Proclamation continues to be the focal point of the semantic field of “mission” throughout the life cycle of the church. Schnabel lists the lexical terms used in the New Testament to relate to missionary proclamation, from the activities of proclamation to the content and goals. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, Volume One: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 36–37.

basic units of information.¹⁴ In perhaps the most non-technical sense, it refers to verbal, shareable “bearers of truth values, whatever they may be.”¹⁵

There are a variety of understandings of what constitutes a proposition in Scripture and what the value of the biblical propositions is for crafting contextual theologies and making disciples.¹⁶ The grammatical nature, function, and interpretation of the biblical propositions are therefore the necessary starting points for understanding why missionary activities must be text-driven, proclamational activities.

Theories of Propositional Meaning and Truth within Linguistic Philosophy

Many secular theories inform contemporary evangelical strategies and proposals for delivering Scripture in new contexts. Analytic philosophy of language has for centuries proposed that the meaning of a proposition is in some way tied to the language with which it is expressed. However, due to the secular nature of the theories, there is no construct for supporting the biblical claim that Scripture is true because it ushers from the mind of God (Deut 29:29; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21; cf. 1 Cor 2:7–8, 12–13). Space does not allow more than a brief mention of the essential philosophical theories about the meaning of a text, though the developments of Frege, later Wittgenstein, Davidson, Dummett, and Austin.¹⁷

¹⁴ Though a debated term, a proposition is a basic verbal unit of shareable information at the level of a word, phrase, or sentence, which represents a class of diverse linguistic entities. Michael P. Wolf, “Philosophy of Language,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 16, 2022, at <https://iep.utm.edu/lang-phi/#SH4a>; Richard M. Gale, “Propositions, Judgments, Sentences, and Statements,” in Paul Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 494, which is referenced in Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, Volume III: God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Two* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 456. See also Daniel Hill, “Proposition,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 632–33; Michael Beane, *The Frege Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 156–57. See the helpful developments of the definition in Matthew McGrath and Devin Frank, “Propositions,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed April 16, 2022, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/propositions/>; Jeffrey C. King, “Structured Propositions,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed April 16, 2022, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/propositions-structured/>.

¹⁵ James O. Young, “The Coherence Theory of Truth,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed November 3, 2021, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/>. On other syntactical and relational functions of propositions in higher-order languages that emerge when their component parts are structured together in statements, see George Bealer, “Theories of Properties, Relations and Propositions,” *JPhilos* 76, no. 11 (1979): 634–48; George Bealer, “Completeness in the Theory of Properties, Relations, and Propositions,” *JSL* 48, no. 2 (June 1983): 415–26. For later developments on the truth-bearing nature of propositions, see Peter Hanks, “Recent Work on Propositions,” *Philosophy Compass* 4, no. 3 (2009): 469–86.

¹⁶ For a useful treatment of a variety of propositions and literary genres that inform the theological reading of a biblical passage, see Hill, “Proposition,” 632–33.

¹⁷ For a detailed development of analytic philosophy of language as it pertains to evangelical missiology, see Burnett, “Defining Biblical Missions,” 325–42. The study traces the proposals of early logician Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), who was connected to his successor Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who in his later years formulated his cultural-linguistic expressivist “language-game” construct, which linked the sense of a sentence to a speaker’s cultural, familial, and societal context (*lebensform*). The study also traces Donald Davidson’s essays between 1967 and 1976 on the semantic concept of truth and finally, Michael Dummett’s mid-century “logical

Generally, linguistic philosophy promoted the overall theory that a sentence might seem capable of affirming a truth, yet if the proposition is ontologically unprovable, at best it can assert only a sentence-level meaning based on grammar and common sense. Neither the mind of an author, nor the realm outside of the author, nor indeed any information outside of the grammatical context can be accessed to verify that what is asserted corresponds to a true concept.

Linguistic philosophy is, however, not devoid of approaches to evaluating the accessibility of meaning and the factuality of assertions. Three theories will be briefly noted. First, epistemic foundationalism is a theory of concepts within philosophy of language that affirms that it is possible to accurately derive meaning for all assertions as they are presented in Scripture.¹⁸ Second, along the lines of epistemic foundationalism, the correspondence theory of truth admits the possibility that the truth rests beyond the sentence but it can be determined by information collected by similar propositions.¹⁹ Third, in similar fashion, the theory of language universals, primitives, or primes, tested according to the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach, is useful in supporting the claim that words have meaning and are inherently truthful.²⁰

positivism” and J. L. Austin’s performative theory, which since fueled proposals for “speech act theory” among secular and biblical linguists alike.

¹⁸ Epistemic foundationalism is useful when discussing the value of the biblical propositions because the theory seeks to justify the legitimacy of a series of metaphysical unobservables (such as God and the spiritual realm). Such unobservables are considered legitimate on the grounds that such innate beliefs are commonly transmitted in words as knowledgeable facts and are meant to be read as verifiable truths. T. McGrew, “A Defense of Classical Foundationalism,” in *The Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont: CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 194–206; Laurence Bonjour, “Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism,” in *Arguing about Knowledge*, ed. Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 233–48. See Poston’s argument for epistemic conservatism in Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁹ According to the correspondence theory of truth, meaning does not just attach to a sentence when the assertion relates to a fact of the observable world but can extend to the metaphysical realm as well. David, “The Correspondence Theory of Truth.” It thereby rejects deflationary theories that deny the possibility of portraying truth by a proposition. Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, “The Deflationary Theory of Truth,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2014 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/truth-deflationary/>.

Both the coherence and correspondence theories of truth recognize that propositions possess truth-conditions but are fundamentally opposed to each other as to how to verify them. For definitions and evaluation of both theories, see Sulia A. Mason, “The Coherence and Correspondence Theories of Truth,” (MA Thesis, Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1998). Also see Alan R. White, “Coherence Theory of Truth,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2006), 308–13; A. N. Prior, “Correspondence Theory of Truth,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2006), 539–50.

²⁰ A language universal, primitive, or prime, is “a grammatical characteristic that can be reasonably hypothesized to be present in all or most human languages.” Edith A. Moravcsik, “Explaining Language Universals,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Language Typology*, ed. Jae Jung Song (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69; also see her explanation in Edith A. Moravcsik *Explaining Language Typology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5–9. For the foundational definition and treatment of language universals, primitives, and primes, and the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, see Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantic Primitives* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1972); Anna Wierzbicka, “Universal Semantic Primitives as a Basis for Lexical Semantics,” *Folia Linguistica* 29, no. 1–2 (1995): 149–69. See discussion of the historical developments of

While words can be culturally particular and complex, it is assumed that most human languages share simple concepts with words that function similarly across languages and lead to stable meanings that are commonly recognized.²¹ Thus, certain linguistic philosophical proposals seem to corroborate the evangelical view that the canon of Scripture reveals the divine reality of God through understandable human language. However, secular theories of meaning and truth within philosophy of language necessarily reach an impasse about the veracity of the biblical text.

Evangelical Responses to Secular Linguistic Theories of Meaning and Truth

Evangelicals have advanced their own theories about the veracity and usefulness of Scripture for understanding transcendent truths. Evangelical scholars that support the transcendent nature of the Bible assert that the biblical writers intended to communicate objective truth within their subjective historical, literary, and cultural contexts in a way that did not compromise the truth and can accurately be portrayed in new contexts.²² Two evangelical responses to secular linguistic theories follow.

Scripture Self-Attests to Its Veracity

As a first response, evangelicals state that Scripture self-attests to its truthfulness. The evangelical reads Scripture with the theological expectation that the biblical propositions, believed by faith in the Person and work of the Triune God, deliver true spiritual knowledge. Reading Scripture with divinely enlightened eyes of faith is paramount, for faith grants the regenerate believer “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1; cf. v. 6). Scripture asserts its truth claims with the expectation that its expressions capture the overarching reality of all things—beyond the sentence, external to the mind of the human author, and outside of the perceptible world.

As to the theological expectation of truthful, propositional meaning, Scripture provides the “controlling beliefs about language and translation,” because all people utilize human forms

NSM and its application to the Romance languages in Bert Peeters, *Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar: Empirical Evidence from the Romance Languages* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006).

²¹ Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, and Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10–20.

²² Ferretter, with sympathies for the community-based interpretation of Scripture as proposed by Ricoeur (but against the excesses of Fish), attempts to define principles of a Christian literary theory in a way that appears evangelical: “The Bible, which is experienced in the same way as other texts, shares with literary texts this property of opening up a new world to the reader, but differs from literary texts insofar as it claims that this world constitutes not only a new experience but the ground of the world of the reader’s experience as a whole.” Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory, Cross-Currents in Religion and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2003), 139, repeated on 188.

However, the Ricoeurian view that communities interpret all literary texts subjectively leads Ferretter to the non-evangelical conclusion that Christian theology presupposes Scripture to portray truth but cannot confirm it: “Theological statements cannot be taken to be finally or certainly true, therefore, but rather as provisional articulations of the church’s faith in that which lies beyond the world to which language can refer. Such statements are believed to be true, although their truth cannot be demonstrated.” *Ibid.*, 184, with discussion on 183–85.

of language that flow from God as the source of all language. By His own words He created all things and enabled our capacity to communicate His truth with other people.²³ Because Scripture is “breathed out” by God (2 Tim 3:16), then the propositions, which are His own words, must transmit the meaning He intended by using them.

Additionally, Scripture exhibits an internal consistency of meaning across its propositions, thus providing an implicit rationale for rooting spiritual knowledge in the words of Scripture—God consistently means what He says whenever He says it.²⁴ Scripture bears witness to its true and faithful nature as God’s truth and, in the face of deceit, is “worthy of confidence.”²⁵

The composite picture that emerges from Scripture’s statements as to its own veracity is that “the full Bible concept of truth involves factuality, faithfulness, and completeness,”²⁶ because the truths of Scripture are expressed by words in complete, definitive, and full-orbed ways.²⁷ Scripture witnesses to its veracity because it is indeed true, and Scripture is true because it reflects who God is.

²³ Biblical scholar Karen Jobes presents an evangelical alternative to secular literary proposals, her “relevance theory,” which is based on a Christian epistemology that she considers a way forward for true spiritual discovery. “Human language *describes* the world that God *created(-es)* using divine language.” Karen H. Jobes, “Relevance Theory and the Translation of Scripture,” *JETS* 50, no. 4 (December 2007): 777, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Roger Nicole applied the literary correspondence theory of truth to Scripture, specifically identifying how the terms for “truth” (ἀλήθεια) throughout the canon portray “that which is conformed to reality in contrast to anything that would be erroneous or deceitful.” Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 287–302, with definition on 290. The term ἀλήθεια represents both the quality and the content of that which conforms to reality. So delineated in BDAG, 42. According to traditional evangelical theologian Paul Helm, “If the Scriptures are the Word of God, then, properly interpreted, the sentences of Scripture will be at least logically consistent with each other. This follows from the fact that if the Scriptures are the Word of God, then, properly interpreted, the sentences are true. And if a set of propositions is true, the propositions must be consistent with each other.” Paul Helm, “Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 316. Furthermore, “the central claims of the Christian faith involve the truth of certain historical propositions . . . propositions expressing witnessable events. . . . But it does not follow from this that because a proposition is part of the total evidence for some claim that it has to be part of *my* evidence for this claim if my evidence is to be good evidence.” *Ibid.*, 317. Emphasis in original. Helm seems to argue against mere epistemic foundationalism and theories of truth that deny the metaphysical unobservables: “These comments underline what has been said previously—that the position being defended is not mere subjectivism. Nor is it some form of reductionism according to which Christianity is really about something that is not dependent either on history or logic. History and logic are both relevant aspects of the complex web that makes up Christianity because the Christian revelation offers itself as something that is consistent and is essentially rooted in history. But this does not mean, as I have stressed, that all logical and historical problems ought to be solved before Christianity is credible or before the status of the Bible as the Word of God is credible. . . .” Helm, “Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures,” 317.

²⁵ As recognized in Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” 293–94, with quote on 293 and support from Romans 1:25; 3:7: 15:8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁷ The descriptions are drawn from *ibid.*, 295.

Scripture Is Both Transcendent and Culture-Bound

As a second response to secular literary theory's dissociation of truth from words, it is important to note that Scripture does not deny that differences in human languages and cultures challenge the accurate communication of objective biblical truth. Evangelicals affirm the importance of studying the historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts to understand their role in shaping the overall form of life that affects the receptor audience.²⁸ Because truth is objective and language is subjective, the divinely revealed propositions are both universal in scope and capable of being accurately translated into any receptor language.

Thus, no matter how great the contextual differences might appear between the original and receptor languages and cultures, the biblical text can be appropriately understood and, as a result, fully obeyed. The evangelical can therefore affirm the transcendent and absolute truth of Scripture while also recognizing that it was recorded in culture-bound language by human authors. Through their historical setting and in specific literary genres, the prophets and apostles communicated truth in full to their socially, culturally, and generationally diverse receptor audiences.²⁹ The biblical writers were responsive to their audiences and adjusted the communicative process in order to be fully understood, just as any missionary must do in a new culture.³⁰

There is no reason to suggest that any change to the message is necessary when delivering the divine propositions of Scripture to a foreign audience.³¹ The objective truth of Scripture is, therefore, of utmost importance to understand and convey, no matter the cultural or linguistic constraints of the original propositions themselves or of the cultural environment in which the missionary will communicate the message.³²

²⁸ According to Jobes' relevance theory, "God is responsible for the diversity of languages in the world and therefore can use that diversity to his purposes.... Because God created the rules by which language works, human language offers no barrier to his purposes nor can it frustrate his ability to communicate." Jobes, "Relevance Theory and the Translation of Scripture," 779.

²⁹ Jobes speaks of contemporary sociology as an updated form of Romantic philosophy: "The popular idea that human thought and language create reality as often taught by sociologists today is, in its most radical expression, an example of the autonomy of the self that when pushed to its logical end violates the Creator-creature distinction that is fundamental to Christian theology." Jobes, "Relevance Theory and the Translation of Scripture," 778n11.

³⁰ Evangelical Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, like Jobes, responds to socio-linguistic theories and concludes of Paul's proclamational strategies that "it is plain that Paul was well aware of these variations in the cultural norms and backgrounds of those he was evangelizing and adjusted his approach accordingly." Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "The Problem of Historical Relativity," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 174.

³¹ Scripture's "central message, which does not vary from age to age, is not at all culturally conditioned and ... is unfailingly relevant to mankind in every period of history." Hughes, "The Problem of Historical Relativity," 175. He added, "The faith of the New Testament is secure and immutable precisely because it is founded on absolutes." *Ibid.*, 185.

³² Hughes surmises: "The cultural environment within which the biblical writings first saw the light of day is not of central significance. But it would be wrong to conclude that it is of no significance.... The more we know

The Retrieval of Propositional Meaning and Truth through Hermeneutical Realism

Literary theory is a second area of study as to the meaning of words, but can only be briefly discussed, though elsewhere it is more developed in connection to missiology.³³ By the 1960s, the disciplines of philosophy of language and literary theory had leveled a continued attack against readers. To secular literary and cultural critic E. D. Hirsch, literary theory had come to propose that the reader must determine meaning for himself:³⁴ if the truth concepts of the propositions remain largely unverifiable and sentences only find their meaning according to the contextual constraints by which they are read, then ultimately, “textual meaning is independent of the author’s control.”³⁵

The interpretive theory that Hirsch called “hermeneutical realism,” offered a way toward discerning meaning from the sense of a proposition. His theory posited a strict relationship between meaning and authorial intent, such that to recover one is to recover the other: the author desires to convey an understandable message by the words that he uses.³⁶ To Hirsch, “authorial intent” was the appropriate designation to refer to the “private meaning” that an author has assigned to his proposition; the private meaning must be uncovered in the interpretive process, so that what was private to the author can now be publicly understood by his audience.³⁷ Therefore,

of the period and its culture, in all its manifestations, the better equipped we are to penetrate to the sense of the biblical text.” Hughes, “The Problem of Historical Relativity,” 175.

³³ See Burnett, “Defining Biblical Missions,” 337–42.

³⁴ In his 1967 work of hermeneutical realism, *Validity in Interpretation*, E. D. Hirsch identified that secular literary theories have generally appeared unable or unwilling to lead the reader to evaluate the truthfulness of a written or spoken proposition, let alone to attempt to reconstruct the author’s intentions for the meaning of a sentence. Yet, to Hirsch, the meaning is the message: “*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.” Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8. Emphasis in original. For a recent highlight of Hirsch’s “seminal statement of actual intentionalism” (on his p. 23, in which he states that “meaning is an affair of consciousness and not of physical signs of things”) see Sherri Irvin, “Teaching and Learning Guide for: Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning,” *Philosophy Compass* 4, no. 1 (2009): 287–91, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00180.x>. Hirsch characterized the skepticism among the academics of his time as “authorial irrelevance” and “semantic autonomy,” in Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 2–5. “The study of ‘what a text says’ became the study of what it says to an individual critic.... The text had to represent *somebody’s* meaning—if not the author’s then the critic’s.” *Ibid.*, 3. He then extends the discussion to the skeptical claim of “semantic mutability,” in which a text might change its meaning “from era to era” or “from reading to reading,” depending upon the subjective nature of the reader in his time and place. *Ibid.*, 6, with discussion through p. 10.

³⁵ The literary attack is so expressed in Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1.

³⁶ So affirmed in Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 74.

³⁷ To Hirsch, the concept of a “private meaning” is at odds with the notion of a “public meaning” that is determined by the audience. He adds to his list of contemporary objections to author-controlled meaning the “myth of the public consensus ... that the author’s intention is irrelevant to what the text says.... The idea of a public meaning sponsored not by the author’s intention but by a public consensus is based upon a fundamental error of observation and logic.” Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 13. There is some sense in Hirsch’s formulation that the reader “can never know another person’s intended meaning with certainty,” since there is some level of privacy to an author’s thoughts, as not everything thought is conveyed in writing. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 17.

the reader can retrieve the author's intention for the proposition and gain the knowledge that the author has asserted to be true. The reader's goal is therefore to believe the text to state the meaning that the author had in mind when writing it.³⁸

Evangelicals shared Hirsch's understanding that a text holds one original meaning with a range of possible contextual applications. In fact, his hermeneutical realism, with its attendant authorial intentionalism, has not only been appreciated by evangelical readers of Scripture, but it has been cautiously integrated into the principles of biblical interpretation and biblical exposition.³⁹

Biblical interpretation, specifically when conducted as evangelical hermeneutics according to the grammatical-historical method,⁴⁰ is the fitting solution to secular linguistic theories that have unnecessarily introduced problems into texts, namely the denial of authorial intent, meaning, and propositional truthfulness.⁴¹ The grammatical-historical method of

Nevertheless, uncertainty as to the author's private thoughts does not lead to uncertainty about what he has publicly written, because "the interpretation of texts is concerned exclusively with sharable meanings," which is to say, with the author's verbal assertion. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 18.

³⁸ Hirsch's goal is well synthesized in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 76.

³⁹ Evangelical hermeneutician Kevin Vanhoozer has drawn substantially upon Hirsch's theory of meaning to support the evangelical position that God communicates His will clearly through the words of the original autographs of Scripture. Vanhoozer considers Hirsch foundational for defining meaning and authorial intention and appropriates his realism for evangelical hermeneutics. See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 74–85; also see Blue's evaluation of Vanhoozer's use of Austin and Searle for communicative acts, in Scott A. Blue, "The Hermeneutic of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Its Impact on Expository Preaching: Friend or Foe?" *JETS* 44, no. 2 (June 2001): 263–64. Evangelicals generally apply caution with Hirsch's work, given his 1976 move away from his prior distinctions between meaning and significance toward a more flexible view that a text could permit a range of non-authorial meanings, which is to say meanings that are not directly intended by the author. For a tracing of Hirsch's original views and perceived shift, see W. Edward Glenny, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations," *JETS* 38, no. 4 (December 1995): 486–88 [of 481–500]; Blue, "The Hermeneutic of E. D. Hirsch," 258–61. Robert Thomas makes little use of Hirsch in his treatment of authorial intention as meaning, in Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 89, 129. More recently, evangelical hermeneuticians have debated Hirsch's shift on meaning, showing a split in the camp. Also, consult the seminars of the working group "The Contributions of E. D. Hirsch to Biblical Hermeneutics," at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 16, 2016, moderated by W. Edward Glenny, with Elliott Johnson, Dan McCartney, Michael Burer, and J. Daniel Hays.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 13. Thomas noted that "Changes in evangelical hermeneutics accompanied changes in the movement as a whole.... Confusion created by the new definitions is enough to force one to resort to the time-honored definitions, in which no such confusion exists." *Ibid.* Thomas drew upon the impressions of David Wells and Iain Murray to support the shift, on pp. 14–17, then he identified publications and events that precipitated the changes, on pp. 17–20. See David F. Wells, "Foreword," in *The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001); Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 51, 185.

⁴¹ Historic treatments of evangelical hermeneutics include Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970); Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*. Thomas distinguished "evangelical hermeneutics" from an array of interpretive methods advanced by ecumenical Christians. His important undertaking identified that by the 1970s evangelicalism began to reflect the kinds of hermeneutical shifts that were common to secular literary theory: "Hermeneutical authorities now define 'hermeneutics,' 'exegesis,' 'meaning,' and 'interpretation' in ways that conflict with traditional

interpretation offers the reader a straightforward, objective process for determining the biblical author's intention for his propositions, and ultimately for affirming the truthfulness of the concept that he has relayed by it.⁴²

The goal of evangelical hermeneutics is to retrieve the original meaning of a text, because, according to evangelical hermeneutician Kevin Vanhoozer, “literary knowledge—knowledge not only about the text but of what the text is about—is indeed possible.”⁴³ Hermeneutical realism thus affirms that meaning is the sole possession of the author.

Original meaning, though fixed, has a multiplicity of possible current applications.⁴⁴ The meaning of the Scriptures, though ancient in origin, possesses a fresh quality for contemporary

definitions of the words.” Thomas’ historic definitions call the reader to a confident interpretive process: “hermeneutics” is “a set of principles;” “exegesis” is “an implementation of valid interpretive principles;” “meaning” is “the truth intention of the author;” and “interpretation” is “an understanding of the truth intention of the author.” Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 27. Also see Robert L. Thomas, “Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?” *JETS* 39, no. 2 (June 1996): 247–49.

Thomas adapted Milton Terry’s classic definition of the “Grammatico-historical method of exegesis” (see Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 173): “A study of inspired Scripture designed to discover under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the meaning of a text dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history.” Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 35. The following steps constitute Thomas’ “digest method” of biblical exegesis. The list is condensed and adapted from Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 35–59, 143–45: 1. Prepare Preparation for Interpretation, by studying the historical background, the original language texts, the target language translations, Greek and Hebrew commentaries, target-language commentaries (expositional and devotional); 2. proceed in interpretation, with lexical exegesis (to define terms in context), syntactical exegesis (to understand the grammatical relationship of words), synthesis statements (to describe findings and propose a passage outline), resolution of difficulties (to analyze and conclude interpretive problems), and re-evaluation (to eliminate wrong alternatives and present final view). Thomas also presents a schematic to represent the relationship between exegesis and the fields of biblical and theological study. The disciplines involved in the student’s initial biblical studies, including the issues of biblical themes and historical backgrounds, original languages, and the employment of interpretive rules and principles, constitute ground-level work, setting a firm foundation upon which to “climb up” to biblical exposition (so identified in *ibid.*, 12–13).

⁴² On the improper separation of “meaning” from “intention” among nonconservative evangelicals, see Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 23–24, 26. Of important note to Thomas, the evangelical reader must be careful not to insert his own “preunderstandings” or presuppositions into the foundational work of biblical study (see extended critique in Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 28–30). The grammatical-historical method does not recognize the validity of a reader’s “preunderstanding” as a starting place for interpretation, due to its subjective emphasis, which places the observer’s feelings about Scripture at the forefront of his interpretive process. The insertion of subjectivism in biblical interpretation can quickly elevate one’s personal views into the science of interpretation, leaving the meaning of the text tentative at best; at worst, preunderstandings can undermine the orthodox doctrines such as the sufficiency, authority, inspiration, inerrancy, and perspicuity of Scripture. On the relationship between text and interpreter see discussion in David Wells, “The Theologian’s Craft,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComisky (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 185–89.

⁴³ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 23.

⁴⁴ On meaning governing the significance and therefore the range of possible applications, see J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Culture Versus Permanent,” in E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 230–40. Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line between Hermeneutics and Application,” in Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 186–87.

audiences of every context.⁴⁵ An application of a text of Scripture, as defined from a traditional evangelical perspective, is best seen as “the use or practice of God’s message in personal life.”⁴⁶ The contemporary lessons that emerge from a text reflect the “significance” that the reader may rightfully derive from the text.

Hirsch’s affirmation that “significance” is consequent to “meaning” is well to be followed by evangelicals: “It is not the meaning of the text which changes, but its significance.... *Significance*.... names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Abner Chou brings a contemporary evangelical caution to the reader who might misuse application, since application is by nature subjective: “Application that does not coincide with the intention of the author is really misapplication.... If our application does not abide in the intended significance of a text, we actually ignore what God desires us to learn and to live from that passage.”⁴⁸

The next section explores how the very nature of a proposition supports the idea of original authorial intent as well as applications that logically connect to the text. Missionaries who desire to be faithful in cross-cultural engagement need to understand that the communicative force of a biblical text lies in its form and function.

Evangelical Descriptions of the Form and Function of the Propositions of Scripture

Hermeneutical realism is not solely a literary matter to conservative evangelicals but a theological conviction that traces back to the definition of a biblical proposition. Evangelicals believe that the propositions of Scripture are not simply words placed in sequence by a human author that mean something potentially true. They are words delivered by the eternal, Triune God in syntactical units that therefore constitute the basis of all truth.⁴⁹ Some connections will now be

⁴⁵ Traditional evangelical hermeneutician Bernard Ramm concluded that “interpretation is one, application is many.” Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 113. Ramm’s understanding aligns with the earlier position of Milton Terry, who in 1885 affirmed the distinction between meaning and application: “There can be no true application, and no profitable taking to ourselves of any lessons of the Bible, unless we first clearly apprehend their original meaning and reference.... When ... the preacher first shows, by a valid interpretation, that he thoroughly comprehends that which is written, his various allowable accommodations of the writer’s words will have the greater force, in whatever practical applications he may give them.” Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 600. See treatment of the quotation by Shealy, who calls for a return to the traditional perspective of Terry and Ramm, in Shealy, “Redrawing the Line,” 170–71.

⁴⁶ Shealy, “Redrawing the Line,” 187.

⁴⁷ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 221. He diagrams and details an approach to meaning-derived application on pp. 221–25 and helps the evangelical reader avoid the false applications of “trajectory hermeneutics” on pp. 226–28.

⁴⁹ Carl F. H. Henry spoke in linguistic terms to champion the inherent truthfulness of the Scriptures. He asserted that a proposition is by nature “a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted or denied.” Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:455–57, with quote on 456. While conservative evangelicals are convinced that the biblical text portrays truth from God’s perspective, they differ on literary grounds as to which syntactical units of Scripture should be regarded as “propositions.” Some evangelical scholars understand the biblical propositions to be limited to declarative sentences,

established to understand the capacity of the form of a proposition to accurately reveal a truth claim to a reader from any context.

The Literary Form and Authorial Logic of the Propositions

That any biblical text can be reasonably considered a proposition is an important consideration when looking to Scripture to provide God's intended truth claims. The claim that all of Scripture is most generally propositional allows the reader to apply established linguistic conventions to any text of Scripture in its literary form, or genre, in order to ascertain its meaning.⁵⁰ Scripture reveals its truths through propositions that are crafted by their authors in well-defined genres and situated in particular contexts.⁵¹

those indicative statements that most directly state a truth. For an early proponent, see Gordon H. Clark, in *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 150: "Aside from imperative sentences and a few exclamations in the Psalms, the Bible is composed of propositions. These give information about God and his dealings with men." Quoted in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 456. For a later expression of the view that propositions are indicative statements only, rather than normative commandments and questions, see Gordon R. Lewis, "Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?" *JETS* 46, no. 2 (June 2003): 269–98, esp. 270.

However, other written forms in Scripture reflect truth, whether or not they make direct spiritual assertions, such as imperatives, exclamations, or any text that describes the pathos of its subject. John Rist's discussion of propositions as "things" (*res*) and verbal "signs" (*signa*), as they were understood in Stoic, Platonic, and Epicurean thought is perhaps helpful to the expanded categorization of propositions. Rist describes how Augustine utilized the *res* and *signa* concepts to urge for a Christian hermeneutic that would actually reveal the spiritual truth behind the words of the biblical text. See John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24–31. In the more expanded sense, then, biblical propositions are best understood as a wide variety of biblical texts from all genres, such as narrative, history, poetry, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature. Hill admits the possibility of a broad range of genres and texts in Daniel Hill, "Proposition," 632–33.

⁵⁰ With a specific focus on Old Testament propositions, Branson Woodard and Michael Travers assert: "Readers come to understand the propositional truths of a text in its generic terms; each genre communicates meaning within its own conventions, not in spite of them." Branson L. Woodard, Jr. and Michael E. Travers, "Literary Forms and Interpretation," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Literary Forms*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., 29–43 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 38. In defense of the factuality of Scripture, for example, Howard and Grisanti explain that ancient Near East histories and the historical narratives of the Pentateuch are of a similar enough genre to sufficiently establish the historicity of the biblical stories and thereby repudiate claims that the Pentateuch is a series of "imaginative fiction novels." In David M. Howard, Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti, *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 229. They draw support from Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 61–68, esp. 65.

⁵¹ Ronald Giese has delineated the connection between literary form and propositional meaning: "Every word and phrase of Scripture belongs to the context of the sentence and paragraph where they appear. What the grammatical form of a word is, or what the role of a word or phrase is in relation to the sentence as a whole (syntax), are important considerations in determining meaning." Ronald L. Giese, Jr., "Literary Forms of the Old Testament," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Literary Forms*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., 5–27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 5–6. Furthermore, Woodard and Travers have added that "genre is an important aspect of how an author creates meaning in a text." Woodard and Travers, "Literary Forms and Interpretation," 27. They continue: "Readers come to understand the propositional truths of a text in its generic terms; each genre communicates meaning within its own conventions, not in spite of them." *Ibid.*, 38.

Recognizing the import of the literary form of propositions leads to understanding that propositions do not exist independently of themselves or their form but are linked together according to the rules and aims of their genre, within the historic, progressive revelation of their immediate contexts and the entire canon.⁵² A truth that is asserted in one proposition in its immediate context will be supported and developed by a similar proposition in the same literary form, even though the immediate context might be different.⁵³

Furthermore, the biblical propositions are not only bound to their literary forms, but they link to other propositions from across genres that bring new or different expressions of the concept elsewhere across the Scriptures. Chou articulates how the propositions are laden not just with authorial meaning but “authorial logic.”⁵⁴ He demonstrates how the biblical writers operate from an underlying interpretive methodology that draws from and applies a prior writer’s theological presuppositions in formulating their new propositions. The effect of such a “prophetic” and “apostolic hermeneutic” is a “Christian hermeneutic” that lays the literary groundwork for a reader to understand the full range of the truth that is presented by its many propositions across many genres and over the progress of written revelation.⁵⁵ The authorial logic of the biblical writers leads to what might be considered the “Hebraic adoption principle,” which is the next topic of discussion.

The “Hebraic Adoption Principle”

The “Hebraic adoption principle” recognizes that the historic, progressive flow of biblical truths that stem from the basis of Jewish history, language, and culture are applicable in all cultures and generations. This principle advances at least three stacking ideas. First, many propositions of Scripture reveal God’s perfections and actions in immediate contexts that are specific to, and for the initial benefit of national, ethnic Israel. Second, God brought later readers to know Him according to the Hebrew context through which He first revealed His Being and His works. Third, because the content of biblical truth builds throughout the canon, by implication, it is reasonable to assert that contemporary readers, like the New Testament Gentile

⁵² Woodard and Travers speak to the progress of revelation in the narrative genre: “In the Old Testament narratives the theological truth is communicated in the chronological development of the events of the story; the reader does not just understand the truth—he experiences it.” Woodard and Travers, “Literary Forms and Interpretation,” 38–39.

⁵³ Through many biblical examples, Chou describes how the prophets operated from hermeneutical realism when writing progressive revelation. They first ascertained the meaning of the earlier proposition in its historical, literary, and cultural setting and then applied it to their own. Thus, they demonstrated a “growing theology” throughout the canon that represented the truth consistently across propositions. Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁵⁵ See Chou’s initial proposal for a “prophetic” cum “apostolic” cum “Christian hermeneutic” in Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 20–23. The remainder of the work undertakes the quest for authorial logic by analyzing the intertextual methodology of the prophets and apostles, ultimately concluding that such intertextuality was necessary for exegetical and theological continuity across the canon. *Ibid.*, 199–200.

readers before them, come to learn the transcendent truths of God through a historic, progressive flow that is Hebraic in nature.⁵⁶

Missionaries rely upon the Hebraic adoption principle when they conduct faithful proclamation activities, whether they realize it or not. The reason is that all believers, no matter the context from which they are saved, share a common, ancient root of faith with believers of all time.⁵⁷ New Testament Gentiles and contemporary readers alike understand their faith by learning and applying the teaching that was delivered and expounded from the ancient Hebrew context.

The New Testament provides many examples⁵⁸ of Hebraic adoption that are essential for living out a biblical faith today, and the presence of the Hebraic context will not be eradicated from the redemption history of future generations. But one example of the principle is helpful to trace here: the use of the term “hallelujah” across the canon (הלל־יהוה, Pss 117, 150; ἀλληλουϊά, Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6). The term demonstrates how the Hebrew context of worship is shared by all believers of past, present, and future generations. “Hallelujah” (הלל־יהוה) in the Psalms is “a term of praise directed to God in an attitude of thanksgiving for his greatness and goodness.”⁵⁹ In the New Testament, the term is transliterated as ἀλληλουϊά, with the result that the sound of the Hebrew form is both the common sound and the common activity of all believers who now and in the future will usher praise with resounding voices.⁶⁰ Despite the foreignness of the customs of

⁵⁶ Similarly, Daniel Strange considers intertextual connections between Acts 17:16–24 and Genesis 1–11 to establish a framework for combatting false religions. He describes his framework of the metanarrative of Scripture as a “canonically limited polyphony” in Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 47, 54–57, 57–94, with summary on 97.

⁵⁷ Discussed with regard to a common biblical orthodoxy in Burns, *Ancient Gospel, Brave New World*, 172.

⁵⁸ One example is how the Corinthians and all later readers must understand Jesus as the Passover Lamb within the context of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the Levitical system of sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7; cf. Exod 12:1–28; Isa 53:4–8). Other NT examples include: circumcision and Law-keeping in the Gentile contexts of the Colossians (esp. Col 2:11, 13); Abraham becoming the father of all Jews and Gentiles who adopt his faith (Rom 4–5 and Gal 3); the progressive development of Daniel’s prophecies in Revelation to Gentiles in Asia Minor.

⁵⁹ Stephen D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 462.

⁶⁰ Ibid. The eschatological exclamations of praise in Revelation 19 are theologically oriented to reflect what all believers will have experienced in their lives and in salvation history: God’s possession of salvation, glory, and power (Rev 19:1); retributive justice over the enemies of God’s people (Rev 19:3–4); God’s sovereignly and supreme might (Rev 19:6). The term הלל־יהוה recurs in Ps 117:1–2 as an imperative to call “all nations” and “all peoples” to join with Israel in praising Yahweh (v. 1). (Nancy DeClaissé-Walford, “Psalm 150: Let Every Breathing Thing Praise the Lord,” in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. Nance deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014], 1009.) According to verse 2, the nations are to praise Yahweh (הלל־יהוה) on the basis of His divine perfections of “lovingkindness” (דִּבְרֵי) and “truth” (אֱמֻנָה), both of which harken back to Yahweh’s Sinaitic self-declaration in Exodus 34:6–7. Psalm 117 therefore uses the imperative הלל־יהוה, which is itself a proposition, as an entrance point for reflecting upon the divine perfections of Yahweh in order to verbally proclaim them. The worship demanded by הלל־יהוה is with words and for public use—verbal proclamation is within earshot of an audience. The proclaimers and the audience of Psalm 117 are ostensibly the same, as praise is to come from the nations and peoples so that the nations and peoples can glorify Yahweh in full recognition of His perfections. Psalm 150 forms a “resounding doxological close to the Psalter,” (DeClaissé-Walford, “Psalm 150,” 1009) employing the term “praise” (הלל־יהוה) thirteen times, with the final form as “hallelujah” (הלל־יהוה, v. 6). The first two verses offer

ancient Israel, all true worshippers in all the world are commanded to engage in verbal, propositional praise, according to the original Hebrew term “hallelujah.”

This brief word study lends credence to the conservative evangelical claim that the form of the biblical propositions is essential for understanding meaning and deriving contemporary significance. The linguistic parameter of the missiological propositional assertion model ensures that local believers in any context mature in their faith by learning and living according to the propositions in the form in which they were divinely revealed and faithfully proclaimed by the missionary.

The External Expression of a Proposition’s Essential Meaning

Although all biblical propositions are transcendent, they will nevertheless undergo some form change in the process of language translation so that the meaning of the text can be fully grasped by a reader in a different language and context. There is no tension in affirming that the meaning of the proposition will never change even if its lexical or syntactical form does when translating the proposition from one language to another.⁶¹ The discussion of the nature of a proposition’s form will help establish the case for what constitutes a faithful Bible translation.⁶²

To understand the form of a proposition conceptually it is useful to employ the biblical term for “form,” μορφή, which denotes the external manifestation of the true internal reality of

the theological motivation for praising Yahweh: He is in His sanctuary and thus transcendent while at the same time accessible for human worship (v. 1; *Ibid.*); He is mighty in His acts and exceedingly great. The remainder of Psalm 150 offers instruction as to the method that Israel was to employ in performing worship (vv. 3–5), with the final call for “every breathing thing” to join in praising Yahweh. Allen concludes well that “Yahweh deserves the praise of the whole world.” Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–50*, 159. The reason the Old and New Testament uses of “hallelujah” correspond is that believers of all time and all cultures have experienced the spiritual benefits of salvation by God. Universally, believers respond similarly when they worship Him with biblical and theological awareness. The proposition “Hallelujah!” (הללויה, ἀλληλουϊά), which is in the imperative in both Testaments, thus invites believers of all generations and cultures to reflect biblically on the perfections of Yahweh and verbally proclaim them as propositions that benefit not only Israel but all believers from the nations.

⁶¹ Ramm expresses similarly, recognizing the inherent “paradox” of language: “Meaning is the root of symbol making.... Meaning is more fundamental than symbols but meanings can be shared only in terms of specific symbols. This is also exhibited in translation, for it proves we can think the same meaning in two or more languages. We may change the symbols but preserve the meaning!” Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1961), 126.

⁶² Ramm considered an exegetically faithful Bible translation to be a “causative authority” for the local church in the language group. Through the translated Scriptures the regenerate reader will spiritually discern the truth, which was passed down from the original manuscripts. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 207. He draws the subjectively oriented definition of “causative authority” from Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., rev., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (1899; repr. Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 43–44. Ramm also described the authority of a translation in more objective terms, which is close to what Bible translation expert and missionary Aaron Shryock has called a “derived inerrancy” (in a personal conversation in Los Angeles in September, 2019). According to Ramm, “Christian revelation is universal and it achieves its universality concretely by the medium of translation so that the translated Scripture becomes *one of the products of special revelation*!” Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 188. Emphasis in original. He further emphasizes: “The Christian Church must counter scepticism about translating and affirm that the Christian Scriptures can be so translated that the translation may be counted as a product of special revelation.” *Ibid.*, 194.

something.⁶³ In linguistic terms, the μορφή refers to the lexical and syntactical expression of the proposition, which is superficially observable by the words themselves, and it also identifies the internal essence of the proposition, which is its meaning.⁶⁴ The external, superficial layer of the μορφή changes between languages, notably so when the languages operate by a variety of differing grammatical and contextual rules. In Bible translations, while the external expression of a text is subject to variation due to the linguistic rules for its use, the text's internal essence is fixed—the meaning of a proposition will not change. The work of the translator is to find the μορφή in the target language (external and internal) that most accurately represents the meaning (internal essence) of the μορφή in the original language.

To distinguish the external, adaptable form of a proposition from its internal, fixed meaning is not to dichotomize the proposition into two functionally independent parts, as if the internal essence will remain intact no matter how the μορφή is expressed. The interrelatedness of the meaning to its form has already been established: meaning derives from the purposeful, fixed order of the author's words. The words of the original propositions were penned in the original languages to perfectly portray the meaning that God intended; not just any change to the outer form will accurately express the author's meaning.⁶⁵

The ability to discern meaning through the new μορφή in the target language depends upon a sound exegetical process of translation. A consistent interpretation according to the grammatical-historical hermeneutical method is essential so that the lexical and syntactical form of the propositions are preserved as closely as possible in the translation process.⁶⁶ The difficulties to overcome are many in accurately understanding the internal essence of a proposition and adequately communicating it in a new context, given that the writer of the text

⁶³ Cf. Philippians 2:6–8, referring to the fleshly manifestation of the divine essence of the Lord Jesus Christ, who took on a human μορφή externally. For a philosophical presentation of the term, see Johannes Behm, “Μορφή, Μορφόω, Μόρφωσις, Μεταμορφόω,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *TDNT*, 4:742–46 [OF 742–60]. For extended scholarly discussion of the term, principally from Philippians 2:6, see Wilfred Matham, “Phil 2:5–11: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Christ's Humiliation” (ThM thesis, Capital Bible Seminary, 1992), 29–39. Matham surveys the scholarly debate about the meaning of μορφή θεοῦ as it contrasts with μορφήν δούλου and concludes: “It seems clear that μορφή is used fairly uniformly in the Bible for external appearance.” *Ibid.*, 34. Matham connects μορφή to John 17:5 to ultimately conclude that “Jesus in His preincarnate state possessed the glory of God and was therefore equal to God in nature and essence—since the form of God was external revelation of true reality.” *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁴ See discussion of the inextricable connection between the outer form of the proposition and its internal meaning by Ramm, who employs the terms *graphé* and *forma* as the basis for the ongoing work of Bible translation. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 194–97.

⁶⁵ If a translator fails to exegete the original meaning of a proposition or deliberately alters its meaning, the result will be to create a μορφή in the target language that does not correspond to the essence of the original μορφή. To misinterpret the meaning of the original μορφή is to misrepresent the proposition in the target language and impose an erroneous meaning onto an incorrectly translated μορφή. Such a distortion of the intended meaning of the proposition would lead to a biblically unfaithful translation with an unbiblical meaning.

⁶⁶ The specific terms and syntax of the original proposition must be both accurately interpreted and represented according to the grammatical constraints of the original language and the new target language in order to read the biblical record of God's Being and actions in a new context. Jobes, “Relevance Theory,” 775–76.

used culturally based linguistic tools specific to his context.⁶⁷ Yet, when the translation's inner sense is true to the original in its new language and context, then the regenerate reader can uncover the meaning of the text and subjectively discern and approve God's message as true (1 Cor 2:6–7, 10–13).

Therefore, discussion of the text's μορφή is helpful for bridging the text's objective meaning with the reading of a context-specific translation. Because the internal essence and the external μορφή of a proposition are inseparably linked, it is possible for the author's meaning to be not only accurately expressed in translation but faithfully applied in the new reader's context. Once the author's meaning is understood from the translated μορφή, the regenerate reader is well on his way to understanding how God wants him to apply it to his life and context.

The Linguistic Parameter of “Missiological Propositional Assertion”

Linguistic and literary considerations find their explicit connection to missions in the missiological propositional assertion model, namely in its linguistic parameter. The linguistic parameter offers the missionary clarity about his task, which is to proclaim the biblical text and demand faith from his listener, regardless of the operative worldview. He can proceed with confidence, since the preaching and teaching of God's Word is the Holy Spirit's means of transforming the sinner into a disciple of Christ.

Several conclusions about the grammatical nature and function of the biblical propositions bear upon the missionary, since the central focus of the Great Commission is the proclamation of the propositions of Scripture.

Transcendent Truth Is Universally Accessible

One reason for missionary boldness, in linguistic terms, is that the languages by which cultures operate follow grammatical rules that are suited to accurately express the meaning of the biblical propositions in their contexts, no matter how diverse the target language is from the original biblical language. Because God's Word is the source of all meaning and truth, new languages and cultural contexts can apply the “significance” of the biblical propositions accurately.

⁶⁷ Several questions related to the philosophy and practice of translation cannot be answered here, such as the following: What are the guidelines for preserving the internal essence of the μορφή when the target language requires a significant grammatical reworking in order to express it? What effect might changes in the word forms of a truth-value (locution) make on its intended understanding and application (perlocution)? Methodologically, how might the translator gain the confidence that the final translation is a trustworthy transmission of the original propositions such that it is equivalent enough to reflect what might be called a “derived inerrancy”? A useful starting place for answering these and other questions is the insightful treatment by William Barrick, which approaches the theology and practice of Bible translation from a basis of conservative evangelical doctrine and exegetical methodology. William D. Barrick, *Understanding Bible Translation: Bringing God's Word into New Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), esp. 30–122. For insights into the problematic translation philosophy and practices of the ecumenical World Council of Churches (WCC), see Kenneth R. Ross, *Mission Rediscovered: Transforming Disciples—A Commentary on the Arusha Call to Discipleship* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), 17–20. Note Ramm's discussion of the limitations of Bible translation, namely that “no version can be the exact duplication of the original Testaments,” as well as the importance of exegetically harnessed interpretation in the translation process. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 200–4.

For some evangelicals, the activities of linguistic engagement that are circumscribed by missiological propositional assertion need to be reconsidered, especially if the experiences, perspectives, and worldviews of the missionary and the target audience might be very diverse.⁶⁸ The search for newer cultural voices in the hermeneutical process can arise from a general distrust of Western missionary-translators, who are often viewed as culturally incompetent to put the true meaning of Scripture into indigenous hands.⁶⁹ The revisionist proposals of cultural hermeneutics also emanate from scholars who expect the local audience to be able to determine not only the effectiveness of the missionary's communication but the relevance of the propositions to their lives.⁷⁰

The contemporary evangelical discussion of worldview differences between the biblical writer and the contemporary reader appears to follow the linguistic relativism of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which postulates that a person's cultural language shapes worldview and influences

⁶⁸ As contextual theologies continue to populate the field of missiology, some scholars urge for more openness to the kinds of theological diversity between the West and Majority World that disregard traditional evangelical methods of biblical interpretation. For example, theologian Elizabeth Yao-Hwa Sung calls for missiologists to conduct a wide-sweeping "reappraisal of the contribution of culture to hermeneutics, the constitution and function of tradition, and the character of theological diversity and unity." See Elizabeth Yao-Hwa Sung, "Culture and Hermeneutics," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, gen ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 150–55, with quote on 150. Also, consult the seminars of the working group "Method in Systematic Theology: The Search for Biblical Orthodoxy," at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 21, 2019, moderated by Ken Keathley, with Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Sung Wook Chung, Kurt Anders Richardson, John Peckham, and Boubakar Sanou. They urge for an ever-expanding openness to context-specific orthodoxy, such that what one ecclesiastical body might consider heresy is for another a correctable error or even an admissible doctrine.

⁶⁹ For discussion of major objections against the use of traditional evangelical exegesis and hermeneutics in foreign contexts, see Will Brooks, "Grammatical-Historical Exegesis and World Mission," in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 240–47.

⁷⁰ The desire to incorporate the local context into the framework of biblical interpretation is the goal of current social locatedness theory. The theory considers the life experiences and worldview of a local reader or hearer (his social location) as a critical factor in how the missionary will present biblical truth. While some degree of cultural literacy is necessary to effectively communicate the propositions, social locatedness theory pushes far beyond cultural awareness by assuming that the reader, whether believer or non-believer, is the final arbiter of a text's cultural relevance. Seventh-Day Adventist Boubakar Sanou promotes the theory: "Besides prayerfully engaging in a rigorous exegesis of biblical texts, biblical scholars need to also diligently strive to achieve some degree of proficiency in cultural literacy. This would help them understand the various factors affecting their intended audiences' reading and interpretation of the Bible, the reasons behind those factors, and how to respond in ways that are biblically faithful and contextually relevant. From this it would follow that those readers can make intelligent, life-changing decisions in favor of the gospel." Boubakar Sanou, "Exegesis of the Bible and the Social Location of the Gospel Recipients: A Case for Worldview Transformation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 57, no. 2 (2020): 375. Sanou concludes, "I am convicted that only this approach to biblical scholarship, which enhances biblical faithfulness in pluralistic contexts, has the potential to lead to discipleship and worldview transformation." *Ibid.*, 379.

thoughts and decisions.⁷¹ According to the hypothesis, speakers of different languages encode meaning according to different (and possibly conflicting) logics and psychological factors.⁷²

Proponents of such relativistic theories express that if the missionary cannot overcome the worldview obstacles that are embedded in language, then a reader who comes from a different cultural context will not understand the reason to obey the missionary's text.⁷³ Proclamational effectiveness is thus expected to require some level of cultural accommodation between terms and concepts in order to facilitate belief.

The missiological propositional assertion model refutes the assumption that the worldview of the biblical text must align with the local, pagan worldview of the audience.⁷⁴ Any

⁷¹ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll, Stephen C. Levinson, Penny Lee, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012). See moderate treatment in Taylor, *Language Animal*, 320–31. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as described by Karen Jobes, who rejects it, proposes that “the worldview of a given culture and its language are so mutually defining that there are no universals across all languages.” Jobes reasons to the contrary, positing that “all languages share phonetic, grammatical, and semantic similarities that are based on embodied experience with the physical world and that can be considered linguistic universals.” Jobes, “Relevance Theory,” 775–76. She draws support from cognitive scientists, whom she cites in 776n7, including Jerome A. Feldman, *From Molecule to Metaphor: A Neural Theory of Language*, (Cambridge: MIT, 2006); Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994); Bernard Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Joseph Greenberg, ed., *Universals of Language* (Cambridge: MIT, 1963).

⁷² For seminal treatment of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, see Harry Hoijer, *Language in Culture: Proceedings of a Conference on the Interrelations of Language and Other Aspects of Culture*, ed. Harry Hoijer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), esp. 92–105. On the historical development of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, see E. F. Konrad Koerner, “The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: A Preliminary History and a Bibliographical Essay,” *JLA* 2, no. 2 (December 1992): 173–98. Also see Jesse Prinz, “Culture and Cognitive Science,” (November 2, 2011) in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/culture-cogsci/>.

⁷³ As an evangelical example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, biblical scholars Richards and O'Brien do not look to insert local cultural understandings into the interpretive process, but they believe that in some cases it might not be possible to overcome the cultural differences and fully apply the meaning of a text. They suggest that beyond common problems related to translation, such as trying to express words that do not readily translate into the target language, there are nearly insuperable worldview obstacles that hinder the full understanding of the meaning of a word in its sentence. The application of a biblical proposition might be difficult or impossible to achieve where the worldviews are incongruent. For example, they find that North Americans struggle to apply the meaning of μακάριος and its connection to “peacemakers” in Matthew 5:9 because the term does not directly correspond to an English term. They remark: “Alas, here is the bigger problem: maybe the reason we North Americans struggle to find *makarios* in our personal lives is because we don't have a word in our native language to denote it.” Randolph E. Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 70–90, with quote on 75.

As a more overtly problematic missiological example, according to Jim Harries, missionary to Kenya, the process of Bible translation is not a simple language-to-language endeavor, but one that involves bringing theological concepts from one worldview to another. (He defines worldview as the cultural lifestyle embodied by a language). Defining biblical orthodoxy is therefore more a matter of seeing how the local believers live out doctrine than how they say it, since linguistic terms can be not only unreliable but parroted without belief from the original language. Harries gives the example of Luo translations and practices that call into question Western English translations and practices. Jim Harries, “Magic, Divine Revelation and Translation in Theological Education in the Majority World Today (with a Focus on Africa).” *Missionalia* 47, no. 2 (2020): 165–76.

⁷⁴ Jobes, who rejects the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, describes it in hermeneutical terms: “To claim any measure of divine authority, the translated text must *communicate* the same meaning in the target language as the

culturally accommodating attempt at the hermeneutical revision of the Scriptures must be renounced. In response, because Scripture was written with a variety of audiences in mind, all who are being saved are called to embrace the Christian faith as partakers of a new lifestyle (cf. 1 Cor 1–2).⁷⁵ Scripture at once demands that the reader adopt the biblical worldview without compromising the vast cultural diversity of the growing Church.⁷⁶

Furthermore, because the transcendent truth of the biblical propositions is universally accessible in the words of the original languages, there is no legitimate reason to seek to integrate the reader's culture into the interpretive process.⁷⁷ Instead, regenerate readers must seek to understand the original meaning of the propositions and commensurately apply the truths to their contexts.

All Languages Transmit Meaning Contextually

A second reason for the missionary to proclaim the biblical propositions confidently is that all languages operate according to established grammatical rules. It is not only possible to derive accurate meaning from a proposition and apply the meaning responsibly; it is expected. Both the original and the target languages are culture-bound, which complicates but does not block the discovery and application of meaning because the linguistic rules can be understood, no matter how dissimilar the languages might be.⁷⁸

Because it is possible to accurately translate a proposition, then the reader must be called to apply it responsibly in the new context. The reader in his local setting must learn the divine truth and live according to it. Thus, on the grounds of the text's translatability, Scripture affirms that it holds divine authority over the reader, no matter his linguistic, cultural, or worldview context.

Nevertheless, pre-evangelistic encounters and the confrontational communication of evangelism require that the missionary gain a baseline understanding of the culture that he is

source text *communicated* in the original language." Jobes, "Relevance Theory," 776. Emphasis in original. Her assessment agrees with secular philosopher Charles Taylor, who has evaluated that it is not necessary to adopt a Whorfian-type linguistic relativism, where worldview is shaped by language. Where the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is useful is in recognizing that languages reveal how people report their reality, and such reporting probably corresponds more between dissimilar people and languages despite the divergent formulations of the languages themselves. Taylor, *Language Animal*, 328, with discussion from 320–31.

⁷⁵ See Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 46.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Filipino scholar Daniel Espiritu states well: "The evangelical insistence on doing rigorous exegesis to get at the probable intended meaning of biblical texts ... is not so much the out-growth of western worldview as it is the inevitable offshoot of evangelical presuppositions and worldview." Daniel L. Espiritu, "Ethnohermeneutics or Oikohermeneutics? Questioning the Necessity of Caldwell's Hermeneutics," *JAM* 3 (2001): 278.

⁷⁸ For an early challenge to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis from the view that languages share universal rules that are applied to different languages to differing degrees, see Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1957) and Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965).

trying to penetrate with the gospel.⁷⁹ At least a basic awareness about the local culture and the worldview of the target audience is necessary if the missionary is going to help the local reader apply the truth in repentance and belief.⁸⁰ The nature of missiological assertion itself demands some cultural assessment. According to the model, the preacher labors to articulate a selection of propositions in such a way as to craft a message that will explicitly oppose the deep-seated, pagan beliefs of the people, which he must come to recognize.⁸¹

Locally Applied Texts Are Indigenized Texts

A third reason for the missionary to confidently proclaim the biblical propositions on linguistic grounds is that the activity is undergirded by the hope of cultural transformation for each sinner who believes. The quality of application that local believers make when learning Scripture in their language and context is best characterized as propositional “indigenization.”⁸² Such indigenization of Scripture is exhibited when the local reader responds personally and directly to the proposition’s original meaning within the linguistic and cultural constraints of the local context.

A text can be considered indigenized when a reader is sufficiently able to comprehend it as relatable to his life and his culture. For an example of propositional indigenization, a sinner personally applies the gospel message by repudiating false belief and pursuing godliness as all true believers of Scripture have done (cf. 1 Cor 6:11; 1 Thess 1:9). Such action indicates that a text has become culturally realized where it was previously unknown, for the hearer not only

⁷⁹ Taylor, though secular, is helpful for recognizing that cautious observation is crucial for bridging the conceptual gaps to which language differences point. The proclaimer must seek a “mutual understanding” that arrives “through patient mutual study and equal exchange.” Taylor, *Language Animal*, 328.

⁸⁰ For theological discussion of “worldview,” see MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 50–52; Naugle, *Worldview*, xv, 4, esp. 260–67; Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 42–52. Daniel Strange encourages missionaries to proclaim “Christian exclusivity with what might be called a ‘bold humanity,’ a stance that seeks first to understand the world of religion and religions through a biblical worldview before then applying unique and satisfying gospel truth to a world of pseudo-gospels that promise much but can never ultimately deliver.” In Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 28.

⁸¹ The apostle Paul, for example, was raised with an in-depth knowledge of Judaism (Acts 22:3; cf. 5:34; Gal 1:14; Phil 3:4–8) and exhibited an adept understanding of pagan philosophy, against which he persuaded for the superior truth of the gospel. As has been demonstrated earlier, when in Athens, Paul engaged in some fact-gathering and preached with a baseline understanding of his audience’s spiritual beliefs. Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 171; Ashford, “The Gospel and Culture,” 229–30.

⁸² The use of the term “indigenization” in this project is specifically linked to Scripture and does not encompass the range of socio-cultural components that might be intended by the use of the term elsewhere. In missiological use, conservative evangelical missiologist George Peters remarked that by 1989 “indigenization” was both subjective and variable depending on who used it. Peters, “Foreword,” in Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, ix. For perhaps the earliest distinction between “indigenization” and “contextualization” in broad ecumenical terms, see Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context*, 20–21; with brief discussion in Elijah John Fil Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 402–3, 403n146–47. For a conservative evangelical analysis of the historical developments of both indigenization and contextualization as fields of study, see Brooks, “Critiquing Ethnohermeneutics Theories,” 42–73.

understands the significance of the biblical proposition but affirms its truth through context-specific action.⁸³

The biblical text becomes the filter through which new readers understand life in their world; God's special revelation explains that the triune God has provided the general revelation that they already inherently understand, including historical events, cultures, and traditions (Acts 14:16; 17:26; cf. Gen 10:1, 32). However, until the special revelation of the biblical propositions is delivered, the people will misconstrue God's providence in the world in which they live.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The linguistic considerations set forth in this paper demand that the missionary engage in a range of textual activities, based on the hermeneutical and theological conviction that what God has said in one context is binding on all contexts. The missionary should therefore be emboldened by the linguistic parameter of the missiological propositional assertion model of biblical missions. When proclaiming Scripture cross-culturally, he must fully expect the biblical propositions to do what Scripture promises they will. Namely, the propositions will communicate God's meaning in such a way as to convict the sinner who is being saved and transform him into a maturing disciple (2 Cor 2:15–16).

The missionary who relies on the Holy Spirit to use His transcendent Word to communicate the depths of spiritual truth is nevertheless committed to studying the culture and language of his target audience. From the linguistic perspective, understanding the dynamic beliefs, traditions, and customs of the receptor culture is of great value to the missionary. With such knowledge his labors as translator and expositor will help his audience most effectively to derive a range of contextually bound applications to pursue in obedience to the Word.

The goal of biblical missions emerges clearly when considering the linguistic and literary discussions of this paper: the indigenization of the propositions of Scripture in the foreign context. To indigenize the Word of God is to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). By the enabling of the Risen Christ, the missionary brings out the significance of the text in ever-changing ways that are appropriate to the local situation and guides the believers to apply the text by the power of the Spirit, beginning with repenting and repudiating all pagan spiritual knowledge.

Believers of all time who seek to engage sinners with the transformative message of the gospel resonate with the private sentiments of the young missionary David Brainerd, in 1744:

⁸³ The response to the gospel in repentance is a sure sign that the content of the gospel propositions has become indigenized. For example, the foreign proclamations of Paul to the speakers of the Lycaonian dialect in Lystra in Acts 14:6–18 and the cultured Athenians in Acts 17:19–32 called the hearers to abandon falsehood and follow the truth, and so did some of them (cf. 14: 20–23; 17:30, 34).

⁸⁴ Daniel Strange presents the idolatrous misunderstandings of people who operate according to non-biblical worldviews as the product of a “remnantal revelation.” By the term he suggests that all people have devolved a revelatory “single source” of Divine truth into a series of idolatrous beliefs. The epistemic base of all people is wholly pagan due to Adam's fall. Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 95–120. The affirmation of biblical authority in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.10 is apropos to new contexts into which special revelation asserts itself: “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”

“I exceedingly longed, that God would get to himself a name among the heathen.... I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through, so I could but gain souls to Christ.”⁸⁵ Brainerd’s highest vision was to establish the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ among indigenous peoples through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. May God instill such a “propositional hope” in the next generation of evangelical missionaries for His glory, and may the nations see their own hope realized when the missionary confronts their most cherished false beliefs and practices through the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

⁸⁵ David Brainerd, *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd: Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, from the Honourable Society in Scotland, for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New Jersey. Who Died at Northampton in New-England, October 9, 1747, in the 30th Year of His Age. Chiefly Taken from His Own Diary, and Other Private Writings, Written for His Own Use; and Now Published*, ed. Jonathan Edwards (Worcester, MA: Leonard Worcester, 1793), 151.