Bernard Ramm foresaw the hermeneutical problem among evangelicals that would arise through the advent of the New Hermeneutic. Hermeneutical theorists have departed from grammatico-historical principles and embraced the subjectivism of the New Hermeneutic. They are recommending a system that incorporates the step of application into the hermeneutical process, thereby confusing definitions of hermeneutics, exegesis, meaning, and interpretation. Dangers that the confusion brings include those of encouraging a man-centered interpretation, allowing cultural application to change meaning, and advocating a reader-response type of interpretation as well as others. To overcome those dangers, interpreters must be sure of their goal, determine what is normative, develop doctrine, and put into practice the lessons dictated by the meaning of a passage. The only way to achieve this is to redraw the line between hermeneutics and exegesis.

As a pastor, it is important to me for my flock to be able to understand God’s Word and apply it to their lives. Therefore, I am greatly excited over the prospect of teaching a class on hermeneutics to our church members. However, choosing a textbook for the course is a challenge. The difficulty is not the nonavailability of books on the subject, but the discovery that most recent treatments of the subject are promoting new philosophies and methods of interpretation.

My training grounded me in the idea that the disciplines of hermeneutics and application are separate from each other. Hermeneutics is the set of rules for biblical interpretation, and application is the practical implementation of those meanings yielded by interpretation to shape human lives. Application as I learned it has well-defined limits, being controlled by the meanings produced through use of hermeneutical principles. However, recent trends in biblical interpretation among evangelicals are obscuring the line between hermeneutics and application, making accurate interpretation and valid application difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

The purpose of this essay is to isolate one area of change among current trends in order to highlight a significant shift in modern hermeneutics. The discussion will focus on how application relates to hermeneutics. First, attention will focus on how new hermeneutical theories in the past thirty years promote merging contemporary application with hermeneutics and sometimes allowing it to become the contr...