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obedience of faith*

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# Editorial

Our understanding of the role of the Bible in Christian faith and mission has shifted from the critical issue of the infallibility and inerrancy of the text to the issues of contextualization, though the authority of the Bible will always hold priority in evangelical concerns. Central to the process of contextualization is hermeneutics, a discipline which in the past had little place in theological education but today is recognized as a subject at the heart of the whole educative process. Hermeneutics is the key to the complexity of ethical and missiological issues facing us today. The earlier books on hermeneutics focused on exegesis and for evangelicals in particular, on the historical-grammatico understanding of Scripture. Now hermeneutics includes both the task of exegesis and interpretation. The preacher, the teacher, the cross-cultural missionary, the social worker all need to work with good hermeneutical principles.

We are increasingly aware of the complexity of this subject as we better understand the role that culture and history have played in the interpreting of the text of scripture and relating it to our human situation. Understanding the cultures of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, and the plurality of cultures that we meet each day has brought new dimensions of understanding to our ethical and missiological task. Mission is no longer a few enthusiasts commissioned to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, for the peoples of the world and their cultures, including the universal secular culture, are at everybody's doorstep. Mission is every local church taking the gospel of the Kingdom to people in every place. Further we have come to recognize that the exegete and the missionary interpreter are not objective commentators but that they read and reflect on the text through tinted glasses, coloured by the theological spectrum of blue to red! In his article Howard Marshall points out that in bringing out the meaning of a text for today our commentaries usually fail us. He notes 'Some offer us exegesis, but make no attempt to ask what the message might mean for today. Others offer us a message of today that may well consist of sound, pious points but they are not really based on exegesis of the passage; the exegesis is faulty or non-existent.'

This issue of ERT attempts to bring together some of these issues and to offer some models based on good hermeneutical principles.

By way of a personal note; I have accepted the invitation to edit a new Asian Bible Commentary series for pastors and Christian workers, especially in Asia. This 10 to 15 year project envisages each volume being written by a team of scholars based in a particular theological college in Asia. Each commentary will seek to bring together the fruits [p. 404](#) of evangelical exegesis, theological and missiological reflection on the text in the specifics of Asian cultural contexts and the insights of pastoral experience. This project of an anticipated 45 volumes is being sponsored by the Asia Theological Association. It is a daunting task for worldwide support. For further information please write to me. [p. 405](#)

# Preaching from the New Testament

Howard Marshall

*Reprinted with permission from The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology, 9/2 Autumn 1991.*

*This lucid survey of the use of good hermeneutical principles in the preparation of sermons and preaching generally is by an internationally recognized New Testament scholar. This Finlayson Memorial Lecture was delivered at the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, April 1991 at the Faith Bible College, Edinburgh.*

Editor

## INTRODUCTION

I greatly welcome the privilege of being able to give this Finlayson Lecture because it gives me the opportunity publicly to pay my own tribute to the memory of an outstanding Christian. My first acquaintance with the Christian witness of R. A. Finlayson was when he came to Aberdeen to speak at conventions organized by the Aberdeen Evangelistic Association somewhere around 1950. Thereafter I heard him on numerous occasions, both at the Keswick Convention and in various meetings of the Aberdeen University Evangelical Union and IVF conferences. His profound knowledge of Scripture and his lucidity in exposition made a great impression on me. He was doubtless not a popular preacher, for he assumed that his audience would pay heed to him without needing any devices to hold their attention, and with him every word counted. There was also a problem for hearers who could not cope with a strong West Highland accent. But the content was pure gold, and I would certainly rank him as the best Scottish preacher that I have ever heard. And, if I may with Paul descend to boasting and putting things in human terms, the best of Scottish preachers will stand comparison with the best from anywhere else.

It is, then, primarily as a preacher that I think of R. A. Finlayson, and it is therefore appropriate that I should use this occasion to say something about preaching, although whether he would approve of all that I am about to say is one of those questions that cannot be answered. [p. 406](#)

There are of course many discussions of preaching and how to do it. When I first began to preach myself, I longed for books that would help me with the actual task of constructing and writing sermons. It was one thing to see that a text or passage could be recognized as the spine of a possible sermon with three vertebrae; the problem was to put flesh onto those three vertebrae and to avoid putting on the same flesh each time. Eventually I found some help and much inspiration in the writings of W. E. Sangster, who is still unsurpassed in the study of 'how to do it' in terms of presentation, although he tended to discuss how to give variety in sermon structure rather than how to develop the content in detail.<sup>1</sup>

But our question today is the more fundamental one of the content of the sermon in relation to the NT, and it will inevitably be seen from the standpoint of the student of the NT. I am sadly aware that I do not give this topic the attention it deserves in the Divinity

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. Sangster, *The Craft of the Sermon* (London, 1949); *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (London, 1946); *Power in Preaching* (London, 1958).

Faculty at Aberdeen where many of the students are preachers, but this lecture contains some of the things that I would like to share with them.

## **THE PLACE OF PREACHING IN THE CHURCH MEETING**

We start by asking a question about what goes on when a congregation gathers in church. I suggest that there are three activities which go on simultaneously, although the emphasis may be more on any one of them at a given time.<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Service to God.**

The most usually used names for what is going on in a church meeting are 'worship' and 'service'. These express what the congregation is doing towards God, and their activity consists in the offering of prayer, praise (often sung) and their self-dedication. The person who is 'leading' the service acts as their spokesperson or representative in this activity. For example, he may say, 'Let us praise God in hymn 123', or he may voice the prayers on behalf of the congregation as a whole. **p. 407**

### **2. Addressing the congregation.**

What the term 'worship' does not bring out adequately is that God is also doing something to the congregation. He is communicating himself and his Word to them, words that may be of grace, judgement, encouragement, persuasion, comfort, challenge, instruction and so on. It is this Word to which the congregation responds in their worship and service. And in this activity various people or perhaps a single leader now act on behalf of God. Somebody reads the Word of God in Scripture to the congregation, and then the same person or somebody else delivers a sermon in which what God is saying to the congregation through the Scripture is made plain.

### **3. Fellowship.**

Both of these activities take place in the context of what I call fellowship. Fellowship is the mutual bond which arises between people who participate in a common object or concern. In this case, the members of the congregation are united through their common participation in salvation and their common life in Christ. Bonds of love are established and expressed between all the people, and here the leader of the group is, as it were, just one of the congregation.

Now the significance of this brief discussion is to highlight two important facts:

*1. The main activity.* Since whatever God does is by definition more important than what we do, and since grace is prior to faith, it follows that the most important thing that takes place in the church meeting is the self-communication of God to the people. The reading of Scripture is the central and indispensable element in a Christian meeting. The sermon is a close second. But the fact that the congregational gathering is so often said to be for 'worship' or 'service' has the effect of obscuring this primary element and sometimes leads to rather grotesque efforts to justify the presence of a sermon in a church gathering. Rather, we should think of the church meeting as the occasion when, gathered together in fellowship, we listen to what God has to say to us and then make our response to his Word.

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<sup>2</sup> See I. H. Marshall, 'How Far Did the Early Christians Worship God?', in *Churchman* 99 (1985), pp. 216–229; cf. D. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester, 1991).

2. *The preacher's responsibility.* The person or persons leading the meeting have the difficult task of acting in three different capacities, the one which concerns us here being that of speaking on behalf of God [p. 408](#) as the people who proclaim his Word. This emphasizes the great importance of the sermon or whatever we call it, and equally the heavy responsibility of the person who does the proclamation. Therefore [1 Peter 4:11](#) says, 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.' I believe that we can see something of this consciousness on the part of at least some of the New Testament writers, and it is also seen in some of those who spoke in God's name. The preacher today should have this same consciousness.

## THE TEXT AND THE SERMON

It follows from what we have just said that the task of the preacher is to proclaim the Word of God. For evangelical Christians that Word is heard today supremely in the Scriptures; we believe that Scripture is the Word of God. Now if that statement is true in a straightforward sort of way, then it is arguable that it should be quite sufficient for preachers simply to read the Scriptures to people. What more do they need? Why do we persist in preaching, and why do we insist that a service is incomplete if the Word is not preached (as well as read)?<sup>3</sup> Clearly we need to explore the relation between the Bible and the sermon and ask what we are trying to do.

The basic answer, of course, is that the Word of God needs to be applied to the particular congregation, and the reason why this is so is because the congregation is not identical with the original recipients of the text of Scripture. Preaching is interpretation. And therefore essentially what we must now talk about is interpretation. I shall suggest that there are some five aspects of this in relation to preaching: the selection of the text; explaining the meaning of the text; interpreting the text; presenting the sermon; and applying the message.

### 1. The selection of the text.

The first step logically is that the preacher selects a passage of Scripture as the basis of a sermon. Here there seem to be two main approaches.

On the one hand, there is the approach which might be summed up as: 'Is there a word from the Lord for next Sunday morning?' The preacher then has borne in upon his mind a passage of Scripture or a [p. 409](#) theme which contains what is believed to be the specific word of the Lord for a particular congregation on a particular occasion. From a human point of view this may seem to be an arbitrary, irrational way of selecting a theme. But from a Christian point of view it is a case of submission to the guidance of the Lord. It depends upon the Lord making his mind known through what is experienced as a divine prompting.

On the other hand, there is the approach which works systematically through a particular set of themes which may be short or long in extent. There are two main forms of this approach. First, the preacher may elect to give, say, a series on Mark or Ephesians; this method, then, involves systematic teaching on a biblical book over a period of time. Second, there is the use of a so-called 'lectionary'. This is usually a set of readings devised for a group of churches and often geared to the Christian year; it aims to give a systematic coverage of important themes or areas of Scripture in a way that is less complete than the

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<sup>3</sup> Here I note parenthetically that I side firmly with those who insist that you should not have a celebration of the Lord's Supper without including the preached Word.

former approach but which, taken over the whole period, gives a fair coverage of the 'whole counsel of God'.

Broadly speaking, the first method is typical of a more charismatic approach, while the two forms of the second method are typical of a more Reformed approach and a more mainline denominational approach respectively. If you ask me which approach I follow, I must confess that I am a curious and probably inconsistent mixture at this point. Since I preach for the most part as an occasional preacher rather than a regular one, it is rare for me to be able to give a series to any particular congregation. Therefore what I preach on is a mixture of: 1. Using as a source for material whatever book of the Bible I happen to be working on academically, but not necessarily in a rigid manner.<sup>4</sup> 2. Establishing fairly rationally what I think the congregation needs to hear—based partly on whatever knowledge I have of them and on what I have done on previous occasions. 3. Feeling 'inspired' to tackle a particular topic because it has become alive for me. Whatever route is followed, there needs to be the sense that the topic is a word from the Lord for that occasion. There are times in my experience when topics simply will not glow with life, and I abandon them; unfortunately this is not an easy option when you are faced with the same congregation twice a Sunday every Sunday! I am fairly sure that the average congregation needs a balanced spread of teaching, and [p. 410](#) therefore I am not tied to the view that only one topic can possibly be right on a given occasion. I think that the Lord gives us a lot of freedom.

It should be obvious that the two types of approach are not so very different. For myself I am less happy with the lectionary approach, since I find it difficult to believe that a distant committee can know just what my congregation needs on a particular Sunday, and equally I cannot believe that all congregations everywhere should get the same topic on the same day. Yet I would not want to say that a committee can never ascertain the guidance of the Lord for his teaching in a group of churches.

Even those preachers who insist that we should proclaim the whole counsel of God, and deduce from this that the whole of Scripture should be systematically expounded to a congregation, nevertheless have to choose in what order they shall do so; and even the preacher who tells me that he must preach on [Revelation 15](#) next Sunday morning because he is engaged in a series and expounded [Revelation 14](#) last Sunday has made a decision at some point that it would be Revelation that he tackled next with the congregation and not Philemon or Philippians. So there is an element of choice or seeking for guidance in order to ascertain what particular part of Scripture is God's Word for a congregation at some particular time. The two approaches which I have labelled charismatic and Reformed run into each other.

## II. EXPLAINING THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

The preacher teaches what Scripture says. By this I mean simply that at the very lowest level the preacher is making the congregation acquainted with what Scripture says. By reading the Scripture and telling the story again in his own words, he is making sure that the congregation know what is there.

This is probably the point to ask again what the sermon is trying to do. Here again there may be a very broad and fluid distinction between what I may call the charismatic and the Reformed approaches. For the charismatic, the aim of the sermon may well be primarily to convey a divine message of oracle, some word of Scripture that comes to fresh

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<sup>4</sup> I recommend this as a good discipline for people engaged in academic study to keep them firmly rooted in the real world.

life as it is made the vehicle of what the Lord wants to say now to this set of people. On this view, the task of the preacher is primarily to let the Lord speak his Word for the present time for the specific people sitting there. For the Reformed, the purpose may be more to teach the congregation what Scripture says, and there may be [p. 411](#) a more timeless character to such a sermon. The sermon is now more consciously expository. It has the character of teaching.

It will be obvious that this attempt to distinguish two types of sermon is artificial. Rather, the sermon should have both characteristics. It should teach and it should be existentially relevant to the congregation. I can well believe, of course, that the Lord's message for a particular congregation may be a piece of solid teaching today and something of a different character next Sunday. But, even if the sermon is primarily teaching, it will still be presented as teaching that matters and that has an application. I stick to the basic belief that the purpose of preaching is not simply to instruct people but to change them. I emphasize, therefore, the need for a message from the Lord that is firmly based in biblical teaching, and the need for teaching of Scripture that is pointedly directed towards the congregation.

As part of the process of teaching Scripture, the preacher is manifestly also explaining what it means. As I said earlier, it is not enough simply to recite Scripture because our congregation is not the same as the original hearers or readers of the Word, and therefore some things need to be explained to them so that they can be put into the position of the original audience. It is a simple fact that although the message of Scripture is fairly plain, there are difficulties of all kinds in detail in understanding it. The variety of renderings in different translations, the existence of Bible encyclopaedias and commentaries—these all bear testimony to the fact that reading Scripture makes people ask questions about what the text means—what it is trying to say. Exegesis is unavoidable. And this is clearly part of the task of preaching. Much could be said about this if our primary interest in this lecture was in exegesis, but I confine myself to two comments in this area.

### **1. The 'text' of the sermon.**

The Scripture can be approached in several different kinds of unit.

i. The traditional unit is the text, usually a sentence or phrase. But it is inevitable that in discussing such a brief unit one will put it into its larger co-text—*i.e.* the longer passage of which it forms part.<sup>5</sup> But some passages are of such a character that lifting out one brief unit does not make good sense, for the unit of meaning is larger. Thus a [p. 412](#) story, such as a parable, needs to be considered as a whole because the whole story is the bearer of the meaning rather than just a few words. Hence a paragraph or even a group of paragraphs may be a more appropriate unit for discussion, and the phrase 'expository preaching' is sometimes used in a rather narrow—and, in my view, undesirable—sense to refer to preaching based on a longer passage rather than a single verse.

ii. Even longer units can be profitably made the basis of a sermon. If the letter to the Colossians was written to the church to be read aloud to them in one sitting, then it stands to reason that a good way to preach on it is to examine the message of the letter as a whole. Some of the modern approaches to New Testament study such as narrative criticism and discourse analysis are concerned to demonstrate the light that is shed on familiar material when it is seen as a whole and the development of the whole story or argument is taken into account.

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<sup>5</sup> For the useful distinction between 'context' and 'cotext' see P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London, 1989), p. 16.



iii. I also want to say a word for other types of approach. There are certain words in Scripture which have acquired a rich theological content, and these are worthy of exploration. In practice this means that the sermon is based on multiple texts. For a simple example, one can learn quite a lot about the nature of Christianity by examining the three occurrences of the word 'Christian', in other words by seeing what is implied about the word and the concept expressed by it in the contexts in which it was used. I think that more can be done with using some of these important words of New Testament theology in our preaching.

## **2. Explaining the Text.**

Having defined a sense-unit, the preacher must explain what the original author was saying, so far as it is necessary to do so for the purpose of the sermon. Technical discussions are out, but any difficulties must be explained in the simplest way possible. Background material that may be unfamiliar to the congregation will need to be supplied. Some of this material may well be interesting in its own right, and may help to secure the interest of the hearers, but it should not be developed simply for its own sake. There will be occasions where a passage can be understood in more than one way, and in such cases the preacher may need either to admit that his explanation is only probable, or to indicate the possible different interpretations. It is manifestly at this level that the preacher must resort to commentaries and other works of reference so that as well founded an explanation of **p.413** the meaning of the text as is possible can be given. Here the preacher has certainly an important responsibility in being the 'expert' in the congregation whose words are likely to be taken as true, and therefore he must measure up to that responsibility by being utterly fair to the text which he is interpreting. He is not to stand between the text and the congregation in such a way as to be a barrier to the truth getting across, but it is rather to be a channel through which truth that might not otherwise be perceived can be faithfully channelled.<sup>6</sup>

## **III. INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURE**

From exegesis we turn to interpretation. By the use of this somewhat ambiguous word I am trying to indicate that the preacher has to determine and convey what Scripture is saying to the people in front of him. What Paul wished to say to the Romans by means of the text that we have in front of us is not necessarily the same as what he wants to say to us, and we have to find what message for us comes out of what he said to them. If, for example, Paul devotes much of chapter 14 of Romans to discussing the problems that arose in the church over those who thought they could eat meat and those who disagreed for reasons connected with the Jewish religion and way of life, then it has to be said that this is not a problem in the average Highland congregation, though it may still be a problem for Christian Jews. Consequently, this is not direct teaching to us, although we may well believe that we can learn something for ourselves from seeing what Paul had to say to the Romans about their problem. But when we make this important move from the direct message of Scripture to the original audience to its indirect message to our contemporary audience, we are doing what I call interpretation.

There are basically two ways in which this must be done, and each of them is a legitimate approach. First, there is the method which begins with a passage of Scripture

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<sup>6</sup> For help in this area see G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (London, 1983), and (a bit more technical) G. D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia, 1983).

and proceeds from it to the modern world. Secondly, there is the method which begins With some modern p. 414 situation and asks what there is in Scripture which says something to it, and thus goes back to a particular passage or set of passages.<sup>7</sup>

To some extent the issue may be the question of where the preacher begins to prepare for next Sunday. He may begin from the Scripture, and because he is dealing with [1 Thessalonians 5](#) the appropriate question to ask is: on what particular need(s) of a modern congregation has this passage something to say? Or equally appropriately the preacher may begin with a modern situation, let us say, the Christian response to issues that are being fought at an impending election, and ask what scriptural teaching is relevant to these issues. Whether the preacher moves from Scripture to the present-day or in the reverse direction is surely of little consequence in itself. It would be wrong in my opinion always to go in the one direction. I suspect that it is more necessary to go from Scripture to the modern world lest by unconscious selectivity we muzzle the Scriptures and do not hear what they have to say on issues that left to ourselves we were in danger of overlooking. But at the same time, if the preacher did not deal with subjects that are not tackled in Scripture—one thinks, inevitably, of problems of medical ethics—then Scripture is again being muzzled in a different kind of way.

I make this remark in the context of preparation for the sermon. It may be necessary to point out that actual delivery of the sermon may begin either with Scripture or the modern world, regardless of where the preacher's starting point in preparation was. Here is one of the places where variety in presentation is needed.

But now we must face the question of what is involved in interpretation. How do we bring out the meaning of a text for today? It is just at this point that the commentaries usually fail us. Some offer us exegesis, but make no attempt to ask what the message might mean for today. Others offer us a message of today that may well consist of sound, pious points but they are really not based on exegesis of the passage; the exegesis is faulty or non-existent. It may sound good, but it is not biblical preaching in the proper sense of the term. But commentaries which deal with the interpretation of the passage for p.415 today, based on careful exegesis, are not so common. Here I want to develop briefly three points which seem to me to be relevant.

### **1. Universality.**

Our first question in interpreting a text is whether its message is of universal applicability. Texts which tell us that 'all have sinned' or that 'God so loved the world' are clearly universal in that they apply to all people at all times. Other texts may not be universal in their reference. They may apply to a limited group, *e.g.* 'Husbands, love your wives', or they may apply to groups that do not exist today, *e.g.* 'Slaves, obey your masters'. In such cases, we have to treat the material in a different kind of way. Equally, the teaching or the commands may be universally true in that they could apply to every kind of person, but the actual content of the commands may be material which is applicable only in certain circumstances or times. Some material is given the form of narrative, and it may be a question whether the narrative is a form of authoritative teaching; this question arises for example with some of the accounts of the giving of the Spirit in Acts, where some

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<sup>7</sup> I believe that it is also possible to have a sermon which tackles some contemporary topic without necessarily expounding a biblical passage but which is nevertheless faithfully based on biblical teaching and develops that teaching. The preacher is so immersed in the teaching of Scripture and in scriptural ways of thinking and dealing with problems that the sermon will be truly biblical even though no actual text is ever cited. I am sure that we should not exclude that kind of preaching on principle, although it may well be an approach that will be used more rarely.

Christians insist that a particular pattern there is normative for today. We have to recognize that some biblical material is not universalisable. However, it may still be useful for today. But where the material can be applied directly to all people in all places at all times, the preacher's task is that much easier.

## 2. Extensibility.

Where the material is not immediately universalisable, we must then ask whether the teaching of a text can be extended to cover people and situations not originally envisaged. Philemon is given specific instructions on how to deal with a runaway slave, but surely Paul's teaching can be extended to cover other situations of various kinds. Here we are operating with the concept of analogy, and the argument is that the teaching of Scripture can be extended to deal with analogous persons or situations—but with the recognition that the teaching may require adjustment to cope with the new situation. It is the principle of *mutatis mutandis*. Here, then, we interpret in the sense that we recognize that what Scripture says today is not precisely what it said to its original readers. I should want to affirm that for the most part the message of Scripture comes into the category of what is universalisable. But I must also insist that the task of extending the meaning is often required. **p. 416**

It will be clear that the basic principle here requires that there be a real analogy between the persons originally addressed and the modern audience. An enormous amount of preaching depends upon the use of analogy, and it is essential that the analogy really exists and is not falsely constructed. The early Christians used something like this principle in their typological understanding of the Old Testament and I believe that this gives us a model to follow in our interpretation of the New Testament. However, very often the interpretation of the text requires us to consider not only the differences in the hearers but also the differences in the actual form of God's Word to them. This brings us to our third principle.

## 3. Reapplication

In extending the message, we are in effect reapplying the message of the text. The text gives the application to specific readers of certain basic truths, principles or commands. What we have to do is to distinguish these basic concepts from the particular form in which they are presented in the passage to the original readers and then to reapply the basic concepts to the new audience. Thus, if Jesus commands—quite specifically—that his disciples should wash one another's feet, and if we say, 'But that was for an audience of first-century Jews treading dusty roads in bare feet or sandals, for whom the washing of feet was a menial duty done by a slave; but we are different because we walk along comparatively clean streets wearing clothes and shoes that keep our feet clean, and because feet-washing would not have the same symbolic significance today'—then I believe that this justifies us in saying that on the surface the text is not universalisable. In such a case we have a duty to seek out the underlying principle—the readiness to serve one another humbly that Jesus illustrated in this way—and then to press home that principle and apply it in whatever ways are appropriate for ourselves today. That is a fairly obvious stockexample. Let it suffice to make the basic point. It is, however, of wide applicability.

It should be made clear that this is not to suggest that we can burrow beneath the surface of the New Testament to find a few basic principles and then ditch the New Testament in favour of the principles; that would be to place the authority for God's Word somewhere other than in the actual text of the New Testament. Rather, it is to suggest that

the New Testament is the authoritative form in which God gave his Word to specific people, and our starting point is always that actual text. p. 417

#### **IV. THE PRESENTATION OF THE SERMON**

We have now reached the point where we ourselves have some idea of what God wants us to say on the basis of a particular text to the congregation. We have not yet produced a sermon! We have still to discuss an important aspect of the process of composing a message which I call—again somewhat ambiguously—presentation. By this phrase I mean that the preacher must find the appropriate ways of expressing the interpreted message of Scripture for the congregation. That is to say, it will not do simply to read out, let us say, the words of a commentary that gets the meaning and the interpretation of the text right. We have to present the material in a way that will be palatable to our specific audience. We have to employ the tools of rhetoric to present the message well—for example, by devising a structure for our discourse that will be helpful to the hearers. Let me mention four of these.

##### **1. Intelligibility.**

Here let me return to the example of R. A. Finlayson by repeating that he was probably not the preacher for everybody. It was not just that at the Keswick Convention the unfortunate English had problems with his accent. It was rather than his level of preaching presupposed a certain level of understanding on the part of the congregation. And this points to the important fact that the task of the preacher is to communicate in such a way as to be understood by the specific audience which is being addressed. Therefore the character of the spoken word, which I shall call the sermon, is in large part determined by the character of the congregation. For example, there is not much use in giving expositions of passages of the Bible to people who do not bring their Bibles to church or who do not have the intellectual capacity to cope with an elaborate discussion of a passage. Nor can you give fifty-minute sermons to people with a limited attention span. I ask you to think of a type of situation which I do not find easy, the occasion when you have a company of the Boys Brigade on holiday in your congregation—perhaps totally unexpectedly—and you want to reach them with your message, or when you have to give a brief talk at a youth club, or when you are taking a service in a mental hospital or an old people's home. Your message must be shaped by the nature of the audience so that they will understand what you are saying. Therefore intelligibility is of crucial importance. p. 418

##### **2. Interest.**

But indeed there is something else which is even more important. Possibly your first priority is not to be intelligible but to be interesting. Naturally, if you are interesting you will also be intelligible, but it is possible to be intelligible without being interesting. If you do not attract and hold your audience's interest, then nothing will get across.

My father, who was a good and godly man, had his occasional blind-spots. He was a good speaker to children in his generation and a good preacher, but when he led the prayers in Sunday School, he was not on the wavelength of the children sitting there with heads bowed in front of him. And when we said to him, 'The children won't understand your prayers', his reply was to the effect that he was not praying to them but to God who would understand them, and somehow the idea that he needed to carry the children along with him if he was to speak to God on behalf of them and involve them in the prayer just did not get across to him. Equally, there are preachers who are just dull, be they ever so

sound, and one of our problems is to make orthodoxy interesting. The thing that I want to stress and emphasize is that, if you fail at this hurdle, you need proceed no further, and what you have to say will do your audience no good because you did not grasp and hold their attention in the first place. That is why the textbooks on sermon-making insist that the beginning of the sermon is so important, and offer remarks such as ‘If you don’t strike oil in the first five minutes, stop boring!’

### 3. Simplicity and lucidity.

This will be achieved by having a structure that is crystal clear and by using language that is on the level of the congregation. I am aware that if you make things too simple and easy you will quickly lose the interest of the congregation. You have to stretch their minds and give them the adventure of thinking. You will have to alter your approach for different types of congregation, for some will come more eager to learn and think than others. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that simplicity is of cardinal importance. Far too often we over-estimate what a congregation is capable of understanding.

### 4. Variety.

It is important to achieve variety both between sermons and within sermons. Do not always present the material in the same way, and do [p. 419](#) not develop the passage in the same way. To some extent what you are going to do should be unpredictable, so that the congregation are kept wondering what you are going to say next.

## V. APPLYING THE MESSAGE

I nearly called the previous point ‘application’, because what we are doing is taking the message of Scripture for the congregation and applying it to them in their particular situation. But on second thoughts I decided that this was unwise because there is one element of presentation that needs separate stress. This is the point that the congregation must be persuaded of what the preacher says. Our task is not simply to instruct but to press home the message, to challenge, to rebuke, to comfort—in short to evoke a response in the hearers so that they go away different people from how they came in.

Again, I go back to the New Testament where I find that recent scholars are discovering that much of the material was composed using the methods of the rhetoric of the time. Some of the letters resemble written speeches, and speeches were composed in order to persuade people. Preaching is very definitely speaking in such a way as to change people. And in my experience a very great deal of preaching contains little application. It is such a soft sell that nobody buys the product.

One can readily think of the kind of factors that help to get this point across. There must surely be the *enthusiasm* of the preacher which convinces the audience that he has something to say which is exciting and worth their attention, and which matters supremely. ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel’ ([1 Cor. 9:16](#)). There is *sincerity*, the fact that the preacher really believes in what he is saying and is not merely going through a form of words which do matter one way or the other. ‘We are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence’ ([2 Cor. 2:17](#)). There is *passion* where the congregation glimpse the strong feeling that the preacher has about the supreme importance of accepting and heeding the Word. ‘I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart’ ([Rom. 9:1](#) f). And there is *love*, whereby the audience grasp that the preacher is concerned for their eternal welfare and salvation and are stirred emotionally as well as intellectually.

I have heard it remarked of R. A. Finlayson that whenever he came to speak of 'grace' there was a new light in his eyes and a fresh fire in his voice. Was not the title of Adam [p. 420](#) Burnet's book on preaching *Pleading with Men*? 'Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved' ([Rom. 10:1](#)). 'We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' ([2 Cor. 6:1](#)). That is an accent that we need to recover. New Testament preaching means recovering the passion and concern that the apostles had to influence and change their audiences. Let us not think of our subject as purely intellectual. It affects our hearts as preachers as well as our minds.

## CONCLUSION

Here, then, are five elements that go into preaching from the New Testament and each one of them is essential. Some of them will be hidden from view in the actual delivery. The hard work done on exegesis—the debates between commentators as to the correct meaning of the text—will not be mentioned, but the preacher should have done his homework faithfully. Equally it is essential that the work of interpretation shall have been carried out with care. How much harm has been done to the church by inappropriate literalism. The presentation and the application are vital in the actual preaching, but we should remember the Latin motto *Ars est celare artem*: the secret of art lies in concealing the art. Or to put it more theologically, the preacher must hide himself but make Jesus as visible as possible. That requires both hard work and the development of a personal relationship with God that is nourished by prayer. My hope is that this occasion may help us all to be more effective in this, the highest—but surely also the humblest—of callings.

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# Exegesis and the Role of Tradition in Evangelical Hermeneutics

Gordon D. Fee

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*This article is the fourth in a series of lectures originally delivered at the Mennonite Brethren Seminary, Fresno, California and since revised and republished. The author reflects on the impact of tradition from the Early Church to churches today on the hermeneutical approach and understanding of the biblical text. He discusses with pointed examples the need to understand one's own ecclesiastical and theological traditions and the influence of sociological and cultural factors and national history on the process. He openly acknowledges the influence that his own pentecostal tradition has had on his understanding of Scripture. He concludes that not all traditions are adverse to good interpretation but all need to listen with greater sensitivity to others and to be willing to change. He offers some*

*preliminary suggestions on the way forward in critically affirming tradition while being faithful to biblically given hermeneutical principles.*

Editor

In this series of essays I have been probing into ‘Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics’, in which my basic concern has been over how evangelicals handle the New Testament imperatives, with a special eye toward the thorny issue of women in ministry. Although not always articulated as such, in the course of things, I have noted—and passed over—the role of tradition in the whole hermeneutical enterprise.<sup>1</sup> That matter I now wish to pursue in this final essay. My concern has to do with how our various presuppositions, especially ecclesiastical and theological presuppositions, affect the exegetical and hermeneutical p. 422 enterprise, both positively and negatively. Since all hermeneutics is done within a circle, or circles, of tradition, the burden of this essay as an ‘issue in evangelical hermeneutics’ is for evangelicals to learn a more discriminating recognition and articulation of the role of tradition in our hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup>

## **PART I TRADITION THROUGH CHURCH HISTORY**

I begin with some definitions, since for the New Testament scholar ‘tradition’ can mean any number of things, and in this essay certainly will. ‘Tradition’ tends to have five distinct nuances, which can be illustrated in the following nearly impossible sentence: The New Testament documents record the tradition (1) of Christ and the apostles, which early church tradition (2) understood to be inspired and authoritative Scripture; the later church codified tradition (3) so that it became equally authoritative with Scripture, an understanding which those within the evangelical tradition (4) reject, but who nonetheless frequently interpret Scripture through the lenses of their own personal and theological traditions (5). Thus:

1. Tradition to the New Testament scholar ordinarily refers to the oral and early written stage of the New Testament materials. It includes Christ’s proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, and the teaching that surrounded and followed its proclamation that was ‘handed down’ by the apostles to their converts. In this sense the New Testament itself is a written representation of that tradition, which the church came to understand as the inspired and authoritative expression of what is essential for Christian faith. Although this is the most common use of the term for the New Testament scholar, it is the one that is not addressed in this essay.

2. For the later church, tradition described the reflective understanding of things Christian, expressed in the consensus of the teachers of the church. What most evangelicals tend conveniently to ignore is that it was tradition in this sense that was responsible, under the guidance of the Spirit, for the canonization of the tradition in its first sense. It should also be noted that in the early going this ‘body of understanding’, although authoritative, was not official and was itself p. 423 in process of formulation. Such matters as canon, Trinity, church order, and infant baptism belong to tradition in

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<sup>1</sup> This is the fourth in a series of lectures, delivered in their present form at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno CA, November 2–3, 1989. The present lecture was considerably modified and expanded for the same series at the Canadian Theological Seminary, Regina, October 25–26, 1990. I am grateful to several members of the biblical and theological faculties of Canadian Theological Seminary and Canadian Bible College for taking time a week later to interact with it, and to Peter Davids for sending me a synopsis of that interaction, which allowed me further to clarify my thinking at several points.

<sup>2</sup> For a penetrating essay on some aspects of this question, see J. Ramsey Michaels, ‘Scripture, Tradition, and Biblical Scholarship,’ *The Reformed Journal* 20 (May–June, 1970) 14–17.

this sense, where the seeds of understanding lie within the New Testament, but their explication belongs to a later time. Obviously, on some of these matters we are more agreed than on others, which is one of the difficulties for us—namely, the interplay between the New Testament documents themselves and their explication in the early church.

3. In time tradition in the second sense developed into its third sense, found especially within the Roman Catholic communion, where church tradition holds an official and authoritative role in the church's life, equal to Scripture itself. This, of course, is a primary area of self-conscious difference between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, and probably why evangelicals historically have been uneasy about tradition in the second sense.

4. This in turn leads to the fourth sense of the term. Since the Great Schism of 1054, and especially since the Reformation, the bifurcation of the church into its many streams caused each of these streams—and rivulets, if you will—to develop its own tradition. Hence there is the evangelical tradition, the Pentecostal tradition, the Baptist tradition, etc. Although usually unofficial, tradition in this sense is quite often as powerful a force among evangelicals as it is among Roman Catholics.

5. Finally, there is a non-technical nuance to tradition, which refers to that entire set of experiences and settings making up one's personal history, that one brings to the biblical text before ever a page is opened. For believers that includes one's own personal experiences, sociology, culture, family and religious/ecclesiastical histories, and national history. The problems emerge when these traditions are not recognized as such and therefore often intrude upon or impede the exegetical and hermeneutical enterprise.

My concern in this paper is to reflect on the way that tradition in senses 2, 4 and 5 impacts evangelical hermeneutics. My primary concern is with senses 4 and 5, although a few initial probings with regard to the second sense are also offered. In none of these three senses, of course, are we talking about bad things, but about necessary and inevitable things. On the one hand, one simply cannot, or at least should not, interpret biblical texts as if there were no tradition in the second sense. In both the Pentecostal and evangelical traditions to which I belong, there is no recognition of an official tradition as speaking for the whole church in the third sense, but neither are we willing to jettison the whole Christian tradition in the second sense. Hermeneutics, we would argue, must be a community affair; and the first community to which we are debtors is that of the church in history. [p. 424](#)

On the other hand, neither can one escape the impact of tradition in the fourth and fifth senses. Indeed, much of our difficulty lies here. First, there is that kind of unofficial—often unwritten and therefore sometimes more powerful—ecclesiastical or theological tradition to which we belong, to which we have varying degrees of commitment, and which we often feel compelled to defend or to speak prophetically within. Wittingly or unwittingly, this tradition shapes both our approach to and our understanding of the biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> But this is but one part of a larger whole. Second, there is the additional factor of living within a certain cultural, historical, and sociological milieu that impacts so much of how we think or perceive things. This too impacts our understanding.

The difficulties here are twofold: On the one hand, tradition in the fifth sense is so much a part of one's own presuppositional history that very often we rather automatically assume our traditions are shared experiential history of everyone else. On the other hand, there are times when one is more consciously aware of one's tradition, and then tries to

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<sup>3</sup> In fact it was pointed out by one of the faculty at Canadian Theological Seminary that my own predominant wrestling with the Pauline imperatives in these lectures probably reflects something of my own set of traditions as New Testament scholar and churchman.



make the biblical evidence read in support of that tradition.<sup>4</sup> In this latter case one moves toward a kind of hearing and reading of texts that would seem to get in the way of the text, not letting the text have its own impact on one's theology and experience.

My interests in the rest of the essay are three. My primary concern is to illustrate the several ways—innocently, subtly, or more consciously—the fourth and fifth senses do in fact affect our hermeneutics, sometimes quite adversely. Secondly, and briefly, I want to urge that the effect of tradition on hermeneutics in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Finally, I would like to offer some preliminary suggestions for finding a way forward so that tradition may be fully affirmed and appreciated, on the one hand, but not allowed totally to skew our hermeneutics, on the other. [p. 425](#)

## PART II ANALOGY OF SCRIPTURE

In a now-famous essay, Rudolf Bultmann once asked whether it was possible to do presuppositionless exegesis, to which question he gave a resounding No.<sup>5</sup> We bring too much of ourselves—our culture and our traditions—to make such exegesis possible. Although he was contending in particular against a sterile historical positivism, his essay continues to be a byword in biblical studies.

If that is true for the more purely historical task of exegesis, how much more do our presuppositions play a key role in the larger hermeneutical endeavour of theological relevance and application? It is simply not possible for us not to bring our own experience of faith and church to the biblical texts. In fact the very *selectivity* of our hermeneutics, with regard to women's teaching and widow's remarrying, is for the most part related to our traditions, not to our exegesis. Our difficulties here can best be demonstrated by illustration, rather than argumentation.<sup>6</sup>

Let me begin at the more innocent level, where experiential, cultural, or ecclesiastical assumptions are simply read into the text without thought or recognition. It may take such simple forms as when someone from my part of the country reads [Psalm 125:2](#), 'as the mountains are round about Jerusalem', and thinks of real mountains rather than the flat, elevated plain that surrounds the low promontory between two wadis on which ancient Jerusalem sat; or when hearing of 'building one's house on sand' one thinks of long sandy ocean beaches rather than the chalk valleys of the wadis scattered throughout Judea. Or it may take a more churchly form, where one presupposes one's own experience of church (whether building or liturgy), when one reads the texts that speak of the gathered church or of sitting at the Lord's Supper. What, for example, could possibly be further from the New Testament experience of the Lord's Supper than an individual cup and wafer, passed along the pew where people sit facing other people's backs, and tacked onto the end of a preaching service, or of going forward to an altar(!) to be administered wafer and cup by a priest?

But it can take more subtle forms as well. Take, for example, the [p. 426](#) Pentecostal doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as subsequent to and distinct from conversion

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<sup>4</sup> This is one area, it should be noted, where the biblical scholar within any given tradition (in the fourth sense) often lives in conflict within that tradition, because he or she is so often prone to re-examine the tradition on the basis of the biblical texts, rather than the other way about.

<sup>5</sup> 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?' in *Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960) 289-96.

<sup>6</sup> I am fully aware of my own vulnerability in what follows, as I hope eventually to make plain. As any perceptive reader will recognize, the very choice of illustrations, and the selective nature of them, says something about my own 'tradition' in the sense that I have just defined it.

and evidenced by speaking in tongues. In all fairness to Pentecostals, much of this understanding came about through a very common approach to Scripture, where Scripture is understood to be establishing historical precedent, and therefore a necessary experience, for subsequent believers. Moreover, the original outpouring of the Spirit at the turn of this century came as a direct result of some students in Topeka, Kansas, who were diligently seeking scripture for the secret of the empowering of the early church. I have elsewhere addressed the question as to whether precedent may be rightly used to establish normative Christian practice;<sup>7</sup> but it should be noted that the concept of ‘subsequent to and distinct from’, which forms part of Pentecostal theology at this point, came less from the study of Acts, than from their own personal histories, in which it happened to *them* in this way, and therefore was assumed to be the norm even in the New Testament.

Such subtlety with regard to one’s tradition may take a more sophisticated posture in the form of New Testament scholarship itself. I think, for example, of how two great scholars like Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummet so cavalierly treat Paul’s Greek in [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) (‘For the reason a woman ought to have authority on her head’). Convinced that the passage is dealing with the subordination of women—despite the fact that this sentence says something quite the opposite—they comment: “That “authority” is put for “sign of authority” is not difficult; but why does St. Paul say “authority” when he means “subjection”?” Mindboggling, to say the least. Or take their comment at the outset of chapters [12–14](#), ‘The phenomena which are described, or sometimes alluded to, were to a large extent abnormal and transitory.’<sup>8</sup> Transitory, in terms of subsequent historical development, yes; but abnormal, hardly. Careful exegesis of all the texts demonstrates that in the Pauline churches at least, these were the normal patterns of Christian experience. But how else could two Anglicans at the turn of the twentieth century have understood these [p.427](#) texts? They simply lacked the ecclesiastical or experiential frame of reference for Paul’s own experience of the Spirit and church.

In a similar vein, one is reminded of how the leading lexicographer in the history of New Testament scholarship, Walter Bauer, treated the name of Junia in [Romans 16:7](#). His own experience of church simply disallowed that Paul could include a woman under the title of ‘apostle’, so the entire entry is devoted to trying to justify reading the name as Junias (a man’s name), even though there is not a shred of evidence for such a name in the Roman world.

But equally as often, the impact of tradition in its various forms is far less innocent, and indeed may be judged to be rather conscious, and sometimes pernicious. Take, for example, that unfortunate book sent out free to almost all North American clergy a few years back, Robert Schuller’s, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*.<sup>9</sup> Here is a case in which culture, in this instance a prior commitment to romantic humanistic psychology, not only determines how one reads text, but does so at the expense of the clear meaning of the texts themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> See esp. Chapter 6 in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (with Douglas Stuart; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 87–102. Cf. an earlier version of this same concern directed toward Pentecostalism in particular, in which I tried to put this matter on somewhat firmer hermeneutical ground (‘Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent—A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics’, in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism* [ed. R. P. Spittler; Grand Rapids; Baker, 1976] 118–32).

<sup>8</sup> *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911) 232, 257.

<sup>9</sup> Waco TX: Word Books, 1982.

The heart of Schuller's 'new reformation' is a redefinition of human fallenness in terms of romantic humanism. The basic human problem is not that people are fallen, living in rebellion, pride, and disobedience, but that they lack self-esteem. 'The core of sin,' Schuller says, 'is a negative self-image,' and rebellion is only one of its external manifestations (pp. 66–67). I would dare say that not two people in two billion could read [Genesis 3](#), or [Psalms 32](#) or [51](#), or [Romans 1–3](#) and derive that view of the human condition. The problem here is not simply letting culture get in the way of one or a few texts, but of the *whole* of Scripture. Schuller's view stands in basic contradiction to biblical revelation.

When he comes to his supporting texts for finding self-esteem as the way forward, the restructuring of meaning away from the author's intent is even worse. Schuller begins, one should note, by asserting that 'sacred Scriptures are our infallible rule for faith and practice' (p. 45); he then goes on to assert, rightly I would argue, the priority of the Lordship of Christ. But in Schuller's hands this becomes a ploy to bypass exegesis altogether in order to use the Lord's Prayer as Christ's own commission to encourage people to be done with the 'six basic, negative emotions that infect and affect our self-worth' (p. 48). What follows is an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer with an occasional p. 428 moment of validity but which overall is so far removed from Jesus' own intentionality that he would scarcely recognize it. Gone is its eschatological framework of the already/not yet of God's Rule, gone its theocentric opening petitions, gone its humbling of the one praying before the mercy and grace of a loving Father. In its place stands a God who is all soft mush and prayer that calls people to self-dignity, to a noble self-love, to become 'sincere, self-affirmed, divine-adventurers, striving to succeed' (p. 50).

What is simultaneously so subtle and devastating about this is that it is cloaked with evangelical buzz-words, and assumes an evangelical posture toward Scripture. But here indeed is hermeneutics gone astray, where tradition in the form of one's culture has the final word, and God's strong and powerful word is blunted at best, and misdirected altogether at worst.

But if this example is somewhat less helpful, because for most of us the flaw is so easy to spot, it may serve its purpose as a more extreme example so as to help us to see where other forms of tradition, especially ecclesiastical and theological tradition, may have equal capacity to blunt the meaning and intent of God's Word.

I think, for example, of how so many in the Reformed or Dispensational traditions argue vigorously about [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) (that women are to keep silent in the churches), suspect as that text is as to its authenticity,<sup>10</sup> that this is an eternal word for the Church in all places at all times; yet they reject everything else in chapter [14](#) as permissible for today, despite the clear imperative to the contrary in v. [39](#)! Only prior commitments to one's tradition could possibly allow for such hermeneutical inconsistency. The greater problem, of course, is that they are quite convinced that there is no inconsistency at all. No wonder those standing on the outside of a given tradition looking in wonder whether there is any hope for an evangelical hermeneutics at all.

Similarly, I recall a debate that I was involved in with three other scholars at Gordon-Conwell several years ago, over the issue of women in ministry, including church structures. I had come from a tradition in which that had been my experience from my youth up. Precisely because of this, I indicated that it never occurred to us in our p. 429 tradition to read [1 Timothy 2:11–12](#) or [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) except as *ad hoc* words to the local situations. God the Holy Spirit had preceded our looking at the texts by gifting

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<sup>10</sup> On this issue see my commentary on 1 Corinthians (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 699–708.

women equally with men, so we asked, as Peter at Cornelius' household, 'Who are we that we can withstand God?'

It turned out that that admission on my part damned everything else I had to say. My views of 1 Timothy were obviously based on experience, not on exegesis. But what amazed me is that the scholar who made this charge assumed his own Presbyterian church order not only to be *biblical*, but the *only* biblical model; and he simply could not be convinced that it was his own experience of a Church in which women did *not* speak, which had equally conditioned everything he had to say when he addressed the Timothy text. Indeed, at one point in a question-and-answer time, when quizzed about this matter, he blurted out, 'Well, there must be *some* kind of juridical authority in the text!' To myself I thought, only a Presbyterian could have read the text in such a way (!); and he could not bring himself to see how much his tradition was affecting everything he said about it.

I have had similar interest in reading the reviews of my recent commentary on 1 Corinthians, which for the most part turned out to be rather positive. But in those parts of reviews where even favourable reviews must offer words of caution to their readers, the two places where I have been challenged most frequently are on some observations I make about church order in 1 Corinthians, or lack thereof, and about the charismatic phenomena. It will surprise no one that the reviewers who have taken exception to the matters on church order are Anglicans and Lutherans, while Dispensationalists to a reviewer bemoaned my handling of chapters [12-14](#). 'But alas,' one of them wrote, 'Dr. Fee is also a Pentecostal.' And then he went on to point out all the things wrong with my point of view, none of which, interestingly enough, were exegetical points, and all of which were based on his prior, unquestioning commitment to his own hermeneutical tradition.

There is one further way in which a prior commitment to tradition affects our hermeneutics. It is perhaps the most subtle of all, and therefore the most difficult for all of us to overcome. It has to do with how tradition (usually in the form of prior theological system) leads us to ask questions of the text in the first place, which then tends to lead us to the kinds of hermeneutical posture we are predisposed toward.

Here let me illustrate from a book basically known only within a given tradition, which is by and large intended to reassure those within that tradition that those outside have an inadequate hermeneutics. The [p. 430](#) book in mind is by Professor Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary, entitled *Perspectives on Pentecost*.<sup>11</sup> The basic problem I have with Gaffin's book, and the reason for its inclusion here, is his subtle use of the analogy of Scripture, which is both predisposed toward a given theological system and intermixed with skilful theological logic and exegesis of texts so as to arrive at a predetermined conclusion. In the process, in texts he otherwise exegetes rather carefully, Gaffin tends over and over again to disregard Paul's own *ad hoc* intentionality in favour of making them speak to questions that are not only not inherent in the texts and contexts themselves, but in fact are finally quite in opposition to the texts and their contexts.

Gaffin has approached his concern by addressing a series of narrowing concentric circles, always moving toward the singular question of the cessation of the gifts of prophecy and tongues. When he gets near to the inner circle of questions, the argument has the following steps:

(1) Prophecy and tongues function similarly, both being what he terms 'revelatory gifts'.

(2) On the basis of [Ephesians 2:20](#) he argues that apostolicity and prophecy are also to be understood as 'foundational gifts.'

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<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

(3) Since apostles ceased after their function of being ‘foundational’ for the church, so too did the prophets (although this seems to fly full in the face of actual church history).

(4) Since tongues and prophecy function alike (from this view), then tongues, too, should cease with the apostles and prophets.

(5) Finally, he argues that it is gratuitous to assume that [1 Corinthians 13:10](#) intends that tongues should continue until the *Eschaton*, and with further circles of logic tries to discount that assumption.

What makes this argument persuasive to some is its apparent logic, coupled with the author’s obvious ability to exegete individual texts. However, quite apart from some highly questionable exegetes of the key texts in 1 Corinthians, for which time does not permit a rebuttal here, what I find particularly unpersuasive is the fact that the logic *precedes* the exegesis. Indeed, the whole enterprise has its logical form structured by asking a question to which not one of the biblical texts intend an answer. Gaffin’s overruling question is, ‘When will tongues p. 431 cease?’ The one text that addresses that question at all—and even there it is quite incidental to Paul’s real point—is [1 Corinthians 13:10](#), which almost certainly intends, ‘at the *Eschaton*,’ as its answer. But since that answer is the one Gaffin is uncomfortable with, he sets up his logical circles to answer his own question with, ‘at the end of the first century.’ But in no case does he, nor can he, show that the answer to *that* question is a part of the biblical author’s intent in the texts that are examined. He circumvents that by suggesting that it was the *Divine* author’s intent, on the basis of his own form of ‘analogy of Scripture’.

I would contend that this is not a legitimate use of the analogy of Scripture—because the question is a wrong one. Indeed, what should be noted here is that traditional Pentecostalism has had its own way of posing questions and arriving at answers, albeit with much less exegetical sophistication. Their question is: ‘Should all speak with tongues when baptized with the Spirit?’ Their answer of course is ‘Yes’. But that is determined *not* on the meaning and intent of the biblical texts themselves, but by the very framing of the question in that way.

Let me finally conclude this critique of others with the candid admission that I do not with all of these illustrations suggest that *I* come to the text with a clean slate. I give them in part to illustrate what a tenuous task this is; in fact, knowing a bit about the basic sociology of the first century believers, and about their world view, I often wonder whether it is possible for the average North American white Protestant to understand the Bible at all, since such people assume their own middle class sociology to be that of the New Testament, whereas almost exactly the opposite is the case. But I am also illustrating in part how much easier it is to see this problem in others than in oneself. And that is precisely the great hermeneutical danger—that the biases of others are so clear!

### PART III HERMENEUTICAL CORRECTIVES

Having set the reader up with all of this, let me now seem to reverse myself and say that coming to the text with our tradition(s) in hand is not in itself a bad thing. Indeed, it is impossible to do otherwise. But what I want to stress here is that in itself this is neither good nor bad, and that in fact, it may often serve to the good. Some years ago, when Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* first appeared on Broadway, it had only limited success and soon ended. But some months later it played at San Quentin, where it was an immediate and thoroughgoing hit; the inmates applauded and applauded—not because they were p. 432 being given a bit of culture, but because they identified so thoroughly with Estrogen and Vladimir, who simply waited for Godot, who never came.

That experience brought it back to Broadway, where it had a long run and huge success. The ‘tradition’ of the inmates at San Quentin gave them an understanding that allowed others to see it through different eyes—much closer to Beckett’s, I would guess.

Thus it often happens that our own tradition(s) cause(s) us to read a text in a certain way, and assume it to be the only way, or the right way. And then someone with a different tradition reads and interprets the text, and suddenly something like scales fall from our eyes. Take, for example, what I consider to be one of the significant contributions of the peace churches to the rest of us—to help us read the texts from the perspective of the early church on matters of peace and war, and not to assume that ‘my country right or wrong’ was in fact something said by Paul or John—or could possibly be a Christian understanding of nation.

I think in this regard of my own experience of celebrating the baptism of thirty-seven new converts—all men—in rural Senegal some years ago. It was the rainy season, so there was a large watering hole just away from the huts of the village, where the baptism was to take place. After a ‘brief’ service (one hour at 135 degrees Fahrenheit) in their newly constructed ‘church building’, we paraded through the village to the watering hole for the baptisms. Of course, for such a new event the entire village turned out. What struck me was the outburst of laughter when the first of the new believers, after his confession of faith in the Lord Jesus, was immersed. They had never seen such a thing—and a religious ceremony at all! But as I watched the others, one by one, declare his own faith in Christ before the laughing—and sometimes mocking—crowd, I suddenly had a strong sense that all other baptisms that I had experienced were much less like the New Testament experience than these. I have never again easily read past the texts that say, ‘and they were all baptized.’ In the New Testament baptism was a public event, not cloistered in a church in the presence of believers only.

There are scores of other illustrations; but I offer these to say that tradition *per se* is not the problem. To the contrary, the ability to hear texts through the ears of other traditions may serve as one of the best exegetical or hermeneutical correctives we can bring to the task.

Let me add also that if the ability to transcend one’s tradition is rare, it can be and has been done—and often enough that we are usually in great debt to those who so do. For example, it was such insights by p. 433 Hermann Gunkel on the Spirit in the New Testament,<sup>12</sup> and by Johannes Weiss on the place of apocalyptic in the New Testament,<sup>13</sup> which stood over against the entire stream of late nineteenth century New Testament scholarship with its non-personal approach to the Spirit and its ‘soft mush’ Jesus, that first really allowed the first century documents to be true to themselves on these matters. Of course, as one reads Gunkel or Weiss one picks up a strongly iconoclastic bent to them, which thus sets in motion a *new* set of presuppositions. But at least they caused the whole world of Germanic scholarship to stop looking at the texts with the presuppositions of nineteenth century idealism. And there have been other such moments, where whole new possibilities of hearing the ancient texts on their own terms have been made more available to us. So all is not lost.

But even more importantly, let me now return to the role of tradition in the second sense noted earlier. Here I begin with an observation, which is also a plea. By and large, evangelicals need to take more seriously the words of [2 Peter 1:20](#), that ‘no prophecy of

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<sup>12</sup> *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes nach der populären Anschauung der apostolischen Zeit und nach der Lehre des Apostels Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1892; 2nd ed. 1900); Eng. transl of 1st ed., *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation' (NRSV). Exegesis and hermeneutics, even when worked on or worked out in the privacy of one's own study, must finally be the product of the Christian community at large. At this point, we all stand indebted to that long history of orthodox consensus. If, for example, on the doctrine of the Trinity Church tradition has been far more positive about what certain texts taught than the exegete might be comfortable with, such tradition was never far afield in terms of what was inherently embedded in the New Testament texts, even if not precisely or intentionally explicated.

In scores of other areas, tradition, the reflective understanding of the biblical texts in the Church throughout its history, has forged out for the Church the theological undergirding for its various structures and practices; and even when it has needed to be corrected, or has been judged and found wanting, this is not the work of one or a few. To put it baldly, where there is no appreciation for tradition, for the rich heritage of reflective theologizing with its general consensus on the basic Christian verities, Protestantism has spawned a mass of individual heresies, all vying for centre stage as the single truth of God.

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## **PART IV THE WAY FORWARD**

That leads me finally to say a few words as to how we might trace our paths through this most difficult of tasks, and be simultaneously both affirming and critical of our tradition(s) in the exegetical-hermeneutical endeavour. Here I have only some reflections and observations, nothing definitive:

1. With regard to the tradition of the Church (in the second sense), it very well may be that we could learn to recognize levels of tradition, which might be given different weight.<sup>14</sup> For example, some issues have been heavily reflected on as central issues of the faith, and the Church has come to a high level of consensus concerning them, a consensus that has held for centuries and that is common to the Eastern Church, the Western Church and the mainstream of Protestantism. Moreover, such understanding seems to be quite the point, or at least in keeping with the thrust of, the biblical texts themselves (e.g. the Trinity; the Person of Christ).

Other doctrines, on the other hand, have not been the focus of much theological reflection, even though they have assumed positions with a high level of consensus for centuries. Here one might think of the traditional role of male leadership, with the general failure to recognize the giftedness of women, or when recognized to allow such gifts to operate only within the confines of women with other women.

At yet another level is the interpretation of single verses or passages, which have virtually never been the focus of church reflection. For this reason, there has often been a variety of interpretations of certain texts, with no sense of reflective consensus as to their meaning. Here the ongoing work of exegesis is itself a part of the formulation of the tradition.

If evangelicals are to take tradition more seriously as to its role in the hermeneutical process, a weighing of tradition in this manner might be useful. It would take a lot of evidence for one cautiously to disagree with the first level of consensus, whereas one might do so more easily at the next level. In any case, such an understanding of tradition might help us to take it more seriously, without giving it absolute authority.

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<sup>14</sup> For the substance of this paragraph I am especially indebted to my interaction with the faculty of Canadian Theological Seminary.

2. With regard to the effect of tradition in the fourth and fifth senses, the first and most difficult task is for any one of us to be able to discover our own traditions, and how in many different ways they affect our [p.435](#) exegesis and hermeneutics. Here the only secret is no secret at all; it requires the effort of a lifetime—to be vigorously demanding of oneself, so as to spot when it is our biases that are at work, or when we are more truly listening to God’s very word for ourselves and for others. I think, for example, of such a simple thing as the recognition of our own personal histories in a thoroughly individualistic culture, and how differently—and more correctly—we will understand and apply texts when we recognize the essentially corporate—people as a whole people—presupposition that lies behind all the epistolary imperatives. Think, for example, how differently one understands [1 Corinthians 3:16–17](#) or [Philippians 2:12–13](#), when one thinks not in terms of individual obedience to such texts, but of their corporate nature—calling a community to obedience in terms of its new self-understanding in Christ.

Or I think further of the whole, generally rationalistic, and almost totally *literary* (= written) culture in which the North American inerrancy debate has taken place—without once recognizing how differently a basically *oral* culture handles such things as precision in wording or in the transmission of traditions. This is not to discount the concern that brought about that debate, but it is to question whether it would have had much meaning to the earliest Christians, whom we encounter in the pages of the New Testament itself.

3. Thirdly, and of equal—or perhaps greater—significance, is a willingness on the part of all of us to be open to one another—to reexamine how we perceive our traditions as affecting us, especially in light of how others perceive it. This, of course, can be terribly threatening, because most of us take considerable comfort—and rightly so—in the stability and security that tradition affords us. There can be little question that we are emotionally so constructed that we can handle the examination at the perimeter with much greater detachment than an examination of the core.

4. The final suggestion is the most difficult of all to put into practice, and that, of course, is that we actually change—or be willing to change or modify—rather than become more defensive. It may well be, of course, that such examination will lead to a greater confidence in the basic correctness, or value, of one’s own traditions. But may God the Holy Spirit give us integrity and readiness to change or modify, if that seems to be needed.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that these are merely probings, as was true of this whole series of essays. In all of them my concern has been singular. In a context of faithfulness to Scripture as God’s Word, how best do we understand these ancient texts—especially the biblical [p. 436](#) imperatives—as a word for all seasons, as a word that addresses us and calls us to obedience to the living God? I may not have resolved much for many, or any, of my readers; but I do hope that I have at least ‘stirred up our pure minds’ to think more carefully, and hopefully consistently, on these matters.

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## Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission



# David J. Bosch

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(Kampen UJH Kok 1978).*

*David Bosch is one of the most respected missiologists of our generation. He was a member of the Theological Commission of WEF and also widely accepted in ecumenical circles. His tragic death last year was an agonising loss to the whole church. We honour him by republishing this receptive article in which he argues that the whole Bible is permeated with the idea of mission. In going beyond proof-texting he parallels four hermeneutical principles in both Old and New Testaments. A stronger emphasis on mission as verbal proclamation would have completed this comprehensive survey.*

Editor

It has become customary, in writing on the 'theology of mission', to begin with a chapter on the 'biblical foundation of mission'. The argument seems to be that we already know what 'mission' is and that, once we have established the biblical validity of mission, we may proceed to the exposition of mission theory and methodology.

Verkuyl, in his *Inleiding in de nieuwere zendingswetenschap*, follows a different approach. The section on the 'biblical foundation' comes up for discussion only after several introductory chapters which deal with the history of the study of mission. To me this seems to be a commendable approach. We cannot simply assume that our readers already know what 'mission' is, nor that they would agree with our definitions. I would, in fact, have preferred to go *beyond* Verkuyl: the section on the 'biblical foundations of mission' should be preceded not only by a survey of the study of the subject of missiology but also by an overview of the ways in which the Church, down through the centuries, has understood her missionary responsibility. This is, naturally, something different from the development of missiology as theological discipline. We usually assume far too easily that we can employ the Bible as a kind of objective arbitrator in the case of [p. 438](#) theological differences, not realizing that every one of us approaches the Bible with his own set of preconceived ideas about what it says. It is only after having engaged in the exercise of looking closely at the different ways in which the Church, during various stages of her history, has interpreted a specific issue, that we begin to understand the relativity of our own approach.

For our present subject all this means that it is of little avail to embark upon a discussion of the biblical foundations of mission unless we have first clarified some of the hermeneutical principles involved. Verkuyl is very much aware of this. He therefore, quite correctly, opens his treatment of the biblical foundations of the missionary mandate with a paragraph on hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup>

In earlier Roman Catholic missiology the hermeneutic problem in dealing with the biblical foundations of mission was of only secondary importance. In the second edition of his *Inleiding tot de Missiewetenschap*,<sup>2</sup> Dr. Alph. Mulder devotes only ten pages to what he calls 'Bijbelse Missiethologie', and of these ten pages only a fraction deals with the problem of the actual *foundation* of mission. Much more time, energy and space is devoted to 'traditional' and 'dogmatic' theology of mission.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Verkuyl, *Inleiding in de Nieuwere Zendingswetenschap*, Kampen: Kok, 1975, 122–124.

<sup>2</sup> Bussum: Paul Brand N.Y., 1950.

Protestants, on the other hand, have always prided themselves on the fact that they do what they do on the basis of what Scripture teaches. Still, in the case of the earliest Protestant missionaries, the Pietists and the Moravians, very little of a real biblical foundation for their missionary enterprises was in evidence. Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out such a foundation for the Church's missionary mandate. A. H. Oussoren, who has studied Carey's missionary principles carefully, says of him that he listened to the authority of Holy Scripture, that his missionary work was 'founded on the firm, objective ground of the Word of God' whereas the Pietists were much more subjective in laying stress on the misery of the 'poor heathens'.<sup>3</sup>

Carey's hermeneutics has to be subjected to scrutiny, however. He p. 439 based his entire case on the argument that the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)) was as valid in his day (1792) as it had been in the days of the apostle. This in itself may be hermeneutically acceptable (we will return to the Great Commission) but it assumes just a little too much. For one thing, it assumes that the validity of the missionary mandate can be founded on isolated texts, for another, that everybody would agree with Carey's definition of what mission is.

Let us begin with the first assumption. Carey—like thousands of other missionary enthusiasts since—has built his case almost exclusively on the commission of the risen Lord. Christ has commanded us to go into all the world, therefore it is incumbent upon us to go. When critical scholarship since the 19th century began to cast doubts on the authenticity of [Matt. 28:18-20](#) as a saying of Jesus, this caused a real crisis in missionary circles. It had to be 'proved', at all costs, that this was an authentic saying because the validity of the missionary enterprise was at stake.

The reader should not interpret me as saying that the Great Commission is *not* from Jesus; I am merely arguing that discussions on such issues may be jeopardized by factors issuing from a wrong hermeneutic. In Carey's view mission was justified only on the basis of an explicit command of Jesus. Our approach, however, would rather be to show that a world-wide mission is valid whether or not this was commanded explicitly by Jesus.

In other circles there developed a hermeneutical approach not entirely unrelated to that of Carey: the Bible was used as a mine from which 'missionary texts' could be extracted. Most of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was undoubtedly 'particularistic' and therefore hardly usable as a foundation for a world-wide mission. If, however, we searched carefully and persistently among the rocks and rubble we would find small nuggets of real gold—stories of pagans such as Ruth and Naaman, who accepted the faith of Israel, 'universalistic' expressions in the Psalms and in Deutero-Isaiah, encounters between Jesus and non-Jews, such as the Roman centurion, etc. Sometimes there are no such clearly visible nuggets of gold; then the ore would have to be melted carefully and the invisible gold meticulously extracted from it via the elaborate processes of exegesis.

I am not saying that these procedures are illegitimate. They undoubtedly have their value. But their contribution towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal. This validity should not be deduced from isolated texts and detached incidents but only from the thrust of the central message of both Old and New p. 440 Testaments.<sup>4</sup> What is decisive for the Church today is not the formal agreement between what she is

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. H. Oussoren, *William Carey, especially his Missionary Principles*, Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1945, 251.

<sup>4</sup> See also Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 123.

doing and what some isolated biblical texts seem to be saying but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture.

This brings us to the second assumption of Carey and of, many others who followed after him: that we already know what 'mission' is and now have only to discover it in Scripture. For most Western Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, from the Middle Ages down to our own times, mission meant the actual geographic movement from a Christian locality to a pagan locality for the purpose of winning converts and expanding the Western Church into that area. Because this movement largely coincided with the West's colonizing of the non-Western world, it was inevitably mixed with overtones of Western superiority, imperialism, power and know-how and with the idea of the 'haves' going out to the 'have-nots'. It is not my intention to join in the popular contemporary chorus of disparaging 'the traditional Western missionary. By and large he was a breed fundamentally different from his colonizing countryman. Nevertheless, the historical situation in which he lived could not but influence his theological understanding. So mission was understood in the typical, activist Western categories of the crossing of (remote) geographical boundaries.

Mission was, moreover, defined almost exclusively as the verbal proclamation of an other-worldly message and a preparation for the hereafter. Consequences of mission, such as social and political changes, were, in essence, regarded as by-products. Other activities of the missionary societies, such as education and medical care, were only ancillaries to the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

When theologians with preconceived ideas about mission, such as those we have just described, look at the Bible, it is obvious that they would judge that at least the Old Testament reveals a 'thoroughly passive character' as far as mission is concerned.<sup>5</sup> The same verdict has often been made about the Jesus of the gospels: the idea of a mission to the pagan world lay entirely outside his horizon. Adolf von Harnack was one of the first scholars to have come to this conclusion, and since then many others have followed suit. I believe, however, p.441 that the definition of mission which underlies this interpretation is open to question.

During recent decades there has been a remarkable shift in the Church's understanding of mission. At least as far as the Protestant churches are concerned mission started its life as a foundling child. For a very long period it was, at best, tolerated on the fringes of the household of the Church, almost as though the Church was embarrassed by its existence. Since the 1930s, however, mission has gained enormously in respectability. The foundling is now accepted as a legitimate child. The Tambaram Conference of 1938 made the first overtures in this direction; the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1961) finally legalized the relationship.

All this gradually led to an escalation in the usage of the term 'mission'. From being a mere footnote to the study of the Church, the study of the mission of the Church has developed into a theological discipline in its own right. The escalation of the usage of the term 'mission', however, also had an inflationary effect. 'Mission' came to mean—as Donald McGavran once put it—'any good activity at home or abroad which anyone declares to be the will of God',<sup>6</sup> and Stephen Neill rightly commented that, if everything was mission, then nothing was mission.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. Hahn, *Das Verständnis der Mission im Neuen Testament*, NeukirchenVluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1963, 14.

<sup>6</sup> In D. McGavran (ed.), *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: the Crucial Documents 1964–1976*. South Pasadena: Wm. Carey Library, 1977, 241.

In spite of this inflationary spiral, however, some crucial elements—long neglected—in the biblical understanding of mission were rediscovered. The essential element remained: mission was the Church-crossing-frontiers, but the frontiers that had to be crossed were redefined. Mission, as we understand it now, is not necessarily a geographical movement from those who practise christianity to those who do not practise it, neither does it have to be restricted to the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Mission is, in fact, the totality of the task *God* has *sent* his *Church* to do in the *world*. In this statement everyone of the four words in italics is of crucial importance. The frontiers the Church will be crossing in executing this task may sometimes, indeed, be geographical; they may however be—and usually are—also ideological, cultural, religious, social, economic and ethnic.

What is at stake here is, naturally, more than just the crossing of frontiers as such. Mission is mission only if it aims at leading people to repentance and faith in Christ's finished work of redemption, if it seeks to incorporate those it reaches into the new Messianic community, and [p. 442](#) if it makes Christ's finished work of redemption relevant to the frontiers that are being crossed. Much of the devaluation of the concept of mission in our day is due to the way in which this indispensable concomitant to the crossing of frontiers has been disregarded in contemporary theology.

## MISSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Let us now take a closer look, first at the Old Testament and then at the New, to establish what the Scriptures say about a foundation of mission thus newly defined. As this has to be a very brief treatment we understandably have to be very selective. We concentrate on those elements that are usually neglected in discussions on the biblical foundation of mission.

As far as the *Old Testament* is concerned, it is vital to recognize that a missionary mandate cannot be derived from a few isolated universalistic passages. That this is a futile starting-point can be deduced from a close look at Deutero-Isaiah, who is usually regarded as one of the most 'universalistic' prophets in the Old Testament, even to the extent of incorporating the pagan king Cyrus into God's plan of salvation. Yet in this same Deutero-Isaiah there is a recurring and devastating judgment on the idolatry of non-Israelites.

### Compassion

We would rather base the missionary significance of the Old Testament not on some universalistic text, but primarily on the fact that Yahweh reveals himself here as the One who champions the cause of the weak, the afflicted and the oppressed.<sup>7</sup> This is why the 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' ([Ex. 20:2](#)), formed the cornerstone of Israel's confession of faith. This distinguished Yahweh from all other gods. Because of their inability to do as he did they stand condemned ([Ps. 82](#)). He is the 'father of the fatherless, the widow's champion ... God gives the friendless a home and brings out the prisoner safe and sound' ([Ps. 68:5,6](#)). So the people of Israel are being challenged: 'Search into days gone by, long [p. 443](#) before your time ...; search from one end of heaven to the other, and ask if any deed as mighty as this has been seen or heard ... Or did ever a god attempt to come and take a nation for himself away from another nation, with challenge, and with signs, portents, and wars, with a strong hand and an outstretched

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Ferdinand Deist, 'The Exodus Motif in the Old Testament and the Theology of Liberation', *Missionalia*, No. 2, Vol. 5 (Aug. 1977), 58–69, and C. J. Labuschagne, 'De godsdiens van Israel en de andere godsdiens', *Wereld en Zending*, No. 1, Vol. 4 (1975), 4–16.

arm, ... as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt in the sight of all?' ([Deut. 4:32, 34–35](#)). Whereas the gods of the predominantly hierophanic religions laid emphasis on order, harmony, integration and the maintenance of the *status quo*, the violation of which would precipitate the wrath of the gods, Yahweh revealed himself as the God of change, the God who comes to the rescue of the poor and needy.

It was characteristic of Yahweh that he expected his elect to reveal the same compassion which he himself possessed. The purpose of election was service and where this service was withheld, election lost its meaning. Israel's besetting sin was precisely that she interpreted election as favouritism. However, election was not primarily privilege but rather responsibility. Israel who was a stranger in Egypt had to show compassion to the stranger in her midst. The 'alien' who lived with Israel had to be accepted without reserve (cf. [Num. 9:14](#); [15:14–16](#); [Josh 20:9](#)).

Israel's guilt in this connection is superbly illustrated in the book of *Jonah*, a discussion of which, quite correctly, takes pride of place in Verkuyl's survey of the Old Testament foundation of mission.<sup>8</sup> This short book has often, wrongly, been regarded as dealing with mission in the modern, Western understanding of the term. Here was a prophet who crossed remote geographical boundaries to proclaim God's message to a pagan people! In reality, however, the story of Jonah does not aim at the conversion of pagans. It is much more concerned with the conversion of the elect people of God: more specifically, a conversion to a compassion comparable to that of Yahweh. What is being castigated is Jonah's—and Israel's—appropriation of God's favour and compassion exclusively for themselves. The irony of the story is that Jonah knows that God is 'gracious and compassionate, long-suffering ... and always willing to repent of the disaster' ([Jonah 4:2](#)), but that it never dawned upon him that all this could be applicable to peoples other than Israel. The missionary significance of this *midrash* does not therefore lie in the physical journeying of a prophet of Yahweh to a pagan country but in the fact that Yahweh is compassionate and that this compassion knows no [p. 444](#) boundaries. As Verkuyl puts it: Jonah reproaches Yahweh for being the same to those outside the covenant as inside,<sup>9</sup> and he adds that it is 'remarkable and disturbing' that the book concludes with an open question in this regard.<sup>10</sup>

## History

In addition to the Old Testament emphasis on Yahweh's compassion for the downtrodden, and closely related to it, is the fact that the religion of Israel was a *historical* religion. This, too, has tremendous significance for the foundation of mission. The Old Testament has often been an embarrassment to the missionary Church because of its apparently exclusive concentration on Israel. This embarrassment is, however, due to an inability to understand the Old Testament revelation as historical. History, in order to be history, *has* to be specific. The concentration on Israel, far from being an 'unmissionary' element in the Old Testament, is precisely the opposite. Without this element of specificity, Yahweh's salvation would have been a-historical. A careful reading of the Old Testament thus reveals the enormous missionary significance of Yahweh's dealing with Israel. This already becomes apparent in the call of Abraham ([Gen. 12:1–3](#)). This event refers back to the Babel episode in [Genesis 11](#). Man's attempt at obtaining salvation has failed miserably; now God begins with a new thing. What Babel has lost, is promised and guaranteed in the

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<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, 131–138.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

history of Abraham's election. [Genesis 12](#) follows [Genesis 11](#): The entire history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God's dealings with the nations. Yahweh alone can make history by breaking out of the circle of the eternal return and by journeying into the future with his people, with Abraham out of Ur, with Israel out of Egypt, moving to the nations. Only a historical religion can be truly missionary. If, on the other hand, we discover in the Bible nothing but 'eternal, immutable truths', the missionary dimension will be quickly dissipated.

### Suffering

There is a third element which is of vital importance for the Old Testament foundation of mission: it is, I believe, not accidental that what Verkuyl calls the 'universalistic motif' in the Old Testament, [p. 445](#) reached its zenith specifically in the period of captivity.<sup>11</sup> This is especially true of the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. Quite contrary to what Israel might have thought, it is not in national triumph but in national disaster that the possibility of being God's witness would come to fruition. This is, above all, true of the *ebedh Yahweh*: being God's witness to the world does not mean an aggressive campaign with much verbiage but a silent suffering on behalf of others. So [Isaiah 53](#) reveals both the highest and the deepest dimensions of mission in the Old Testament. In [Exodus 19:5-6](#) Israel was called a 'kingdom of priests'. She was allocated a priestly function in the world. The priest, by definition, does not rule; he serves. [Isaiah 53](#) shows that such service can, at times, consist in innocent suffering for the sake of others. The priest himself becomes, as it were, the sacrifice which he brings to the altar.

This happens at a time in history when Israel was, politically speaking, entirely insignificant. She appeared to have failed miserably in playing a role in the world. She had become the scum of the earth, 'whom every nation abhors, the slave of tyrants' ([Isa. 49:7](#)). Yet, precisely at this moment of deepest humiliation (and self-humbling!), kings and princes will draw nearer to Israel 'because of the Holy one of Israel who has chosen you' ([Isa. 49:7](#)).

### Conduct

This leads us, almost naturally, to the last of the four elements in the Old Testament dimension of mission I would like to highlight: that Israel is not the subject of mission, but Yahweh himself. The 'proclamation' is not the spoken word, but the events concerning the *ebedh*. He is brought into the court of law in order to witness in the law-suit between Yahweh and the nations. He is, however, a most extraordinary and, in fact, apparently useless witness, for he can neither talk nor see ([Isa. 42:18-20](#); [48:8-13](#))! The whole point seems to be that the message of this dumb and blind witness does not consist in verbal proclamation but that merely by his existence and his experience he is a witness for Yahweh. His mission consists in his being there for others.

This has sometimes been referred to as the 'centripetal' dimension of mission in the Old Testament whereas, in the New Testament, mission would be conceived of as 'centrifugal': If the Old Testament people of [p. 446](#) God are obedient, the pagans will flock to Jerusalem, attracted by the light that shines forth from the holy city. In the New Testament, on the other hand, the emphasis is on going out from Jerusalem into all the world (cf. [Acts 1:8](#)).

Undoubtedly there is an element of truth in this distinction. The problem comes, however, when we—as Westerners tend to do—define mission in exclusively centrifugal

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

categories (a definition of mission we have already challenged), and when we argue that the 'centripetal' is absent from the New Testament. This is by no means the case, as D. van Swigchem has shown in his *Het missionair karakter van de christelijke gemeente volgens de Brieven van Paulus en Petrus*.<sup>12</sup>

The four elements of an Old Testament missionary foundation we have selected—out of many—are all very closely inter-related. The God who has compassion on all is also pre-eminently the God of history, who uses the specific history of Israel as the arena for his dealings with the nations. He is also, as the compassionate One and the God of history, the One who turns human categories upside down: he uses the weak and the downtrodden as his instruments to draw the world to him. Ultimately, therefore, it is not Israel who is the missionary agent but God himself.

## MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we now turn to the New Testament we make the remarkable discovery that all four elements essential to an Old Testament understanding of mission can be found here as well. Far too often discussion about the Church's missionary mandate were made dependent upon the question about the attitude of the historical Jesus to the Gentile mission. While this question is undoubtedly of theological significance for our understanding of the ministry of Jesus, it is of no more than secondary importance in our present investigation about the biblical foundation of mission. There would have been a post-Easter Gentile mission even if Jesus had never been in contact with non-Jews and never said anything about them. That he *did* meet non-Jews and *did* say some surprising things about them should not be interpreted as a  *motive* for the Church to engage in a Gentile mission but as a  *consequence* of the essentially missionary dimension of God's revelation in him. **P. 447**

### Compassion

As in the Old Testament, one of the key words for understanding the New Testament's essentially missionary character, is the word  *compassion*. Jesus' conduct in no way confirmed Jewish piety as expounded by the Pharisees. Unlike them he did not gather disciples so that they might learn the  *torah* from him. On the contrary, he questioned traditional Jewish values at crucial points and he did this especially by turning to the outcasts of society. To them he proclaimed the possibility of a new life on the basis of the love of God.

It is remarkable to note how the people to whom Jesus turned are referred to in the gospels. They are called the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, sinners, those who weep, the sick the little ones, the widows, the captives, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the least, the last, those who are weary and heavily burdened, the lost sheep. It is also significant that, whereas all these designations suggest boundless compassion, the Pharisees referred to the same categories of people derogatorily as 'the rabble who know nothing of the law'.

Jesus' love and service acknowledges no bounds. He mixes with taxcollectors, disreputable women and other shady characters. He even enters into the homes of pagans. He tells the story of the lost son, in which he undercuts all human righteousness by works and all pride of achievement, but he also tells the parable of the good Samaritan

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<sup>12</sup> Kampen: Kok, 1955.

in which he denounces all Jewish national self-righteousness and pride of descent. In his sermon in Nazareth he explicitly says:

He sent me to preach the Good News to the poor,  
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,  
tell blind people that they can see  
and set the down-trodden free,  
and go tell everyone  
the news that the Kingdom of God has come.

[\(Luke 4:18-20\)](#)

In the ensuing dispute he challenges the Nazareth synagogue with the stories of God's universal compassion in the Old Testament.

In all this he categorically calls his disciples to the same kind of boundless compassion. After the parable of the Good Samaritan he asks the lawyer: 'Who of these three, do you think, was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' And the lawyer had to admit grudgingly: 'It was the man who had compassion on him' ([Luke 10:36](#)).

Jesus sharpens and radicalizes the ethical demands of the *torah* and p. 448 concentrates all these demands in the command to love: more specifically, in the command to love the *enemy* (cf. [Matt. 5:44](#)). This kind of love excludes every vestige of vengeance in the disciple's heart. I therefore believe that Joachim Jeremias quite correctly attributes the cause of the dispute, which followed upon Jesus' Nazareth sermon, to the fact that he dared to omit the reference in [Isa. 61:2](#) to the 'day of the vengeance of our God'.<sup>13</sup> In the preaching of the period it was especially on these words that the emphasis was laid. In fact, any truly Jewish preacher would read this passage with the primary purpose of using it as basis for an exposition of the coming vengeance of the Lord on Israel's enemies. And now Jesus deliberately stops short of the announcement about vengeance! How unimaginable! To read only the portion about grace, not the portion about vengeance! This was unforgivable, especially as it implied that the same attitude would be expected of his followers.

Jeremias points out that the same occurs elsewhere as well. In Jesus' reply to John the Baptist ([Matt. 11:5-6](#); [Luke 7:22-23](#)) he quotes freely three passages in Isaiah ([29:18-19](#); [35:5-6](#); [61:1-2](#)). What is significant is that in each of these passages there is an explicit reference to the wrath of God while Jesus omits these references. Martin Hengel is therefore correct when he asserts that the proclamation of Jesus hardly had less 'missionary' character than that of his disciples after Easter. He also, with approval, quotes Erich Grässer who says: 'The Church saw in Jesus the archetype of the missionary'.<sup>14</sup>

## History

Another important aspect in the New Testament missionary dimension lies in its historical character. As is the case with the Old Testament, missionary enthusiasts have been embarrassed about the absence of absolutely clear references to a Gentile mission in the stories about Jesus of Nazareth. This embarrassment reveals an inability to appreciate the historical character of God's revelation. Once again: history is specific, not general. Here it is specific in the extreme: God's revelation was incarnated and

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<sup>13</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jesu Verheissung für die Völker*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956, 35-39.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Hengel, „Die Ursprünge der christlichen Mission“, *New Testament Studies*, No. 1, Vol. 18 (1971), 35, 36.



concentrated in the history of this Man. Yet this in no way suggested that the rest of humanity was left [p. 449](#) untouched. On the contrary: God was touching humanity through this Man, he 'was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' ([2 Cor. 5:19](#)).

History is moreover, by definition, an unfolding. It contains the idea of *καιρός*, of fateful and decisive moments which inaugurate new, hitherto unknown events. And the gospel stories are straining towards the unfolding of the new events. Verkuyl puts it well: all Jesus' encounters with non-Jews vibrate with the holy impatience of him, who, while temporarily limiting himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, is yearning for the day when salvation will in its fulness go out to the nations.<sup>15</sup>

And so it was. The first advances towards a Gentile mission proceeded from the 'Hellenistic' groups within Jewish Christianity. To them this was the natural consequence of their understanding of the ministry of Jesus within the situation of contact with Gentiles in which they lived. They did not need a missionary command to engage in mission. In fact, what has become known as the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)) is no missionary command in the strict sense of the word. Verse [19](#) has usually been translated as though the real activity of the disciples was to be the 'going' into all the world. The Church has therefore understood [Matt. 28:18-20](#) almost exclusively in geographical categories. In reality, however, *πορευθέντες*, as an aorist participle, is an auxiliary simply reinforcing the action of the main verb. It does not command the disciples to go into all the world. It is simply taking it for granted that they will do this, and so they are told that, while going into the world, their principal responsibility will be that of 'making disciples'. The principal verb of the sentence is therefore *μαθητεύσατε* and its meaning is explicated by the two participles that follow: baptising and teaching.<sup>16</sup>

There is, in fact, a remarkable analogy between [Matt. 28:18-20](#) and [Philp. 2:6-11](#). The latter passage also refers to the exaltation and universal rule of Christ after his humiliation and then adds, not as a command but as a logical *consequence* of his accession to the throne, 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...' The historical *καιρός* for the Gentile mission has come and it needs no explicit command. [p. 450](#)

### Suffering

Also the third dimension of the Old Testament understanding of mission is to be found in the New. In the Old Testament, so we said, the idea of mission reached its zenith in the period of the Babylonian captivity, more specifically, in the suffering of the *ebedh Yahweh* in [Isaiah 53](#). In the New Testament the zenith is reached in the suffering of the Son of man, more explicitly on Calvary, where he gave his life as a ransom for many. What appeared to be disaster was, in fact, God's way of victory.

Once again: this has vital consequences for the Church-in-mission. To follow the Rabbi of Nazareth did not mean studying the *torah* under his guidance, but identifying with his suffering. Nowhere does this come out as clearly as in Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians.<sup>17</sup> Paul rejects here the conduct of the 'hawkers' ([2:17](#)) who define mission in the categories of demonstrable success and triumphalism. In contrast to them Paul is a 'captive' ([2:14](#)) who prides himself on his weakness ([12:9](#)). As a matter of fact, weakness (*ασθένεια*), affliction (*θλιψις*) and suffering (*λύπη*) are key concepts in this epistle in

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<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. also Peter O'Brien, 'The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?' *The Reformed Theological Review*, No. 3 Vol. 35 (Sept.-Dec. 1976), 66-78.

<sup>17</sup> See Horst Baum SVD, *Mut zum Schwachsein—in Christi Kraft; Theologische Grundelemente einer missionarischen Spiritualität anhand von 2 Kor.*, St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1977.

which Paul has to defend his apostleship against the ‘superlative’ apostles ([11:5](#); [12:11](#)) of Corinth who recommend themselves. Unlike them, he has this treasure in an ‘earthen vessel’ ([4:7](#)) of which his many sufferings ([6:4–10](#); [1:23–28](#)) give ample evidence. Moreover suffering and affliction are *normal* experiences in the life of the apostle, but for those who can think only in terms of success they are a σκάδαλον. We should go even beyond that and quote these words of Paul, which are such a stumbling-block to Protestant ears: ‘It is now my happiness to suffer for you. This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ’s affliction still to be endured, for the sake of his body which is the Church’ ([Col. 1:24](#)). To the Corinthians he says essentially the same thing: ‘So death is at work in us, and life in you’ ([2 Cor. 4:12](#)). True mission manifests itself only in a Church which agonizes with the victims of this world. The difference between Pauline mission and that of his opponents in Corinth lies in the Cross.

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### Conduct

The last element in the New Testament view of mission we want to direct attention to, is that here, too, mission is understood as a matter of *being* rather than doing. The Church does not become missionary only when she crosses geographical boundaries. As a matter of fact, she may cross such boundaries without becoming missionary in the true sense of the world. She may be crossing geographical frontiers without crossing the many other frontiers that count so much more.

We have already referred to van Swigchem’s book on the missionary character of the Christian Church in the letters of Paul and Peter. Especially in 1 Peter the conduct of the Christians forms the basis of all mission. This and this alone will convince the pagans ([2:12](#)) and put their ignorance and stupidity to silence ([2:15](#)). Apparently these Christians do not themselves publicize their faith. The *pagans*, however, ask them for an explanation. Of what? Of the hope they have within them ([3:15](#))! This was so much in evidence that the pagan became both inquisitive and jealous. To put it in Pauline language: this was the way God used to ‘reveal and spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of himself’ ([2 Cor. 2:14](#)). Wherever the apostle lives as ‘Christ-fragrance’, something happens to the surrounding people.

### CONCLUSION

We have come to the end of our brief discussion of the why and how of a biblical foundation for mission. Our conclusion is that both Old and New Testament are permeated with the idea of mission. There is only one scriptural symbol that corresponds to the question of the dynamic and functional relation of the Church to the world. That symbol is mission. Verkuyl quotes Hendrik Kraemer who once said: ‘A Church which is not engaged in mission is a galvanised corpse’.<sup>18</sup> We have to elucidate this statement by adding: not everything we call mission is indeed mission. Paul dismisses the claims of the ‘hawkers’ in Corinth that they are engaged in mission. They are not, in spite of all their expansion programmes. They are what Hans Hoekendijk once called ‘a club for religious folklore’. It is the perennial temptation of the Church to become just that. She may slip so easily into this situation, without even becoming aware of it. The only remedy for this mortal danger lies in challenging herself unceasingly with the true biblical foundation of mission.

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<sup>18</sup> Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 155.

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The late Dr. David Bosch was professor of Missiology at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. [p. 452](#)

# African Bible Guides: Preliminary findings of an experiment with African Christianity in Microcosm

Stan Nussbaum

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*This article outlines the vision plan and process of a very significant development across Africa—preparing Bible Study guides for the grass root leadership of churches in Africa. They are designed for people who preach or teach every week without any formal Bible training. These include elderly pastors, village church leaders and women and people with limited reading skills. The guides are not ‘commentaries for the sophisticated’ but ‘sparks for the common people’. As with Jesus, profound truths can be taught in simple ways. The guide for [Colossians 1](#) is an example. In Africa they are printed in the vernacular languages.*

Editor

A paper presented to the ‘Conference on Christianity in Africa in the 1990s’, for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, 27–28 May 1992.

Since May 1987 I have been designing and coordinating an experiment upon which I would now like to reflect in the presence of such an august company of Africans and lovers of Africa. Because it has intensively involved twenty-two Africans deliberately selected as a fairly representative cross-section of the entire spectrum of African church leaders, I believe it is of considerable significance as an indicator of what African Christianity is, can be and may be in the 1990s. The experiment is still going on, so the findings reported here must be taken as preliminary. Suggestions for refining the experiment or interpreting the findings differently are therefore welcome.

The experiment brought twelve Africans together at INTERACT Research Centre from April to July 1990 and another ten from April to [p. 453](#) July this year.<sup>1</sup> The team members worked in groups of five or six to write ‘guides’ to selected books of the Bible which would be appropriate for the average African lay preacher or women’s leader who has no formal Bible training but nevertheless functions as the preacher/teacher in a group of Christians who meet weekly.

The experiment was designed so that its structure, process and results would address a number of the major problems besetting African Christians in this decade. We will consider these problems according to their sources—missionaries, African culture and the

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix for listing and description of the participants.

current African situation. In each case we will note what the experiment was trying to do and what discoveries were made along the way, whether planned or otherwise.

## I. INHERITED IMPORTED PROBLEMS

The major problem for African Christians which is left over from the colonial era may well be *the division between the mission-founded churches and the African-founded or independent churches*.<sup>2</sup> The gap between the two kinds of churches seems to be narrowing in a number of countries but the work of reconciliation is far from over. In West Africa particularly the expansion of American-style Pentecostalism is leading to a revival of the old missionary accusation that the independent churches are demon-inspired.

A growing number of mission agencies are trying to undo this division which is part of the missionary legacy in Africa<sup>3</sup> and the current experiment can be seen as one aspect of this effort. Because of its long-standing interest in independent churches and in promoting contact with them, INTERACT set up this experiment to include half its members from the independent churches and half from the mission churches. In this sense the experimental sample was not a true representation of African Christianity, which is perhaps only 10–15% independent.<sup>4</sup> However, the independent churches have more of the untrained lay leaders whom the experiment was intended to help and the mission-independent relationship was one of the main things which we wished to explore, so the balance was weighted toward the independents.

A further part of the plan was to bring the team members in pairs from a given country. For example, the 1990 team included a lecturer in New Testament from the Kimbanguist seminary in Kinshasa and a lecturer in religious studies from the Catholic Faculté, also in Kinshasa. The two men had never met each other in Kinshasa, but in Birmingham they spent eleven intensive weeks discussing how the Gospel of Luke should be preached at the grassroots level in Zaire.

The recruiting of the two team members from a given country was usually done through a contact with the independent church, who would then invite the participation of mission church leaders. For example, Pastor Charles Kudzerema of the Zion Apostolic Church, who had been involved in designing the concept of the experiment during his 1988–89 study on a different course in Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, contacted various churches in Zimbabwe in 1992. They eventually sent a total of six candidates to the interview day at Gweru. The Methodist woman from Bulawayo who was selected did not know the independent church woman from Gweru who was to be her partner, but they were selected on the same day by the same people, Pastor Kudzerema and Mr John

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Turner, 'New mission task: worldwide and waiting,' *Missiology* 13 (1) Jan 1985, see especially p. 7 on the 'history of thinking about Prinerms'.

<sup>3</sup> A network of these missionaries was organized in 1986 and is held together by a triennial publication, *The Review of AICS*, published by INTERACT Research Centre in Birmingham, which also keeps files of the prayer letters and newsletters written by such missionaries. The network has held conferences at Abidjan in 1986 and Kinshasa in 1989 from which the papers were published in volumes edited by David Shank: *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches*, 1987, and *Ministry of Missions in Partnership with African Independent Churches*, 1990 (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions).

<sup>4</sup> Barrett estimates about 27 million independent church members in the mid-1980s. See the relevant country descriptions in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford University Press, 1982. About half these members are in Nigeria and South Africa. The growth of independent churches is striking in some countries such as Ghana, where a recent survey projects that by the year 2000 over half of Ghana's Christians will be members of independent churches.

N'gandu, a member of the United Church of Zambia and of the 1990 writing team. The two women travelled together from Harare and are now working together and living in the same building in Birmingham.

With each such link between two people in an African country and with each visit by people from a neighbouring country, new lines of communication and cooperation are opened between churches. New bridges are being built across the gap between the mission and independent church camps, as well as among the mission churches themselves (Roman Catholic, ecumenical, evangelical, Pentecostal).

A *second* imported problem addressed by the experiment is the problem of contextualization or rather, *lack of contextualization*. p. 455 There is wide agreement among African Christians at the theoretical level that African Christianity needs to contextualize in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> One can name some very encouraging examples where the grand theories of contextualization are actually being put into practice in religious educational material<sup>6</sup> yet one must also admit that a great deal of the Christian literature on offer in Africa today still has a foreign ring about it, and not a little is a direct translation from something written by and for Western Christians.

The experiment began its process of contextualization by selection of books. James was the first one done. Luther might have turned over in his grave if he had heard that James was at the top of the list and Romans was not among the seven books done in either 1990 or 1992, but James was found to be the book most frequently preached on by a large sample of Nigerian independent church leaders.<sup>7</sup> The other two books done in 1990 were Hebrews, which Kwame Bediako has written of as the 'African book' in the New Testament<sup>8</sup> and Luke, the gospel which shows the greatest concern for foreigners, as independent church people often feel themselves to be when confronted with an alien form of the Christian faith.

The books selected by the leaders of the 1992 team after long discussion were Nehemiah, Amos, Acts and Colossians. Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Proverbs and I and II Corinthians were seriously considered. These choices will sound strange to many Westerners, which is as it should be. Western choices of books to teach in Africa Bible institutes have sounded strange to Africans for a long time.

Once a book is selected, the team of African writers is trained to use the 'two-column' method as a basis for writing about it. The method is quite simple. Each writer is given a galley proof style copy of the text. In the left margin or column he or she notes which verses an untrained p. 456 leader will probably select from this passage as the basis for sermons, how the selected texts will be interpreted and applied, and which parts of the passage the leader will overlook, misunderstand or have questions about. In the right column the writer lists points which he or she would like to highlight or explain to an untrained preacher from the passage.

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<sup>5</sup> To name just one of the better-known examples, Jean-Marc Ela, *Ma foi d'africain*, Paris: Karthala, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the LUMKO Institute in Johannesburg has produced an extensive series of pioneering work of this type, a 'PREACH' series was done by Asempa Press in Ghana already in the mid-70s, a new series of genuinely African Sunday school material is being produced by the National Council of Churches of Kenya, and a deliberate shift toward contextualization is evident in many of the materials produced by Scripture Union offices across the continent.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Turner, *Profile through Preaching* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1965), p. 19. From a sample of 8000 sermon texts, Turner calculated the frequency each book was used in proportion to its length.

<sup>8</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: a Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), p. 33f.

The group of five or six writers who are discussing a passage all prepare their left-column and right-column notes ahead of time. While doing this, they each picture an untrained preacher or women's leader whom they know well and imagine what that person will do with the passage. The group will begin its discussion by spending one to two hours on each chapter, noting what is already happening to it in African sermons. Only after that step (the left-column) do they go across the text to the right column and decide what they want to write about that chapter. The introduction of that special step promotes contextualization in a way which is not possible if one moves straight from the text into the writer's own thoughts about it. Examples of the fruits of this method are given later in this paper.

A *third* inherited problem which Africans are struggling to escape from at present is the *abstract form of theological education* which has become the standard one in Africa as in the West. Anyone observing one of these experimental writing groups as they discuss a passage will soon be convinced that a very effective form of theological education is taking place. The focus of the discussion is Scripture, the agenda is being set by grassroots (left-column) considerations, and the mix of denominations, countries, backgrounds and sexes is guaranteed both to broaden the outlook of each participant and to force them all to articulate their own positions more clearly. The writing assignment demands that the group discuss until reaching a consensus, which may need to be carefully worded and yet which cannot use any theological or academic jargon.

From what I have seen happening in the experiment, I am tempted to claim that the Africans involved have profited more from this type of 'education' focused on producing something for publication than Africans do who spend a comparable time in Britain on any standard Christian education course with its more theoretical written work, usually completed by individual students. But I resist that temptation because it would be such a theoretical debate, just the kind I wish to avoid.

What I do not resist is the temptation to challenge people involved in Bible training in Africa to consider whether this method might not be a better one for their classes than the standard lecture-and-paper [p. 457](#) method. Would seminary or Bible institute education not be revolutionized if, for example, the lecturer set a term project of team-writing a local preaching guide to a biblical book (or editing one of the seven guides produced in our experiment), marked each student according to the quality of the section he or she contributed, and published (mimeograph or photocopy) a limited edition of the result?

Let me also suggest a simpler alternative. A lecturer might use a chapter from one of our experimental guides as a final examination before graduation, requiring each student to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the draft and to suggest improvements which would make that chapter of the guide more useful for the average untrained lay-leader in his region. I submit that any student who can pass such an examination has been well prepared for church ministry and any student who fails it has not been. Note that an expatriate lecturer will have considerable trouble marking such an examination because he will not have the necessary depth of knowledge about the local culture. This is a clear signal that the education has moved from the abstract to the practical, where the foreigner is more likely to be off his territory and out of his depth.

## II. INHERITED AFRICAN PROBLEMS

Not all problems facing African Christianity in the 1990s were imported by the missionaries, of course. African traditional culture, despite its often underestimated

strengths, has also contributed its fair share to the current unhappy situation in the continent.

The *first* problem area is *male dominance*. In most traditional cultures women have been relegated to inferior status and this has been carried over unquestioned into the life of the Church. No one doubts that women are the majority attenders, the most faithful contributors and the centre of spiritual vitality of African churches, but neither does anyone doubt that women are under-represented in church leadership, theological education and literature production. At the theoretical level one can find a few signs that this problem is being addressed by African women.<sup>9</sup>

As we set out to address this problem in our experiment, we discovered immediately that it was not only an African problem. At p. 458 Selly Oak Colleges where the issue of women's roles has a very high profile, we managed to find only one staff member for our committee of eight. Nevertheless we committed ourselves to try to get an equal balance of men and women in our writing teams.

We determined ahead of time whether we would be asking for male or female nominees from a given country in order to ensure that the total team was balanced and that each country was represented by two people of the same sex. Very interesting things happened as we tried to implement this policy. One independent church leader, very well placed in a highly literate country with many independent churches, was unable to identify any independent church woman whom he considered right for the work and able to go to England and for three months, so he nominated a woman from a mission church in the pentecostal family whom he knew was sympathetic with many of the independent church people and views. In another case a group which was asked to nominate women sent in four names, of which three were men. In another a group of independent church leaders refused to nominate women at all, arguing that in their culture every pioneer must be a man. They claimed that no one would take the literature seriously if it were brought back to their country and introduced by a woman.

We also invited the African continental offices of the Bible Society and Scriptural Union as well as an African staff member of the World Council of Churches to suggest names for the positions of team leaders or 'scribes'. We stated criteria for the position but did not stipulate whether the nominees should be men or women. Four names were received, all men. Later when we specifically sought a woman scribe, three qualified women were suggested.<sup>10</sup>

Through the process of raising funds for the experiment from a very broad cross-section of donors, I have become aware of how widespread the concern with women's issues is among them. I have also heard an African man admit that whenever his agency prepares a p. 459 project proposal, they include women in it somehow in order to please the potential donors even if they doubt they will be able to implement the proposal in that respect. Someone's integrity is at stake here; and I mention the case because I do not believe Westerners realize it may be theirs.

Some Africans, excluding the friend I have just mentioned, may see the Western emphasis on women's issues as a modern form of Western imperialism. Western culture

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<sup>9</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, 'With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology,' in *Reflections of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, edited by V. Fabella and M. A. Oduyoye (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> These were suggested by staff members at the All Africa Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Kenya. There were complicated reasons including a reduction in the team size for 1992 which prevented us from including any women as 'Scribes' in the 1992 team. In 1990 the scribe duties were done by three expatriates (myself and two women).

has reached a conclusion about feminism which many Western Christians have taken on board, justified in theological terms and exported as a universal truth. Western missions, which ardently claim they have long ceased to dictate anything to African churches, are doing something not far removed from dictating when it comes to women's issues. What Africa does about women's issues and how it responds to Western suggestions, criticisms and pressures in this area will be a major part of the life of African Christianity in the 1990s.

A *second* problem in the African heritage is *tribalism*. The experiment tackled this by inviting wherever possible members of two different tribes in the same country, such as a Yoruba and an Igbo from Nigeria, and by bringing together a team from the various regions of Africa. In 1990 it was Ghana, Benin, Zaire, Kenya, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa; in 1992 Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. Often the two members from the same country found themselves identifying with each other by contrast with the rest of the countries.

Team members experienced their tribal differences in many ways. While learning greetings in Zulu or Bassa they found that other languages, though African, still contained sounds which were completely unfamiliar and laughably unreproducible. A Liberian member was shocked to learn that Zimbabweans do not traditionally believe in any river spirits or mountain spirits. The Swazis said that English food was too spicy; the Ghanaians said the English never use any spice at all. All these tribal differences could be affirmed and accepted; dislikes of cultural characteristics could be maintained, but at the end of the day, the team was a team of Christians who had learned to love each other while completing a common task which would benefit all their tribal groups. Their unity transcended tribal identity without negating it.

I was asked by a Tanzanian church leader whether this experiment was not moving against the tide of the times by affirming the local languages instead of national or regional languages such as Swahili. This may be true, and if it is, we will have to plead guilty. We are giving [p. 460](#) priority to the local languages from beginning to end in this experiment.

For example, in our two-column method the text in the centre is an English text but it is not the one the team members read as they prepare their comments. Each one reads his or her vernacular Bible and enters comments into the blank columns next to the English text so it can be discussed in English in the group. However, each member knows that the English guide which the team will eventually produce is not a finished product meant for pan-African distribution. It is not even meant for translation. It is to be taken as a rough draft by local editing committees who will discuss a vernacular draft of it and make whatever changes in content and style which they feel are appropriate, without having these changes authorized by anyone in England. The local language guides are therefore derived from a common source but they will not exactly match that source or each other.

A *third* problem is *illiteracy*. Because of the debt crisis which will probably be plaguing Africa right through the decade, educational budgets are being cut. The AIDS epidemic could also have severe effects on education by decimating the pool of trained teachers. The number of people who are illiterate or semi-literate is likely to increase. Therefore the need for materials on audio-cassettes and material designed for poor readers is also increasing.

The guides are deliberately intended for people who do not read well. Each paragraph or section in the guide is a self-contained unit so that a reader does not have to read several pages in order to benefit, nor does he or she need to have pages 1–16 in mind in order to understand page 17.



Illiterates and semi-literates can also play a valuable role as consultants in the writing process. For example, last August at a weekend Bible conference in Umtata, Transkei, about eighty independent church leaders edited the guide to the book of James in Xhosa. They were split into working groups, all containing at least one person who could read well. Even those who could not read were invited to join in the discussion and evaluation of the draft text. They could identify the parts which were not clear as well as contribute traditional proverbs or other comments which strengthened the guide. It was a celebration in the undoing of apartheid. People whose limited educational experience had been entirely shaped by the view that the student has nothing to contribute were now being asked to speak and to tap the resources of the traditional wisdom in which they are the best living experts. Literate, semi-literate and illiterate were teamed up in a cooperative effort. p. 461

I believe our experiment has confirmed John Mbiti's call for more effort to go into the recording of oral theology in Africa.<sup>11</sup> That is exactly what the guides could become if local editing groups accepted the challenge-repositories of the wisdom of traditional culture and of old preachers, whose insights will otherwise die with them. I say this because the age range of our participants was from 24 to 62, and it was quite clear that the generation between those two ages has lost a considerable amount of the insights of the traditional cultures. Also Western theological education has militated against the cultivation of those insights. I would venture that of the twenty-two Africans involved, the two who had the greatest difficulty getting integrated into the work were the two who took their Western theological education most seriously and who had the least knowledge of the traditional wisdom of their cultures.

### III. CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS

Some of the problems facing African Christians in the 1990s are part of the modern historical process and are not directly rooted in either the missionary era or the traditional culture. For example, there are problems of political and economic crisis, church leadership and finance, health, the relation with Islam and traditional religion, and regional issues including the changing scene in South Africa. Because of the nature of these problems, the structure of the experiment itself could not have much bearing on them. However, the product of the experiment could and did. A few examples will have to suffice here. Some sample copies of the guides are still available for those who wish to read more.<sup>12</sup>

a. *Poverty*. Concerning the 'giants' who frightened some of the Israelites from entering Canaan ([Heb. 4:11](#)), the group added, 'We are p. 462 not facing giants like the Israelites did, but there are other things which frighten us like the giants frightened them.... [For example] rich people frighten us like giants in our way. They drive their cars to church or they dress up to go to church in clothes we could never afford. They do not mean us any

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<sup>11</sup> John Mbiti, 'Cattle are born with ears, their horns grow later—towards an appreciation of African oral theology' in *All Africa Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology in the African Context* edited by Alison Bares (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> The guides are not for sale but for free distribution to church leaders who have some interest in examining them and possibly in promoting their use. Copies may be requested from INTERACT Research Centre, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham B29 6LQ. With your request please state your position in your church and the reason you wish to examine a copy. Also indicate which of the following you want: Luke, Hebrews, James, and whether you want them in English or French. You may suggest African church leaders or training institutions who should receive copies and we will check whether they were included in the earlier mailing list for free samples.

harm, but when we see them we feel embarrassed and afraid to be around them. We may even stay away from church because these big people are there'.<sup>13</sup>

b. *Concern for the national situation.* Concerning Nehemiah's weeping when he heard the news of the situation in Jerusalem, the group said, 'Whenever a big man sits down on the ground to cry, then it means that something that is unusual and very serious must have happened. Nehemiah was not just an ordinary big man in age, but he was also a big man in power. He worked very closely with the King of Persia. But when he learned the news about the destruction of his home town and the suffering of his people back home, he forgot his own self-importance and sat down on the ground and cried and prayed.... How is our homeland? How do we feel? What can we do for our dead churches and our destructive countries?'<sup>14</sup>

c. *Political oppression of Christians.* Concerning the statement in [Amos 2:12](#) that the prophets were not told not to speak God's message, a Liberian refugee reported a well-known case of a prophetess who about seven years ago had warned the nation through a vision which the Doe government did not want to hear. She was beaten severely and eventually flown to Britain, where she died of her injuries.<sup>15</sup>

d. *Racism and tribalism.* Concerning the thankful Samaritan ([Luke 17:16](#)), the group cited an example in which the hero was an Asian: 'A Kenyan mother had a child who was very ill with meningitis. She did not have the money to pay the deposit so her child could enter the hospital. An Asian doctor paid the deposit so the child could be admitted to the hospital immediately. The doctors worked to save the life of the child. The mother was deeply grateful and thanked the p. 463 doctor who had paid the deposit in spite of being of a different nationality and tradition.'<sup>16</sup>

e. *The generation gap in Africa.* Concerning the wisdom from above mentioned in [James 3:17](#), the group noted, 'Some people say the wisdom from above has nothing to do with education. They say, "We are called to preach while we were still tending the cattle, and we still preach better than you young people who have spent your whole lives in school." There is some truth in this. There seem to be more and more educated people in our country but fewer and fewer wise people who understand life and can give the right advice for the problems people face today. For example, a young African often lives in two worlds. He is one person with his classmates at school or university and a completely different person at home in his village with his family....'<sup>17</sup>

#### IV DIGNITY, COMMUNITY AND SERVICE

The paper up to this point has been problem-oriented. Will African Christianity in the 1990s be problem-oriented? Will this be one long decade of coping with everything that has gone wrong and is going wrong? Or can African Christians in the midst of everything

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<sup>13</sup> African Bible Guides. *Hebrews: an Inter-church Guide for African Preachers and Teachers* (Birmingham: INTERACT Research Centre, 1990), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Unpublished second draft of the forthcoming booklet on Nehemiah (Birmingham: INTERACT Research Centre, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished second draft of the forthcoming booklet on Amos (Birmingham: INTERACT Research Centre, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> African Bible Guides. *Luke: an Inter-church Guide for African Preacher and Teachers* (Birmingham: INTERACT Research Centre, 1990), p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> African Bible Guides. *James: an Inter-church Guide for African Teachers and Preachers* (Birmingham: INTERACT Research Centre, 1990), p. 13.

that is caving in on them still find space to experience positive things such as dignity, community and service? Our hope is that this experiment will help them both to cope and to get beyond mere coping.

On the matter of dignity, the experiment has produced encouraging evidence that the Africans involved have felt dignity. We have sometimes explained this by analogy with a movie production. We who have run the experiment are like the producer, director, sound engineer, etc., but the Africans are the actors and actresses. They can be coached a bit, but basically it is their natural ability and their application of their talents which makes or breaks the enterprise. They are the stars. We are behind the scenes playing essential but supportive roles. Perhaps this is a model of one form that partnership in mission may take in the 1990s.

The Africans in this experiment have sometimes found it hard to believe they are being given this starring role. For example, one of the [p. 464](#) women doubted she had very much to contribute to the writing team because she was not theologically trained. 'All she had done' was to translate sermons of expatriate clergy for many years for her village congregation. She had never been invited to express an opinion during a service much less give a sermon herself, but her experience in translation meant that she had thoroughly thought through the process of putting foreign concepts into sensible vernacular terms. This was a superb qualification for contributing to the writing of a guide, as she came to realize through the process.

The 1990 team members have also had some difficulty convincing local editing groups that they are really allowed to change the meaning of the English text. In fact local groups are supposed to change and improve it according to their own judgment rather than aim at a 'faithful' translation. Since they are the experts on their own culture and the interchurch relations in their countries, they are the ones who should decide what the guides actually say in the local editions. Furthermore, the guides are supposed to help people preach from a vernacular Bible, not an English one, so there may be things which have to be added to clarify weaknesses in the vernacular translation. Only a local committee can identify these points. Clear as that may seem in this paragraph, it has been very difficult to communicate. I can only conclude that it is such a radically new way for most Africans to look at literature in a European language that they cannot believe it. We are making believers out of some of them, and this means a new experience of dignity for them because they are believing in themselves. They see they are being trusted with ultimate editorial power.

The process of editing the text locally also promotes dignity by building self-confidence, since there is no central funding or central planning for the local groups. The members of the experimental writing groups and any other interested persons try to organize local editing groups wherever they can. Each group decides which churches will be involved, which books will be edited, what funds are needed and which donor agencies it will approach. Each establishes its own committee and writes its own project proposal. The experiment has shown that this is not easy but it is possible, and most of the members of the 1990 team who have encountered difficulties along the way are still persevering.

For example, the first guide produced in an African language was the Swahili edition of the guide to James. It was produced by the National Council of Churches of Kenya in August 1991. I had no contact with Pastor Obed Ochwany, who directed the work, between the time he [p. 465](#) left Birmingham in July 1990 and the time the guide arrived just over a year later. It just came in the post as a wonderful surprise. A second version of the guide was produced this April by a group of independent churches in western Kenya (Kenya United Independent Churches) in a partnership arrangement with the National Council of Churches of Kenya. A guide to Luke in a third Kenyan language has been

through the inter-church editing process and is ready for publication. Funding has been approved and local editing is under way on three guides in each of three languages in Benin. The Luke guide is ready in Lingala and awaits funding. Some progress is being made on the James guide in Botswana and in South Africa the Xhosa version is nearly ready to go to press.

Much has been learned from the struggles of the 1990 group in organizing local editing teams. They were so busy in 1990 inventing the guides and doing everything for the first time that inadequate time was left to prepare them for this part of the work. In addition I as coordinator was not able to give as much on-site supervision in Africa as I had hoped, and this created severe problems particularly in Ghana where I had specifically promised help for a conference. In 1992 we are providing the new team with more training and fewer promises. We try to provide a little support from afar and perhaps a short visit in a few cases, but no one is being pressured from Birmingham or hired with INTERACT money to lead the editing process.<sup>18</sup> Any African group which produces a guide knows that it is their own vision, initiative, skill and commitment which has done it.

I have described how the process of writing a guide contributes to a sense of community, but what is being done at the experimental level in Birmingham is only the tip of the iceberg, it will take more than a decade of work across Africa to build a comparable sense of community there, and it will take Africa's choicest peacemakers to see to it that the local editing process resolves more problems than it aggravates. But if African Christians in the 1990s could more effectively capitalize on their African sense of community to resolve some of the imported conflicts among Christian denominations, the rest of the world's Christians would be greatly in their debt. Which continent [p. 466](#) currently leads the world in resolving inter-Christian conflicts? It seems that chair is vacant. Perhaps Africa will sit in it in this decade, but not unless the barriers between mission churches and independent churches come down to a greater extent.

The experiment is now near its conclusion. It was originally planned to bring three groups of twelve Africans to Birmingham, one each year from 1990 to 1992 but was scaled down because we did not have the staff time to manage the follow-up of 1990 and the recruitment and fundraising for 1991 at the same time. We also hoped to involve a group of five Africans working in French in 1992 but because of a shortage of funds we had to cancel that plan. We are now discussing with our Benin contacts a tentative plan for them to host a French writing team next year, following through on our recruitment explorations this year in Ivory Coast and Madagascar. That writing team will not be editing an existing guide but rather writing a guide to a book or books of the Bible which the Birmingham end of the experiment did not use.

If that group goes ahead, it will do so on the initiative of the people in Benin. The same will be true of other local editing groups or other writing groups which want to write on additional books of the Bible. Africans will decide what shape the work should take and what structures will be needed at national or international levels. The committee in Birmingham plans to cease operating in 1993 after the distribution of the samples from 1992 is completed. A suggestion has recently been made by a member of the 1992 team that the two teams (1990 and 1992) should meet together in Africa at an appropriate time after the 1992 group has had opportunity to try to promote the work in their home

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<sup>18</sup> The Bible Guides Committee has adopted a policy under which it makes a nominal contribution to a church or Christian agency for each working day that they release a staff member for Bible Guides promotional work. The primary use of this so far has been for members of the 1990 team who helped recruit people for 1992. The policy limits the contribution for the services of any individual to five days in any month or twenty days in any year.

countries. They could then compare notes on the African end of the experiment and make plans for carrying it forward in appropriate ways.

## CONCLUSION

When this experiment started, no one knew whether it would be possible to get the cooperation of such a wide range of churches, to write a guide jointly for use in all churches, to follow through with local editing and publishing without central funding, and to sell the end product to the intended readership. The experiment has produced considerable evidence that all these things are possible for African Christians, though it is too soon to make great claims about the last and most crucial step, distribution. The preliminary findings strongly suggest that the prospects are bright for a polycentric, African-controlled **P. 467** programme that will bring the entire spectrum of African churches together to prepare materials (print and/or other media) to help untrained leaders preach and teach the Bible better. If that happens, average church members will be better equipped to survive the turbulent Africa of the 1990s with increased dignity and a stronger sense of community.

### APPENDIX: PARTICIPANTS IN THE AFRICAN BIBLE GUIDES EXPERIMENT

YEAR	SEX	COUNTRY	NAME AND CHURCH
1990	F	Ghana	Miss Grace Adjel, Ghana Baptist Convention
1990	M	Benin	Rev. Samson Assani, Apostolic Church of Benin
1990	M	Zaire	Dr. Mwene-Batende, Roman Catholic Church
1992	M	Swaziland	Rev. Isaac Dlamini, Pentecost East Star Jerusalem Church in Sabbath
1992	M	Swaziland	Mr Charles Dlamini, Roman Catholic Church
1990	F	Botswana	Miss Florence Ferguson, Roman Catholic Church

1992	M	Rwanda	Mr Tharcisse Gatwa, Presbyterian Church
1990	M	Benin	Pastor Coffi Gbankpan, Church of Pentecost
1992	F	Liberia	Mrs Ester Mark-Gbeh, Liberia Interdenominational Assembly
1992	M	Liberia	Rev. Abba Karnga, Worldwide Mission of Liberia
1990	M	Kenya	Archbishop Manoah Keverenge, Lyahuka Church of Africa
1992	M	Ghana	Rev. Joshua Kudadjie, Methodist Church of Ghana
1992	F	Zimbabwe	Mrs Brigit Munguri, Zion Apostolic Church
1992	F	Zimbabwe	Mrs Sithembile Ncumbe, Methodist Church of Zimbabwe
1990	M	Zambia	Mr John Ng'andu, United Church of Zambia
1992	F	Nigeria	Mrs Chikwe Njoku, Evangelical Church of West Africa
1990	F	South Africa	Miss Bernice Ntuli, Apostolic Faith Mission
1990	M	Kenya	Pastor Obed Ochwany, Church of God

1992	F	Nigeria	Mrs Rebecca Owanikin, Cherubim and Seraphim Ayo ni. O.
1990	F	Kenya	Mrs Rosalie Oyweka, Church of Christ in Africa
1990	F	Ghana	Miss Esther Tawiah, Pentecostal Association of Ghana
1990	M	Zaire	Dr Owanga Welo, Kimbanguist Church

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Rev. Stan Nussbaum is Director of the Interact Research Centre, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK. [p. 468](#)

# African Bible Guides Series—Booklet 8: Colossians

Editor: Joshua Kudadjie

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## COLOSSIANS CHAPTER 1

### 1:2 MAY GOD OUR FATHER GIVE YOU GRACE AND PEACE

Greetings are very important to Africans. When one person meets another or there is a family gathering, they exchange greetings, they ask about the welfare of the family members and wish each other well. This is exactly what Paul was doing at the beginning of this letter which he wrote to the church in a city called Colossae, which was in a region then known as Asia Minor, now Turkey. Paul had no relatives at Colossae but, because the Colossians had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, Paul regarded them as his brothers and he wished them God's grace and peace.

The greeting: 'May God our Father give you grace and peace', is the usual way in which Paul greeted Christians to whom he wrote. These 'greetings' are not mere words of greetings such as people commonly use these days when they say, 'Good Morning', for

example. They are a kind of prayer that God, who is the common father of both Paul and the Colossians, may bless the Colossians. When we greet each other or say the benediction, we should regard our words as prayers and take them seriously.

### **1:5 FAITH ... LOVE ... HOPE**

When people hear some good news, it is natural for them to give thanks just as Paul does here. Epaphras, who started the Church in Colossae, had told Paul and Timothy that the church was doing well (v. 8). When the Colossians first heard the Good News that they could be saved from their sins through Christ and that they would go to heaven, they had believed it. That hope of going to heaven made them accept Christ as their Saviour. Because of that hope, they also expressed their love to all their fellow Christians.

Paul, as a senior messenger of God, had real cause to thank God that the young church was showing all the three major qualities expected of Christians, namely, faith, hope and love ([1 Cor. 13:13](#)). In our prayers of thanksgiving, we must always remember to thank God [p. 469](#) for the good lives and testimonies of other Christians, not just for the good things that happen to them.

### **1:15 CHRIST IS ... SUPERIOR TO ALL CREATED THINGS**

Some religious groups teach certain things to draw Christians away from their faith. Some of them teach that there is nothing special about Christ and that he is only one of many spiritual 'masters'. They also promise their own followers that they will receive more spiritual knowledge and power. Some even claim that certain spirits are more powerful than Christ.

Some of these teachings were being introduced into the Colossian church by false teachers. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, therefore, he took great pains to explain the true Christian teaching that Christ is supreme and superior to all created things. Here are the proofs that Paul used:

- (1) Christ has the full nature of God in himself and he has shown what God is like (v. 15.19):
- (2) God created all things through Christ—including the spirits and all grades of rulers and authorities (v. 16):
- (3) Christ existed before all things (v. 17):
- (4) All things work properly only when they are in the right relationship with Christ (v. 18):
- (5) He is the head and source of life of the Church (v. 18):
- (6) He was the first to be raised from the dead (v. 18):
- (7) It is through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross that the whole universe is saved and brought back to God (v. 20):
- (8) Jesus Christ has the first place in all things (v. 18).

From these facts about Christ, it is clear that he is superior to all other persons, or powers, or spirits. As the Shona proverb says, 'Even the highest rulers on earth still have Someone above them.' Christ is the one who can give us protection, life, salvation, knowledge and everything else that we need. As Christians we have no need to seek help from any other power, since we already have Christ who is supreme over all.

### **1:20 TO BRING THE WHOLE UNIVERSE BACK ... THROUGH HIS SON'S DEATH**



In most African societies there are taboos. When a person disobeys the taboo of a god or ancestral spirit, that spirit power withdraws its favour or works against the offender or even sometimes against the whole **P. 470** community. In such societies it is believed that the offended spirit must be given something. Usually this is done by sacrificing some animal which people think will cleanse the offender and restore the lost relationship.

As Christians we don't need to sacrifice animals for our cleansing because Jesus Christ was offered as the peace-making sacrifice, to redeem the whole universe and restore it to God's favour. The sacrifice he made was once and for all and it was perfect, because he was the perfect Son of God. There is no other sacrifice we can add to his sacrifice of his own body and blood. (See [Hebrews 9:11-14](#) and [10:4](#)).

As Christians, we must always remember that Christ sacrificed everything to cleanse us and bring us back to God. We must, therefore, keep ourselves clean, holy, pure and blameless. Since Christ has made us God's friends, let's act like God's friends.

### **1:24 I AM HAPPY ABOUT MY SUFFERINGS**

Some preachers give the impression that once a person becomes a Christian all his problems will be over and he will be protected from any kind of suffering. Because of this wrong impression, when some Christians suffer, they complain and some even give up their faith. But this must not be so because the Lord Jesus himself has told us to be happy if we suffer for his sake. Our reward in heaven will be great ([Matt. 5:11-12](#)). It is very encouraging that Paul testifies that he is happy about his sufferings, since through these sufferings he is able to advance the work of God. Christians should be prepared to suffer for the sake of the gospel and the Church. But we should note that Paul suffered for preaching the Good News of Christ and not for doing anything wrong. [1 Peter 4:12-16](#) encourages Christians to be happy, if they suffer because they are Christ's followers but warns that, if a Christian suffers, it must not be because he has committed a crime or other wrong.

### **1:26 THE SECRET ... HID THROUGH ALL PAST AGES**

Most people have information or plans that they keep as secrets and which they reveal only to some loved or trusted person. Usually people feel excited and important when some such secret has been revealed to them. God also has a secret that he kept from all humankind throughout the ages until the time of Christ. Then the secret was out. All the followers of Jesus knew it and God gave Paul the task **P. 471** of revealing that secret to people from other countries. This secret is that people from all those countries could have Jesus Christ living within them if they would love him and live for him. This means that all such people will share in God's glory.

This is a great and exciting revelation. Like Paul, all Christians must preach Christ to everyone so that, if possible, all others will come to share in this glory. **p. 472**

# A Model of Hermeneutical Method—An Exegetical Missiological Reflection upon Suffering in 2 Corinthians 4:7–15

Mark J. Cartledge

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*In this article the author establishes a model of hermeneutical method in relating the text of scripture to the context, in this case, the concept of Dukka, the meaninglessness of life and human suffering generally. He gives a careful exegesis of nine verses in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthian Church. He then describes and reflects upon the context of the problem of suffering as developed by Peter Cotterell. In the dialogue between the text and the context the author shows that Paul responds to meaninglessness and suffering, not only as an answer to the problem Dukka but as belonging to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which gives missiological purpose for our present suffering and weakness.*

Editor

## INTRODUCTION

The question of disorder and suffering in creation is one which we cannot evade. Mission studies in the past have not treated this subject with the degree of seriousness it deserves. Indeed pastoral experience would tell anyone how high on the agenda it should be. Therefore we must be grateful for Peter Cotterell's book: *Mission and Meaninglessness*, and also his article: 'Disaster and Disorder: the Human Predicament'.<sup>1</sup> There are many, no doubt, who are chewing over the contents of this book in particular and attempting to evaluate it missiologically and evangelically. The questions which come to mind after reading these two items concern the type of purpose which God may have in allowing certain incidents to occur. Specifically, it can be asked: could God have a missiological purpose in allowing Christians **P. 473** to suffer? Do Christians simply share the lot of the rest of humanity, or is there meaning and significance in what they suffer? If so, what sort of meaning or purpose are we talking about? In an age of tremendous suffering and in a Decade of Evangelism these questions highlight a sensitive and difficult area, making theological reflection all the more urgent. In actual fact, this question of purpose in and through suffering receives scant attention because Cotterell's main aim is to propose a missiology which focuses upon *changing and alleviating* disorder.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to get to grips with the issues raised by Cotterell's book and article, [2 Cor. 4:7–15](#) has been important as an account of Paul's theology of suffering and weakness. This is not to suggest, however, that other pauline passages are insignificant; on the contrary, passages such as [Rom. 5:3ff](#); [8:35–39](#); [1 Cor. 4:9ff](#); [2 Cor. 1:5](#); [6:4–10](#); [11:23–30](#); [12:9–10](#); and [Col. 1:24](#) are important and pertinent (especially the 2 Corinthian passages). But they are not the direct concern of this present reflection. The aim of this short study is (1) to show how Paul argued in [2 Cor. 4:7–15](#) that there was missiological

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<sup>1</sup> (SPCK, 1990); and *Vox Evangelica* XXI (1991).

<sup>2</sup> *Mission and Meaninglessness*, *ibid.* pp. 273–275.

purpose in his experience of suffering and weakness; and (2) to note its significance specifically in relation to the thesis of Cotterell and also briefly in terms of missiology more generally.

However, before the passage is viewed in detail it will be necessary to observe some general characteristics of the letter which have bearing upon the literary and historical context.

## I. THE CONTEXT 2 CORINTHIANS

Most recent commentators would probably interpret the letter as having originally been two letters (chs. [1-9](#) & [10-13](#)).<sup>3</sup> While the general theme of Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry is understood to be crucial to the letter, it has often been restricted to chapters 10-13, where it is obviously explicit. In contrast to this, and largely following the thesis of Young and Ford, the epistle will be seen as a coherent whole.<sup>4</sup> They have argued that the genre of the letter is forensic speech in epistolary form. In other words, it is an apologetic **P. 474** letter, a speech for the defence.<sup>5</sup> For Paul, it is maintained, is concerned to defend and explain himself against rumours of inferiority and weakness, which have been used to undermine his ministry and mission.

Young and Ford have argued that the letter is primarily concerned with the glory of God and the reputation of Paul. It is claimed that this is reflected in the double sense of the term *doxa*, meaning reputation and glory.<sup>6</sup> Due to the crisis of confidence between Paul and the Corinthians, he asserts his openness to God and commitment to his apostolic vocation. Paul also maintains that his ministry is for them. Indeed the salvation of the Corinthians is at the centre of his concern. It is the 'outsiders', the 'super-apostles' ([11:5](#)), who have been catalysts of discontent and have brought matters to a head. Paul writes to explain himself and especially his apparent weaknesses in the light of these 'outsiders'. So the central theme of the letter is Paul's defence of his weakness. Therefore [4:7-15](#) is significant for the letter as a whole since it contributes to this theme.<sup>7</sup>

## II. EXEGESIS: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-15

### 1. Verses 7-9

Paul in these verses describes his own mortal body as an 'earthen vessel' (*ostrakinos skeuos*).<sup>8</sup> It is something which is exceptionally fragile and yet contains a treasure (*thēsauros*). The referent of the treasure, in this context, lies in the immediately preceding

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<sup>3</sup> Eg. V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Anchor, Doubleday, 1985); C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (A&C Black, 1973); R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> F. Young & D. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (SPCK, 1987); cf. D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (James Clark & Co., 1988) p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> Young & Ford, *ibid.* p. 38f.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63f, 128f; regarding this theme later in the letter, see Ch. Ukachuku Manus, ' "Apostolic Suffering ([2 Cor. 6:4-10](#)): The Sign of Christian Existence and Identity" ' *Asian Journal of Theology* 1-1 (1987) pp. 45-54.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 128; *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* ed. C. Brown (Paternoster, 1980), Vol. 3, pp. 913-915; Martin, *op. cit.* p. 85; Furnish, *op. cit.* p. 253; Barrett, *op. cit.* p. 137.

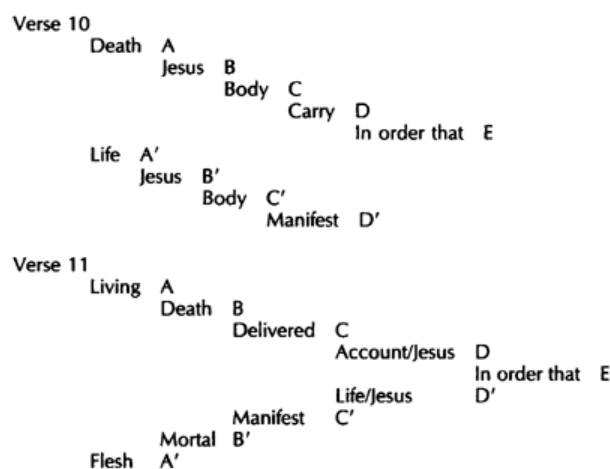
verse (v. 6): ... *phótismon tés gnóseós tés doxés tou theou en prosópó(i) [lésoul] Christou*. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God has been revealed to Paul in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> This is Paul's gospel, this is p. 475 Paul's treasure; and it shines through his frailty. Indeed the purpose of such fragility is so that (*hina*) the light of the gospel and its power might be seen clearly *not* to be coming from Paul the charismatic apostle but from God alone. This paradox of weakness and power sets the tone for the following verses and, as has been mentioned, characterizes the whole epistle.

Verses 8–9 show us something of Paul's sense of vulnerability and yet clear confidence in the power of God. He is afflicted or hard pressed, perhaps even oppressed, but yet he is not completely overwhelmed or crushed. In other words this affliction does not paralyze him. He is in difficulties, perhaps at a loss and very perplexed, but he is not yet desperate, he is not despairing. Paul is also persecuted, or may even be pursued, but despite the attack he is not abandoned. He does not experience God-forsakenness. Indeed it is through the experience that God is seen to be faithful. Finally, Paul says that he is one who experiences being struck down or cast down, but although he is knocked down, he is not 'out for the count'. He is not perishing despite the intensity of the suffering he has endured.

These antitheses obviously express a theology which emanates from personal experience, written in a vivid manner. They affirm hope amid crisis and purpose amid the unthinkable. These words indicate that Paul is a person close to the edge of his existence; he is someone who is uncomfortable and carries pain. The pressures upon him are fantastic, so that he might break at any point. Yet the power of God is what stops this from occurring. And more, it is at this point of supreme vulnerability that the power of God is revealed by means of Paul to others. This occurs in such a way that they cannot but perceive that its origin lies with God alone. The God who creates persons for his glory has already created something unimaginable: purpose through weakness. This purpose of Paul's weakness is to show that God has chosen to be most powerful through weak humanity not powerful humanity. Thus the glory cannot belong to anyone but God alone.

## 2. Verses 10–11

Many English translations of these verses inevitably do not do justice to their structure. Both verses contain a parallel structure with the purpose clause indicator (*hina*) as the focal point. It is here that the pauline understanding of God's purpose in the experience of suffering is seen most clearly. The parallelism in verses 10 and 11 can be described in the following manner: p. 476



<sup>9</sup> S. Kim, *The Origins of Paul's Gospel* (Eerdmans, 1982) pp. 5–8, 229–232, 326–328.

Not only is there a parallel structure in each verse, but there is obviously parallelism between verses [10](#) and [11](#).<sup>10</sup>

The significant feature of both verses is the reference to the manifestation of the life of Jesus in the weakness of human flesh. There is an identification by Paul in the death (or more exactly the 'dying') of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, that is the resurrection life, might be clearly seen. This reinforces the statement of verse [7](#), that power is revealed through weakness. As stated, one could identify the power from God as the resurrection life of Jesus. It is precisely through the body of death that the life of Jesus is seen. Life and death are two sides of the same experience.

This statement has an important function within the letter, especially in relation to the criticism Paul has faced from the Corinthians encouraged by the 'super-apostles'. J. D. G. Dunn helpfully writes:

... they (Paul's opponents) thought of the Spirit as a power of the already [p. 477](#) which swallows up the not yet in forceful speech and action, Paul thought of it as a power which reinforces the not yet. Where they glorified in the power that came to perfection in ecstatic experience, Paul looked instead to the power that came to perfection in weakness.<sup>11</sup>

Dunn continues by observing that the Spirit of Christ (I would add: which mediates the resurrection life of Jesus) had not obliterated the antithesis of power and weakness, but rather had sharpened it. Weakness is therefore seen to be the essential *presupposition* of power.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Verse 12

The word *hōste* introduces the idea of consequence as this verse spells out the reasoning in Paul's thought.<sup>13</sup> All this suffering, sharing in the dying of Jesus is for them, that is the Corinthians. It is because death (and life) are at work in Paul that the Corinthians experience the benefits of resurrection life. Ultimately this clause shows that, for Paul, his pain means their benefit. This benefit can be summed up in the phrase the 'life of Jesus' (here simply 'life'). That resurrection life is what touches them at Paul's expense. It is precisely this which validates the ministry of Paul the apostle. So whatever spiritual power they have received through Paul is because of personal weakness, not strength. This, once again, is directed against the boasts of the 'super-apostles'.

### 4. Verses 13–15

It is possible that even the faith of Paul was questioned by those who thought that greater faith would be evidenced in power without weakness. So Paul continues his theme by claiming to have the same 'spirit of faith' as the Psalmist ([Ps. 115](#), LXX; [Heb. 116:10–19](#)): who believed and therefore spoke.<sup>14</sup> Despite Paul's adversity he still has the courage and faith to speak out and proclaim the gospel. Indeed it is through his faith despite weakness that the message is communicated with clarity. Paul's message is not simply a matter of

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<sup>10</sup> K. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant And Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, combined ed., 1983). Both verses illustrate clear parallelism. Verse 10 illustrates 'step parallelism' while verse 11 illustrates 'inverted parallelism', p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM, 1975) p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 329.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. C. D. F. Moule, *Idiom of New Testament Greek* (CUP, 1953) p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> Vurnish, *op. cit.* pp. 258, 285.

words but of power (1 Cor., [4:20](#)); it is, however, power which is mediated through frailty. The ultimate source of this power, which in turn gives Paul [p. 478](#) confidence, is the one who raised Jesus from death; and who will raise Paul and all believers too. It is the hope of this resurrection, together with his present experience, which gives Paul the confidence for his ministry and mission.

Paul concludes this section by affirming once again that all these things which he experiences are for the sake of the Corinthians. They are very much part of the redemptive purposes of God. In order that (*hina*) through Paul and them the grace of God may be increased and extended to more and more people. This is for the glory of God (v. [15](#)), and therefore the reputation of Paul is a vital component in this activity. For if Paul's reputation as an apostle is undermined then the glory of God is also affected as a direct consequence. Verses [16–18](#) reiterate the significance of these things for Paul in terms of the expectation of renewal day by day despite the experience of 'wasting away'; and also the hope of the glory that is to come and which will last throughout eternity.

### III

#### 1. Missiological Significance in the Light of Cotterell's Thesis

Before any specific comments can be made in relation to Peter Cotterell's thesis a summary must first be attempted. In this regard it is, perhaps, best to begin with the author's own words:

Seen from within the two apparent boundaries to human existence, birth and death, life appears to be meaningless. Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people. Disease and sudden death always threaten; accident, calamity, is an ever-present possibility. Humanity is left with the choice of an extreme existentialism—life *is* meaningless, too bad—or of one of the many religions which have at least this much in common: they all believe that life *should* make sense.

The Christian mission is charged with the task of giving meaning to life, of giving hope in a world of suffering and disorder. But more than that, Christian mission involves *acting* to oppose oppression, to bring wholeness and health, to announce Good News: reconciliation with God, and the creation of the new community, the Church, a community of love and compassion ... and of power.<sup>15</sup>

Cotterell defines this apparent meaninglessness or 'unsatisfactoriness' of life by using the buddhist term *dukkha*; this describes the fact that [p. 479](#) 'things are not as they should be'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the book *dukkha* is used in this sense, and is evidenced by those who cry with some justification: 'It's not fair!'. The areas or domains of *dukkha* include: physical illness, disease, the anticipation of death, death itself, bereavement, loneliness, the frustration of hopes, the pain of not being able to share or alleviate another's suffering. There are also the areas of: mental illness, possession (that is, 'a destructive invasion from the Second Kingdom'—these two are carefully distinguished—cf. [Luke 9:1](#)); accidents—personal and major; natural disasters; discrimination and rejection; the experience of willing what is right but not being able to act accordingly; oppression—political and societal; and finally the experience of 'meaninglessness which arises out of belonging to the powerless masses', that is, people without real choice.<sup>17</sup> Thus *dukkha* affects everyone;

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<sup>15</sup> *Mission and Meaninglessness*, *op. cit.*, p. 2; cf. 'Disaster and Disorder', *op. cit.* pp. 89–93.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* pp. 264–266.

nobody can escape because it is universal. It therefore provides the focus for the mission of the universal Church.

To be clear about what Cotterell sees as the relationship between Christianity and *dukkha* we shall need once again to allow him to speak for himself!

From the first post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the Christian Church has been of its essence a missionary Church. Both Peter (with some reluctance) and Paul were committed to one gospel for both Jew and Gentile. There was salvation in Jesus and nowhere else. There was no salvation to be found in the plethora of religions on offer around the Mediterranean basin. Gods constructed by human hands were no gods at all. The Christians were confident that in Christ God had not merely *spoken* to all humanity: he had himself come among them with the ultimate authoritative response to the human condition. In the past God had spoken at various times and in various ways through the prophets. It might be argued that other religions had their prophets too. But this was different. In Christ *God* had come to deal with *dukkha*, to share it, to embrace the apparent meaninglessness of life, to show for himself the ultimate apparent meaninglessness represented by the apparent abandoning of the one good man to an undeserved suffering by the theoretically just and loving God. At the cross Jesus submits himself to it. That cross and the person fastened to it were the measure both of the ultimate hideousness of the human condition and of the radical salvation which would in some measure affect every aspect of the human predicament.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, according to Cotterell, *dukkha* is the domain of the Church, p. 480 towards which it must respond holistically, that is, it must both speak and act: ‘... to seek to understand theologically, to explain believably, and to act so as to end the *dukkha* experience, or at least to offer the hope of an end to it’.<sup>19</sup> In the light of this, he defines mission in the following manner: ‘The Christian mission is biblically understood as the people of God speaking and acting on behalf of God to explain and to resolve the apparent meaninglessness of life wherever that meaninglessness appears and however it is experienced’.<sup>20</sup> This definition is then related specifically to four areas of *dukkha*. These are: (1) the ultimate meaning of life; (2) the *dukkha* experience of disease and death; (3) the experience of political and economic oppression; and (4) the experience of natural disaster.<sup>21</sup> But Cotterell by no means restricts *dukkha* to these areas. Indeed, as previously indicated, *dukkha* by its very nature permeates every aspect of life.<sup>22</sup>

There is much with which we can agree and affirm in all of this. However, in light of [2 Corinthians 4:7–15](#) more can be said by way of constructively critical comment.

## 2. Responding biblically to the *dukkha* experience

Cotterell understands the Church’s task in relation to *dukkha* as a matter of offering an explanation and/or acting to end the *dukkha* experience. But in contrast to this Paul accepted his experiences of *dukkha* because in them he saw the purposes of God and not just the work of the Second Kingdom. It is not simply a question of God bringing out the

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* pp. 267–277.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* pp. 264–265.

good that he can, although this need not be denied.<sup>23</sup> Rather, Paul saw them as having meaning *now* not just at the end of time. For him suffering was intimately related to his life as an apostle, and its meaning was evidenced in and through his life. Thus the purpose of his suffering in 2 Corinthians relates specifically to the Corinthian Christians' reception of the life of Jesus ([4:12](#)), but it has wider significance in that through the Corinthians Paul hoped that many more would believe, and thus by implication also receive the life of Jesus ([4:15](#)). This is missiological purpose indeed!

So while it is important to recognize that some *dukkha* experiences [p. 481](#) will not appear to have any purpose or meaning now, this was not Paul's experience. Ultimately all these things are to be understood teleologically, but admitting this much does not eradicate all or any meaning and significance in the here and now.<sup>24</sup> To this we shall return below.

The purpose of God in suffering as exemplified in the passion is affirmed. There is clear purpose in Jesus having a *dukkha* experience (as stated above). Cotterell can say that the real message of Christian hope is 'God-With-Us'.<sup>25</sup> Again, with this we can all agree and rejoice! But the New Testament has more to contribute in addition to this central feature. At this point the author is restricting himself to, what could be called, a Jesus paradigm of *dukkha*. This raises the question: what about Paul's experience, the pauline paradigm? It is this paradigm which we find in 2 Corinthians. In verses [10-11](#) of chapter [4](#) especially Paul makes it absolutely clear that Jesus' death and resurrection is the interpretative key which unlocks the purpose and meaning for him in his *dukkha* experiences. So Paul carries in his body the dying of Jesus, the *dukkha* of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus might be seen. As a living person he is given over to death or *dukkha* because of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be manifest in his weak mortal flesh. There is not only 'God-With-Paul', but also, and very importantly, 'Paul-With-God'. Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ because he so clearly identifies with the *dukkha* of Jesus Christ. Alternatively, one could say that Jesus not only died upon a *cross*; he also called his disciples to deny themselves, take up their *cross* and follow him (cf. [Mk. 8:34-5](#)). It is this identification which is so clearly in evidence in Paul's experience; and it is therefore this connection which is, perhaps, the most significant of all Cotterell's omissions.

In combining the above points, it could be said that Christians have an apostolic vocation to proclaim the gospel by word and deed. This involves dying and rising with Christ. Many Christians can, no doubt, testify to such experiences today. Thus the dying and rising experiences of Paul are common to a large number of Christians. Are we to say that we must *always* look to the eschaton for their purposes to be revealed? If Paul's theology is normative in any sense, that cannot be true. The tension regarding our understanding of the missiological [p. 482](#) purposes of God in suffering is indeed eschatological; once again we are dealing with the 'now and not yet of eschatology'. We have the first fruits but not the full harvest of understanding ([Rom. 8:23](#)). Or to put it differently, we see in a mirror dimly ([1 Cor. 13:12](#)), nevertheless, we do see! Therefore it could be contended that the perspective of Cotterell is significantly enhanced by allowing the missiological experience of Paul as described in [2 Corinthians 4:7-15](#) to interact with it. By so doing, greater 'meaning' is achieved by accommodating this pauline concept of purpose into Cotterell's framework. So, dying and living experiences are placed side by side (cf. vv. [8-9](#)), and in the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

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<sup>23</sup> 'Disaster and Disorder', *op. cit.* p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. M. Tinker, 'Purpose in Pain?—Teleology and the problem of evil' *Themelios* 16, 3 (1991) pp. 15-18.

<sup>25</sup> 'Disaster and Disorder', *op. cit.* p. 104.



Christ they are transformed and given purpose now, not just in eternity. The paradox of a Christian death (and *dukkha* experiences) is that it means rising with Christ. The paradox of Christian life (and living experiences) is that it means dying with Christ. Both aspects are central to Paul's gospel and consequently to a missiology which takes seriously the redemptive purposes of God in Jesus Christ.

### 3. Suffering as a biblical foundation for mission

More generally in the field of missiology, this whole area is often ignored completely. This is found in the subject of biblical foundations for mission,<sup>26</sup> as well as the theology of mission.<sup>27</sup> Even where the experience of Paul is discussed, this issue is notable by its absence. One exception, however, is a recent book by D. J. Bosch entitled: *Transforming Missions*.<sup>28</sup> In the context of proposing a pauline missionary paradigm, he notes the place of weakness and suffering. He writes:

For Paul, suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively because of the onslaughts and oppositions of the powers of this world but also, perhaps primarily, as an expression of the church's active engagement with the world for the sake of the world's redemption. Suffering is therefore a mode of missionary involvement. Paul bears in his body 'the marks of Jesus' ([Gal. 6:17](#)) he has acquired as a servant of Christ (cf. [2 Cor. 11:23-28](#)). p. 483 He shares in Christ's sufferings ([2 Cor. 1:5](#)) and completes in his flesh 'what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' ([Col. 1:24](#)). Yes, he carries in the body the death of Jesus; death at work in him but life in those who have come to faith through him ([2 Cor. 4:9, 12](#)). If he is afflicted, then, it is for the sake of their salvation ([2 Cor. 1:6](#)). Towards the end of 2 Corinthians he says it in yet another way, 'As for me, I will gladly spend what I have for you—yes, and spend myself to the limit' ([12:15](#), NEB).<sup>29</sup>

It is to be hoped that this feature of pauline theology will become more central to missiology in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The proposition that [2 Corinthians 4:7-15](#) is significant for missiology is hopefully very apparent. That it also refines Cotterell's thesis is also clear. This perspective does not contradict his view but rather gives it an explicitly extra dimension, one which was previously mentioned only in passing. In answer to the questions posed at the beginning, it can be stated affirmatively that there *can* be purpose in suffering which can also be experienced *now*, and that this purpose is an integral part of the gospel and its proclamation by Christians through mission.

Like most theology, this offering is not simply an academic enquiry and proposal. The initial reflection arose out of a conversation with a friend about suffering in general and one experience in particular. As a parish minister in the Church of England I have had to

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<sup>26</sup> Eg. D. Senior & C. Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (SCM, 1983); G. W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Moody, 1972); J. H. Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective*, (Baker, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Eg. G. H. Anderson, J. M. Phillips & R. T. Coote, *Mission in the Nineteen 90s* (International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Overseas Study Centre, 1991); J. Verknylk, *Contemporary Missiology* (Eerdmans, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> (Orbis, 1991)

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 177.

spend a considerable amount of time with those bereaved and suffering, occasionally because of tragic circumstances. It is these experiences which provide clues to my personal history in this matter. Therefore it is out of this context that my particular questions arise. I trust that this reflection is all the more real for that.

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# Competing Paradigms in Theological Education Today

Grahame Cheesman

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*In this article the author discusses five models of theological education for training people for ministry in today's complex society whether Western or Third World. He argues for a integrated balance in academic, spiritual and practical training and appeals for a better understanding between denominational theological schools and those that belong to the Bible School Movement.*

Editor

Theological Education today is complex, diverse and often unsure of itself. Criticism from the churches and missionary societies has become vocal and some are voting with their feet, setting up initiatives only partly involving the traditional 'Ivory Steeples' or 'theological sausage machines'.<sup>1</sup> Two thirds world Christians are radically-rethinking the structure and content of theological education as they have received it at the hands of the missionary enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

Theological educators are urgently in need of a new understanding, an up-to-date theoretical model which allows them to thank God for the usefulness of their calling, but which also frees them to take on board the changes necessary to serve the new situations in the world and the Church.

Present day Theological Education is, of course, a mongrel. Systems and attitudes from the past live uncomfortably with modern conceptions of the task. Even the term Theological Education harbours radical mis-conceptions because both the words, theology and education, have unhappily narrowed their field of meaning in the 20th century. Theology has become for us a group of scientific disciplines which can p. 485 exist

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Starkey 'Ivory Steeples?' *Third Way*, October 1989 pp. 22–24.

<sup>2</sup> 'I propose first that we dump the academic model once and for all—degrees, accreditation, tenure, the works.' John Frame 'Proposals for a New Seminary' in Harvie M. Conn and Samuel F. Rowen, *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, Associates of Urbanus, Farmington, p. 377. For a more constructive approach, Lesslie Newbigin 'Theological Education in World Perspective', *ibid.* pp. 318.

without the love and experience of God. Education is usually taken as synonymous with study and scholarship rather than a maturing of the person assisted by learning.<sup>3</sup>

I want to analyze the task using paradigms or dominant models. This tool has recently been used to great effect in theology by Avery Dulles and Hans Kung and in missiology by Donald Bosch, all following the work of Thomas Kuhn in the natural sciences.<sup>4</sup> I will not use the word paradigm in the full technical sense of Kuhn (although it has been said that he uses the term in at least twenty-two senses himself).<sup>5</sup> In the context of this paper, a paradigm is a model of interpretation of the task of Theological Education which has become dominant in a particular era or culture and which today competes for importance with other historical and cultural models as we seek to understand the nature of Theological Education today.

While this approach will not enable us to count the trees, it may, more modestly, but more fundamentally, help us to see the true shape of the wood.

## 1. THE ACADEMIC PARADIGM

In the Academic Model, Theological Education as the training of the mind, is placed first, not because it is historically prior but because it presently dominates Theological Education. The great universities were founded in the 12th and 13th centuries and swiftly became the loci for theological work and training. Theology became an Aristotelian university science under such men as Aquinas. Then, as the Enlightenment built on the Renaissance, a great sea change took place in theology. It broke free from authority (whether that of the Scriptures or the Church) and became another enquiry, subject to the same rules of evidence as others.

Not that theology continued to exist as a unitary concept. It was p. 486 broken down into separate disciplines, usually the fourfold pattern of Biblical studies, dogmatics, Church history and practical theology, and each subject rapidly underwent social institutionalization with specialist conferences, journals and societies.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this is to the good. A desire to demonstrate that the study of revealed religion can and should be academically rigorous must be welcomed. It is no less than the completion of the act of worship; a loving of the Lord your God with all your mind. As it trickles down into the churches, it will wean us away from the inappropriate proof-text use of Scripture as the basis for our spiritual lives and provide a solid platform for spirituality in real theology and real biblical knowledge.

Academic study also enables mission. One of the greatest tasks in mission today is to engage with secular, pluralistic, presuppositions of Western culture. Academic excellence will enable us to move out of the past to understand and to confront the world as it is today.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Farley *Theologia*, the Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983, pp. 29–66, 152–156.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, 1962, 2nd edition 1970. Kung and others in Hans Kung and David Tracy (eds.) *Paradigm Change in Theology*, T. & T. Clarke, Edinburgh, 1989, apply his ideas to historical theology, Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1988 (2nd Edit.) applies the concept to an area of theology and, more recently, David J. Bosch *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books, New York, 1991, applies the idea to Missiology.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, *op. cit.* p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Farley's analysis on this point is important, *op. cit.* ch. 2 (pp. 29–48).

Furthermore, as theology has become an academic discipline, so it has dissolved denominational boundaries and contributed to the unity of the Church.

However, the academic paradigm also has a negative influence on Theological Education. It was a concept of knowing moving within the orbit of ideas and reason, which formed the universities in the middle ages and re-wrote the meaning of theology. And, as Western culture has travelled on, knowledge has become ever more closely associated with information. Not only that, but nowadays our highly competitive culture measures success in preparation for one's life work in terms of educational attainment.

In allowing our training to be dominated by teaching we have permitted prevailing culture to dictate our method. While theological education must be compatible to a degree with the culture it serves, it has no mandate to be subservient. It is to serve the needs of the Church of God. The Biblical attitude to knowing is wider, more holistic and often involves relationship.<sup>7</sup> Theology cannot just be a university discipline. It must speak about the student's relationship with God.

One of the tragedies of modern theological education is that this model, only partly justifiable in Western culture, has been imported p.487 all over the world in the founding of two-thirds world colleges and the often unwise interchange of students between those colleges and Western institutions. Status in two thirds world colleges often becomes dependent on academic excellence in Western seminaries or universities.

A further problem with the academic model is that it usually projects the educator primarily as a lecturer. The lecturer then becomes a role model for the aspiring servant of God. The student goes on to enter a form of ministry, seeing the task as primarily a cerebral one. The attitude of the lecturer who complains 'I wish I had a few more lectures to deal with holiness properly' becomes the attitude of the minister who assumes that the job is done after a fine sermon on [Romans 6](#).

Another problem, often, but not essentially, created by the academic model is that of entry requirements. If the growth in academic concern is not matched by an equal commitment to those without academic achievements then the colleges enter the realm of intellectual snobbery. Such attitude denies training to many useful servants of God. Alternatively, colleges will embrace low academic achievers only to put them through agonies of stress and self-doubt as they seek to keep up academically. Many practitioners know this to be one of the biggest problems in theological education today.

The academic model is inadequate to describe the task of theological education. It strengthens no more than one factor in the ultimate usefulness of the servant of God. Plenty of mature believers have been able to turn upside down their corner of the world without having experienced academic theology.

Nevertheless, at its best, the academic paradigm is teaching both knowledge and the ability to think. With the help of the Spirit it can be a significant factor in producing not just theologians, but obedient theologians, applied theology, a knowledge of the Scriptures that develops into love.

## 2. THE MONASTIC PARADIGM

By this I mean Theological Education through a firmly structured community with the primary goal of personal spiritual development. The monasteries were concerned with

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<sup>7</sup> Carl F. Henry article on 'Knowledge' *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Revised*, Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986, vol. 3, pp. 48-50. R. Bultmann, Article on (girwskw) and cognates in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Ed. G. Kittel, Trans. G. W. Bromily, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964, vol. 1, pp. 689-719.

theological education almost from the beginning, the Irish and then English institutions leading the way in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries. This model re-entered the Christian training scene more recently with the rise of the Bible Colleges and was a reaction to the academic paradigm. The difference between the older monastic paradigm and the early Bible College **P. 488** movement was that whereas monasticism became bi-polar, creating saints AND scholars, the early Bible Colleges were not concerned with scholarship. This has changed with the maturing of the concept and since the second world war, concern for academic rigour has grown steadily in the Bible Colleges.

The Bible College Movement can be seen to have begun when H. Grattan Guinness founded the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missions in 1877 at the instigation of Hudson Taylor.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the Bible College Movement has proved itself a remarkably adaptable and useful tool. The movement began in the U.K. and U.S.A. with four main concerns: to train Christian workers without the 'corrupting' influence of universities or liberal denominational colleges, to prepare non-ordained missionaries, to train lay people for witness and to emphasise spiritual development as the key to equipping Christian workers.<sup>9</sup>

Edgar Lee puts the point clearly;

The original intention of the Bible movement was to train men and women for Christian service in a warm spiritual environment.<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to quote William Menzies speaking about Central Bible College;

The ethos of the school was designed to be an intense spiritual atmosphere, an atmosphere created by scheduling numerous prayer meetings and worship services through the week. The centre of gravity was spiritual development rather than academic excellence.<sup>11</sup>

Bible Colleges as we encounter them today, however, are the product of one hundred years of evolution and nowadays the lines between them and many denominational colleges have blurred.<sup>12</sup> **p. 489**

Spiritual development was placed as the first objective by the colleges (Bible and denominational) participating in the 1990 U.K. survey by Bunting<sup>13</sup> and it is not hard to see why. The greatest qualification for Christian service is a person's relationship with God. This permeates all aspects of life and work and the greatest damage is done when it

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Pritchard, *For Such a Time*, Victory press, Eastbourne, 1973, pp. 14/15.

<sup>9</sup> Article 'Bible Schools (American)' by Earle E. Cairns in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. J. D. Douglas, Exeter, Paternoster Press, Revised Edition, 1978. S. E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American people*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972, p. 812.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Lee, 'Spiritual Dimensions of the Bible College Academic Program', *Theological Education Today*, Jan-June 1987, p.4.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p. 4. See also p. 5, 'The deep conviction that receptive faith takes precedence over critical study is a cornerstone of the Bible college movement' George Sweeting writing on Moody Bible Institute.

<sup>12</sup> Witness the History of Spurgeon's College and the present composition of the Association of Bible College Principals.

<sup>13</sup> Ian D. Bunting *The Places to Train, A Survey of Theological Training in Britain*, MARC Europe, London, 1990.

is absent.<sup>14</sup> Biblically, it is the basis for understanding and therefore of all biblical and theological study.<sup>15</sup> The old Wesleyan had a point when, after listening to a less than gentle Calvinistic preacher, he turned to his friend and said, 'I wish his heart was as soft as his head'.

Furthermore, it is within community that such growth is designed to occur for believers. Community is a pattern of theological education arising from the nature of the Church. The college or seminary is not a church, but it is part of the Church so the concept of the mutual ministry of the body of Christ very much applies. Such an intense community of teachers, the taught, ancillary staff and their families<sup>16</sup> is often the very aspect of theological education which is remembered by the student as having most impact on his or her life. It is perhaps the most powerful tool of theological education.

Yet, while spiritual development is widely acknowledged as the top priority in theological education, this is almost always wishful thinking rather than realized policy. Structures of pastoral care within the community are generally swamped by the academic timetable. Space to grow is invaded by the essay schedule. Furthermore, the increasing age of students in some countries brings with it the greater likelihood of a spouse and children and this compounds the difficulty of integrating the student into the community.

Both spiritual development and community atmosphere suffer in the eyes of Western oriented educators with a certain fuzziness of definition. The spiritual, communal life of the college involves commitment to the Lord and to the task of loving each other, an openness and enjoyment in fellowship, a corporate devotional and prayer p. 490 life which has reality. Such matters are not easy to quantify statistically for an end-of-year report.

The biggest disadvantage is that the atmosphere created, whenever this model dominates, is artificial, it has little correspondence to the world of service the students will eventually enter. Future service needs to cast its shadow before and inject reality into the classroom and the community.

Nevertheless, this model is under-valued today, it may be that some alternatives to college or seminary training nowadays would not look so attractive if the institutions had not allowed the pendulum to swing so far from the spiritual/pastoral towards the academic. If the college is perceived as simply where you go to get knowledge then there are plenty of cheaper and easier alternative systems of knowledge acquisition.

### 3. THE TRAINING PARADIGM

Theological Education as training for service is a task-oriented model. It takes its justification for a view of the ministry or missionary service as a profession. Its natural home is the seminary, an institution which became important in Roman Catholic circles after the Council of Trent, which entered North American Theological Education last century and which now dominates the task there. The model is becoming more popular in secular as well as theological education. In the U.K. and elsewhere, governments are concerned to shorten the perceived distance between vocational and academic achievement. Theological Education is being forced to decide where it belongs.

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<sup>14</sup> See Bruce Nicholls 'The Role of Spiritual Development in Theological education', *Evangelical Theological Education Today 2 Agenda for Renewal*, Ed. Paul Bowers, Nairobi, Evangel Publishing House/WEF, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> [John 7](#) v. [17](#), [1 Cor. 2](#) vs. [6-16](#).

<sup>16</sup> See Chow, 'An integrated approach to Theological Education' *Theological Education Today*, Sept. 1981, p. 8 and especially John M. Frame, *op. cit.* pp. 369-388.

In the past, particularly in the Bible College Movement, this paradigm has often been taken to extremes. Some colleges with a missionary ethos would even at times have hints of the atmosphere of an army training base or a jungle camp. Accompanying this model has sometimes been an emphasis on spiritual warfare and a hard life, boiled cabbage and floor scrubbing duty, all of which are 'good missionary training'.

The emphasis on relevant training has been strengthened by a new attitude to theology as a practical task rather than a science. The new approach arose this century as anthropology, sociology and even politics made an impact on Theological Education. It is a movement which rightly takes seriously the situation in which theology is done and the uniqueness of each situation. So, the student is not 'given' theology as a tightly bound parcel of information to pass on to the p. 491 waiting world; he is trained to do the task of theology in his day and in his place of ministry.

The traditional, informational-based theological student who eventually finds himself in a practical ministry situation puts up on the shelf his notes on Appolinarianism, Pan-en-theism or Supralapsarianism and cobbles together a new practical theology based on the more useful parts of his classroom learning along with the experience he gains in the job.<sup>17</sup> The student taught theology as a task has less problem bridging the chasm between the classroom and the world when he leaves the one and enters the other.

Theology as done in the N.T. was formed by practitioners; active pastors and teachers in the churches, and especially by missionaries such as Paul. Because of that, it was related to and a part of the struggles and needs of the world and the church in which they operated.<sup>18</sup> It answered real current questions, set out relevant ethical norms and was mixed up with teaching on the spiritual life; theology and spirituality giving rise to each other.<sup>19</sup>

One of the positive influences of this model is seen in the growing interest in practical assignments for students. In the last twenty years block placements have been enthusiastically embraced by many colleges and the average length of such placements is now about 10 weeks for inter-denominational colleges and 12 weeks for denominational colleges in the O.K.<sup>20</sup>

This training model also provides a sense of purpose and reality for the student and therefore for the tutor. You will not lecture on Romans in quite the same way if you know your students are involved in practical ministry (or you should not). A healthy to-and-fro between classroom and street enlivens both locations.

This sense of purpose will insist that the college lecturer re-orientate his teaching in a number of ways. He has to teach expository courses at every level with spiritual and practical application.<sup>21</sup> He has to teach theology in such a way that it touches the thinking of the world, in sociology, literature, politics even. He has to deal with devotional and p. 492 practical subjects with the same academic rigour that he applies to biblical and theological studies (as traditionally defined) so that he does not re-inforce the alienation from the other side. He must deal with the theological issues about God with a humble

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<sup>17</sup> See Frame *op. cit.* pp. 371/2.

<sup>18</sup> See the articles by Charles H. Kraft 'Dynamic Equivalence Theologising' pp. 258–285, Daniel Van Allmen 'The Birth of Theology', pp. 325–348, and other articles in section III of Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, Pasadena, William Carey Library, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Especially in the epistles of Paul.

<sup>20</sup> Bunting *op. cit.* p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Lee, *op. cit.* p. 7.

care and a devotional heart. Such lectures would often appropriately include a hymn of worship as did Barth's classes in Bonn.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, the training paradigm leads to a theological attitude which is bi-polar. Theology is preaching. It is missiology. It is rooted in the content of the Scriptures and builds a bridge into the situation of those among whom the theologian lives and moves and has his being. It is not a body of knowledge, it is a task. And it is a task to be done in the real world of today, answering the real questions which are in the student's mind and heart.

Nevertheless, as a dominant model, training has a steely coldness; the elevation of technique above conviction, of relevance above truth. It projects an activist approach which sees the pleasing of God as residing in doing more than being. It allows sociological perspectives to determine the content of theology. So Theological Education is defined more by what the Church does than by what the Church is. At its worst, it can bind theology to the way the Church sees its task and how the Church behaves in any one time and place. At its best, it displays only one important component of theological education.

#### 4. THE BUSINESS PARADIGM

This model of Theological Education as a business enterprise has grown in importance as leadership and management concepts have been taken on board by principals, staff and college councils over the last few years. Colleges provide a service for a fee. Courses are seen as the 'products' and as such are influenced by the marketplace. Growth objectives are formulated. The presentation to the public requires a company logo and an advertising budget. Among other things, the principal becomes a managing director, responsible to the chairman of the board, with the treasurer peering over his shoulder. Almost all colleges and seminaries in Europe and North America have gone some way down this road.

The first thing to be said in favour of this model is that it stresses accountability and stewardship. Institutional Theological Education is an extremely expensive way to train a Christian worker. Even a small p. 493 college will have a budget which taxes the support capabilities of its church group or constituency, and considerable capital assets, often bought or built through the disbursements of charitable trusts. So this model becomes a necessary perspective. Its application has helped many theological training institutions onto a sound financial basis and therefore into a secure ministry for years to come.

Secondly, market-led courses are indicative of a servant attitude. Churches and missionary societies do not exist to provide the colleges and seminaries with students. Colleges exist to provide the churches and societies with workers. It follows that students must be able to do the job as it exists today and theological education programmes must reflect what is required. This has not always been so,<sup>23</sup> but the business model has had a significant role in bringing our previous paradigm, the training model, to the fore.

Nevertheless, this model, like the others, has dangers and disadvantages. Perhaps the most dangerous, because the most subtle, is that the new terminology shifts the emphasis of theological education. For instance, this model requires us to identify products to sell. In the past, the 'products' of the system were the students. Under this model, they must

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<sup>22</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, pp. 256 and 258.

<sup>23</sup> See Point 2 of the Manifesto on the renewal of Evangelical Theological Education published in connection with the meeting of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies in Malawi in 1981. *Theological Education Today*, April-June, 1984 pp. 1-6. Frame, *op. cit.*, pp. 371f. and Steward, 'Tensions in North American Theological Education' *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Jan. 1990, p. 43.



be the courses, because these can be sold in the market place and so generate income. The emphasis on the people we are training, then, becomes partly sidelined in a marketing-led organization. This shift of students as the *raison d'être* of the whole exercise into customers of our products is worrying.

Economic viability is also a two-edged sword. It is a welcome ultimate aim, but must not become the dominant short term objective. Sometimes a college or seminary should do something which is not economically sensible, such as taking a controversial decision which alienates a proportion of its support base, accepting an outstanding student with inadequate means, or refusing a marginally unsuitable potential student despite the seminary's overdraft.

A third problem with this model is that marketability can unduly affect curriculum design. This is the other side of the coin from the positive servanthood attitude the model engenders. What is wanted may not always be what is needed. As the president of Denver p. 494 Theological Seminary commented 'We believe we must have a strong sense of mission, and respond to the market only where it clearly fits with the mission of the seminary'.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. THE DISCIPLESHIP PARADIGM

There has been a growing awareness, in the third world particularly, of the importance of this model of Theological Education as a training relationship. In Church History, we encounter this model in the postgraduate 'discipleship' type schools in the U.S.A. of the last century in which a number of prospective ministers attached themselves to a prominent pastor/teacher. A similar system existed among dissenters in the U.K. But its history goes back further than that. Just how far we have moved from the educational methods of Christ is dramatically shown in Adeyemo's classic playlet;<sup>25</sup>

Student:	I can't outline what you say.
Teacher:	Life and thought and conversation seldom conform to an outline.
Student:	But that makes it hard to prepare for the exam.
Teacher:	What exam?
Student:	The one at the end of your course.
Teacher:	You will be taking my exams the rest of your life.

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Steward, *op. cit.* p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo 'The renewal of Theological Education', in *Evangelical Theological Education Today*, Ed. Paul Bowers, p. 7.

Student: I don't understand a lot of what you are teaching us.

Teacher: You won't for three years.

Student: That's the whole course?

Teacher: No, it's only the beginning of the course.

Student: Do you have any idea of what my class standing will be?

Teacher: You'll fail the course, along with the rest. But then all of you except one will turn the world upside down.

Student: When we've finished, will we know as much as the Pharisees?

Teacher: No. You won't know as much, but you'll be changed. Do you want to be changed?

Student: I think so. Is your teaching relevant?

Teacher: Is it true?

Student: You seem to throw questions back at me instead of answerin them.

Teacher: That's because the answers are in you, not in me.

Student: Will we see you in class tomorrow? p. 495

Teacher: The class continues at supper and the camp-fire tonight. Do you think I only teach words?

Student: Is there an assignment?

Teacher: Yes, help me catch some fish for supper.

To a degree, no tutor can escape the clutches of the discipleship phenomenon. The tutor has always been the medium and the medium has always been the dominant message.<sup>26</sup> Looking back on our own student experience, it is the quality of life, attitudes and enthusiasm, of a few teachers that are remembered when much of the content of the teaching is forgotten—often 24 hours after the end of the exam.

Conversely, the tutor who is ineffective as a person, uncommitted, unable to offer a clear message from his or her life, can have a devastating effect on the acceptance of the truths taught. This may not be an over-riding argument if the subject is biology or the history of the civil war. But, for the teaching of biblical truth, it raises the issues of hypocrisy. As Martin Buber said, 'The teacher must himself be what he wants his pupils to become.'<sup>27</sup> The Discipleship paradigm consciously harnesses this effect in a training college.

Communication theory would suggest that discipleship is a far more efficient tool for learning than the standard information transfer by lecture. It relates learning to life and reality. In fact it integrates the process of learning and change within the student in the practical, spiritual and academic fields.

However, the model is not a Western model and does not fit well into Western cultural and educational structures (which, of course dominate theological education today). Firstly we encounter the problem of time, because the discipleship model is one greedy for that Western commodity. As Kornfield says,

The impact that a professor makes on a student will generally be directly proportional to the quantity of time spent together times the quality of time spent together.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, walking down this road will be unsettling and threatening to the tutorial staff. It is easier to lecture on holiness than to show it. Many would prefer to teach horniletics than to hold up their sermons as examples. The classroom situation does not require open-ness and the p. 496 vulnerability of personal relationship so it is emotionally cheap. In many teaching situations there is fear of rejection, doubt and insecurity about ability on both sides. You can protect yourself to an extent in a formal classroom setting but you are exposed in discipleship contact.<sup>29</sup>

Thirdly, the growing level of academic specialization amongst theological tutors today and their specialized experience of christian work is another area of difficulty. Institutions nowadays possess an Old Testament tutor, pastoral theology tutor, a theology tutor, none of whom is able to mark the other's work. Some never tread the pulpit steps, others have never evangelized among the mud huts of Africa. This cannot be avoided and is, in fact, a strength of the system, exposing students to learning from a wide variety of skill and experiences.

Unless we intend to abandon the Western institution altogether, we will have to develop discipleship learning alongside a formal, fragmented, specialist academic mode. In our struggle to balance and combine the classroom with discipleship, we are living in an unstable zone; two culturally different tectonic plates are rubbing against each other. Either the edges of each will crumble or one will clearly rise above the other.

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<sup>26</sup> Kornfield, 'A Working Proposal for an Alternative Model of Higher Education' Pt2, *Theological Education Today*, Sept. 1983, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *op. cit.* Sect. 11, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen *Reaching Out*, London, Collins, 1975, p. 80. The whole passage pp. 78–84 is of great value.

Unfortunately we often assume that the 'higher' the educational institution, the more the Western model must prevail.

## TOWARDS TRAINING THE PERSON

Now that we have examined the dominant models associated with theological education today, we have arrived at the task of synthesis. What has already become clear is that no one paradigm is adequate. Each taken alone becomes a procrustean bed for the task. Working in different cultures will force the theological educator to shift the balance between the various models but balance there must be. The inadequacies of one model will be made up in the strengths of the others and the task of leadership in theological education today is to maintain that balance amid the pressures of culture, tradition, finance and the seductive new idea.

In Western culture (as it is found in the West and as it is spread across the world within the Theological Education Movement) we need to take especial care that the model of academia and increasingly p. 497 those models of training and business do not dominate the more integrative and holistic models of discipleship and community.

In that task, the most fundamental question to answer is 'What is the purpose of a college?' Stated simply, it is to prepare people.

The goals of theological education must focus on the kind of person we expect the student to become.<sup>30</sup>

We will not achieve these goals in any individual because maturity is an on-going task through the student's life. College or seminary will be only one influential event in that process.<sup>31</sup> But we are required to be people-orientated. Our primary objective is not to teach courses or skills, but to train people.<sup>32</sup>

This person-related, holistic approach has at least three advantages. *Firstly* it requires humility on behalf of the teachers. We cannot dole out spiritual maturity, fitness for ministry, or knowledge of God as we can lecture notes; it is the work of God. Just as the Reformers came to realize that the Church is not the controller and dispenser of the Holy Spirit but the occasion for his works, so a holistic objective helps the institution to see that clearly about itself.

*Secondly*, it provides a unifying focus for what is now a very diverse and fragmented task. Farley has written eloquently on this subject and sees a need to re-capture unity by relating theology to the person in training. This article has suggested that the centrality of the person unites an even wider area than Farley works with.<sup>33</sup>

*Thirdly*, we are then able to distinguish clearly between the means and the end. If the prepared person is the end, the various activities of the college become the means rather

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Nicholls, *op. cit.* p. 126. See also James Plueddemann 'Towards a Theology of Theological Education' in *Evangelical Theological Education Today: 2 Agenda For Renewal*, Ed. Paul Bowers, Evangel W.E.F. Nairobi 1982 p. 57. 'Properly understood, theological education facilitates the maturation process in students so that they can in turn facilitate that process in others.'

<sup>31</sup> See Nouwen's concept of student as 'guests' in Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, London, Collins, 1975, p. 83.

<sup>32</sup> This emphasis is, of course, neither new nor revolutionary. See, for instance, Philip Jacob Spener *Pia Desideria* section 5, English translation reprinted in Peter C. Erb, Ed. *Pietists, Selected Writings*, SPCK, London, pp. 40-46.

<sup>33</sup> Farley *op. cit.*, especially the first and last two chapters.

than ends in themselves, and each will have its place as it contributes to the ultimate objectives. The traditional structuring of these means has been the Western academic model of the four-legged table; Biblical Studies, Theology, Church History and Pastoral Studies. We have already seen that this academic p. 498 model is inadequate for what we try to do in Theological Education. A model more in keeping with the holistic approach is the three-legged stool of Academic, Spiritual and Ministerial growth.<sup>34</sup> This classification is presently proving influential in the Third World renewal movement in theological education. It is sometimes spoken of as the training of the head, heart and mouth.

This immediately faces us with the issue of balance. Almost all colleges and seminaries are under-resourced with too little money and too few staff who are too busy. Pressure is increasingly being exerted from outside, for instance, to be seen to achieve academic standards or to be training missionaries as adequately as another college. It is hard to keep the stool level.<sup>35</sup>

Some have argued for the priority of one of these three means over the others on the basis that some are more essential for college training and others more essential goals for an 'in ministry' setting. I cannot agree. Academic study is especially appropriate in an intensive way at the beginning of one's ministry but that time cannot be relied on to cover a person's future ministry without a student attitude and student application through life. Great strides can be made spiritually in the hot house of the college but this experience needs also to be the spring of an on-going maturity. Ministry studies are well learnt on the job, but part of that learning is best done in close association with studies and in the team environment of fellow student and staff at college. Institutional Theological Education is a step on the way, an event in the process for all three areas of growth.

That these three should occur together at college is important because they are inter-related and so feed off each other. Coming together in training, they often form a critical mass leading to an explosion of growth. Doing brings thinking to life and sifts it for relevance. Study provides the context and direction for doing.<sup>36</sup> As B. B. Warfield says, the study of Scripture is itself a religious exercise.<sup>37</sup> Practical ministry requires faith and so deepens spirituality. And in many other ways, it is the confluence of these three streams at one time in a person's life which is the great contribution that an institutionalized Theological Education makes to a person's growth and usefulness. p. 499

I close with some words written by Bonaventura around 1257. It is from the introduction to *The Soul's Journey into God* and it sets out eloquently the sort of learning that is required of a Theological student.

First therefore, I invite the reader to the groans of prayer through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice—so that he not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavor without divine grace, reflection ... without divinely inspired wisdom.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Robertson McQuilkin 'Bible College Futures' in *Theological Education Today*, July–Sept. 1985.

<sup>35</sup> David Kornfield, *op. cit.* p. 5. See also Edgar Lee *op. cit.* p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Stewart *op. cit.* p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> *The Religious Life of Theological Students*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Philipsburg, 1911.

<sup>38</sup> Translated by Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventura, The classics of Western Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, 1978.

## A Review Article

### NEW HORIZONS IN HERMENEUTICS

by Anthony C. Thiselton

(Harper Collins, 703 + xii pp. \$29.99/£29.95)

(Reviewed by Richard S. Hess)

*Reprinted with permission from Themelios, Jan 1993*

*This comprehensive survey provides Biblical scholars with a first hand acquaintance with hermeneutical theoreticians and the diversity of hermeneutical models open to us today. It is a one volume library on the subject. Thiselton is concerned to affirm and retain both the existence of universals in the interpretation of texts and the need for criteria to evaluate the success or failure of different methods as they apply to the text. Focussing on the cross, Thiselton concludes 'The spirit, the text and the reader engage in a transforming process, which enlarges horizons and creates new horizons'.*

Editor

Twelve years after the publication of *The Two Horizons*, which became a classic work in biblical hermeneutics, Thiselton has produced a major synthesis of the issues and people involved in the questions of interpreting texts. The importance of the work for readers justifies a longer review, which can consider the content and some of the theses of the book.

Following an introduction which summarizes the contribution of the study, Thiselton investigates how texts function, both (1) to transform readers, as in speech-acts where texts carry the reader into their own world and may provide a reversal of expectations, and (2) to be transformed themselves through techniques such as intertextuality with changing language functions and pre-intentional backgrounds as well as through semiotics and deconstructionism. The difficulties of grasping an area of research so heavily laden with jargon should not be minimized (*i.e.* this is not a text for the beginner), but the discussion of its various usages and implications is one of the book's strengths.

The chapter '*What is a Text?*' surveys the developments in hermeneutics following on the traditional 'classical-humanist' paradigm which emphasized the author's intention and its possibility of recovery through a study of the text and the context of its origins. The p. 501 New Criticism challenged the recoverability of authorial intention and turned to a focus on the text itself. *Northrop Frye* introduced the postmodernist emphasis on the context of the reader or audience for understanding the text. The American development of reader-response theory suggested that the readers themselves create meaning from the text. Reader interests became dominant. In his application of these ideas to biblical studies, Thiselton considers the sense in which promises are given to Israel and to the church but it remains for the hearers to believe and to appropriate them. Further, he observes the Christian confession of the role of the Holy Spirit at work in the origin of the texts, in their transmission, and in the lives of the readers. The developments in

hermeneutics imply that readers do their reading in the context of social communities, certainly the community of believers but others as well. Further, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes are written without a specific answer to the problems which they address. These texts invite the reader to participate in the problem, to wrestle with the issues. Thiselton argues that these approaches do not 'foreclose questions' about interpretations. However, he also affirms that the role of the authors and the biblical contexts must not be sacrificed in any reading and that these provide guidance to the interpreter.

In the chapter '*From Semiotics to Deconstruction and Post-Modernist Theories of Textuality*', Thiselton provides a survey of the present landscape of how people deal with texts. Semiotics refers to the way in which texts presuppose a code or sign-system as a means to communicate. The ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure represent the foundation of semiotics, especially the principles that all signs are arbitrary in their value or meaning, that meaning is based on the differences or relations within the sign-system, and that concrete acts of speech (*parole*) are to be distinguished from the language system (*langue*) which is abstract and not found in the external world.

Thiselton goes on to trace the development of structuralism by Claude Lévi-Strauss and its Marxist application by Roland Barthes. He describes its successor, deconstructionism. However, Thiselton argues that deconstructionism is not a logically necessary consequence of semiotics.

*Jacques Derrida* argues for the absence of both signatory and referent in texts. The text is a mark of what has gone before and a trace of what is to come. However, the mark itself must be erased in an onward movement. Derrida suggests that writing has priority over speech. Even more, it has priority over the human psyche. At this point the discussion moves beyond a theory of textuality and into p. 502 philosophy. Thiselton will allow for the use of deconstruction as a method in the interpretation of certain biblical texts, particularly those which are subversive, *i.e.* texts such as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables of Jesus, all of which challenge the accepted tradition. However, the method cannot function as an iconoclastic philosophy which denies any connection of self with the text and allows for any interpretation as equally valid. Thiselton comments (p. 122):

... what would or could count as counter-examples or as falsification in the face of such a theory? Once again, when deconstructionist and post-modernist insights of iconoclastic method become inflated into some world view which is allegedly anti-metaphysical but in practice comes to function as a metaphysic, the whole system becomes self-defeating, a mere negative against someone else's positive. To set this up as a model of *textuality as such* is to imperialize all texts within a single system, while superficially rejecting any notion of system.

Thus deconstruction can be a useful method when applied to particular biblical texts, providing new insights and dispelling illusions that reading a text once provides mastery of it. However, it is a method and not a world view. As such it cannot lose contact with the speaking subject and the surrounding world of thought and life, which both reintroduces the possibility of misinterpretation and provides the social effect of its interpretation into life. Thiselton concludes the section with a caution regarding concepts of textual play. Again, it is important to recognize the purpose of a text. Some texts may serve such purposes but this is not an argument that all texts must. The multi-purpose nature of the biblical text must be recognized (pp. 131–132):

... the biblical texts transcend any single goal: they teach, but they also invite us to celebrate with joy the deeds and reign of God. They make truth-claims about the world and reality; but they also make us uncomfortable recipients of judgment and comfortable recipients of grace. They subvert our idols, but they also address us, heal us, build us, and

transform us. Any theory of textuality which cannot make room for these textual functions cannot be given a paradigmatic place in biblical interpretation.

After sections that helpfully explain the exegetical methods of the patristic and Reformation eras, Thiselton moves to the modern period, with Schleiermacher. He identifies the contributions of *Friedrich Schleiermacher* as being the first to set hermeneutics in the context of theories of knowledge, to ask how we know as part of the interpretive process. He brought questions of who the author was and what was the language-world in which the author wrote. However, his theories were more comprehensive than only concern for the 'genetic' aspects p. 503 of hermeneutics. In addition to the author of the text, Schleiermacher took account of the original audience, the later reader, and the effects of the text upon each. His approach to the Bible was one which saw these hermeneutical questions as applicable to the Bible, just as they were to other texts. His distinction between grammatical and psychological interpretations argued that both are necessary and that the goal of hermeneutics is always an approximation of certain understanding. There is the whole context and the specific elements of it. Both inform one another, and together they constitute Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle. He believed it was possible to understand a text as well and even better than the author. The first phase of interpretation implied a commitment to historical and grammatical inquiry. The second considered elements behind the text, which may not have been conscious to the author. Thiselton concludes that Schleiermacher's idea of background, like his other emphasis on psychology, is one aspect of hermeneutical theory, rather than a comprehensive theory.

Thiselton considers existentialist approaches to interpretation. He critiques them as inadequate in their lack of concern for the interpreting community and in their polarization between descriptive and proclaiming/transforming functions of language. The existential categories limit the NT's confessions of 'Jesus is Lord' and of the kingdom of God. These have an element evoking personal response but they simultaneously point to someone who bears the title or a divine reign which is yet to come. Without the latter reality, the former would be meaningless or idolatrous. This leads to Thiselton's discussion of the speech—act theory of *J. R. Searle* and others. Rejecting a putative Hebraic power of words magically to perform actions, Thiselton recalls his previously published arguments that the irrevocability of blessings by Jacob and Balaam are grounded in generally recognized institutional functions of the world of the Bible. Just as in Western Christendom there is no service of 'unbaptism', so in the biblical world there is no operation of 'unblessing'. Speech—act distinguishes between assertions in which the words match the world and promises or commands in which the world is made to match the word. Thiselton notes various biblical statements which operate in both directions. In the OT this is especially true of promise and covenant, *e.g.* in God's promises to the patriarchs and in the covenantal language of Hosea. Pre-eminently, it appears in the NT with the enfleshment of the divine Word and its ongoing reality through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

Thiselton finds *Pannenberg* more satisfactory than Gadamer, and p.504 critiques both. He follows his student Luckmann in recognizing a third horizon of interpretation in Pannenberg, that of the eschatological. The text, and especially that of the NT, must be understood in the context of the future, as well as the past and present and the future removes these texts from the arena of the mythological. Thiselton finds justification for this eschatological emphasis upon interpretation in the Epistle to the Hebrews and its hope for a city with foundations ([4:1-11](#); [6:13ff.](#)).

*Paul Ricoeur's* theory is the next one to fall beneath Thiselton's lens of examination. The symbols of the text have the power to produce thought but also to generate idols.



There is a strong element of Bultmannian existentialism in Ricoeur's biblical interpretation, in which religious language is understood primarily to redescribe the human experience. Hermeneutics becomes a struggle against the idols of ideologies and other illusions at the same time as it is an act of listening to a language which we no longer hear.

Thiselton's analysis of *liberation hermeneutics* begins with a chapter which explores the theories of Habermas, Rorty and Apel. Habermas sought the foundations of social science in the theory of communication. In so doing he emphasized the social context of speech-acts. Rorty represents American liberal pluralism with its abandonment of any truth values outside of social contexts, other than a pragmatic universal of 'success'. However, Thiselton observes critiques of this approach in (1) a concealed authoritarianism in Rorty, which uses liberal rhetoric to define an authoritarian message of its own; and (2) the absence of any means to challenge the status quo on the basis of universals: as Rorty acknowledges, there is no answer to the question, 'Why not be cruel?' Apel follows Habermas in his recognition of transcendent rational norms.

Chapter [12](#), 'The *Hermeneutics of Liberation*', offers 60 pages of analysis and critique of hermeneutic approaches found in liberationist readings of Latin American, black and feminist theologies. The common elements which Thiselton finds in all of these are those which *Gutiérrez* outlined in his *The Theology of Liberation*—an empathetic understanding of the oppressed, a criticism of society, the centrality of scriptural themes of liberation such as the exodus, and the biblical language of promise and eschatology as a means of transformation of the world. Thiselton identifies three corresponding methods in these movements (pp. 410, 462): critiques of frameworks of interpretation found in the dominant traditions, reinterpretations of biblical texts from the standpoint of a particular context of experience, and the use of critical tools to unmask interpretations which serve social interests of [p.505](#) domination and oppression. In all this, Thiselton constantly asks whether the critiques are socio-critical and therefore part of a larger critique with universal significance, or whether they are socio-pragmatic, designed to serve the interests of the particular group concerned. A second key question is whether the method used is made into a universal philosophy or world view, or whether it remains controlled and employed only as a particular method. For example, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff affirm that they use Marxism purely as an instrument, submitting it to the judgment of the poor, rather than as a philosophical or political programme. A similar claim is noted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her feminist hermeneutic. However, Thiselton's examination of her leads him to challenge this and to charge her with (p. 445) 'clearly selective discussions of different explanatory hypotheses which might account for the same textual and historical data'.

Special note should be made of Thiselton's critique of the approaches of *Fiorenza* and of *Phyllis Trible's* depatriarchalizing method. In so doing, he reviews the feminist critiques of *Elizabeth Achtemeier* and of *Susanne Heine*. Thiselton's own recounting of his earlier analysis and critique of Bultmann's demythologization forms the basis for a similar critique of depatriarchalizing. Some feminist applications of Ugaritic and Canaanite goddess-systems to the OT and of Gnostic sexual symbolism to the NT and especially to the early church serve to critique 'androcentric' biblical language. But it is not clear that androcentric biblical language does not serve ontological purposes of describing the nature of God and of God's relation to creation which have nothing necessarily to do with human masculinity as opposed to the feminine. Such language is often androcentric only if conventional modern stereotypes of masculine and feminine are read into the text. Further, as Heine observes, the usage of feminine imagery for God in the prophets serves

not to depatriarchalize the texts, but rather to affirm the God of Israel as all-sufficient and therefore to discount any need for a mother goddess in Israel.

Thiselton's introduction to the hermeneutics of reading is an attempt to justify its importance. On the one hand, he refers to Terry Eagleton's comment (p. 472), 'hostility to theory means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own'. On the other hand, he observes the sophisticated philosophies which lie behind many literary theories. He notes the tendency to replace meaning with rhetoric, as in Derrida and Fish. But Thiselton also finds some positive contributions in modern literary theories, including the restoration of the importance of the imagination in reading, the greater attention to p. 506 metaphor, the role of ambiguity and indirectness, and the development of theories of narrative which can take into account items such as irony. He observes the manner in which these approaches have served 'to sharpen contrasts in hermeneutics with historical-critical and especially source-critical approaches' (p. 479):

As Alter, Moberly, and many others have pointed out, literary considerations may suggest that apparent doublets or duplications, for example, may be due not to clumsy editing in conflating dual sources, but to a narrative technique of juxtaposing two loci of vision which may even stand in tension, because the vision as a whole transcends either of the two single strands of narrative as flat statements.

Rising out of *Roland Barthes'* concerns with how the text is made, structuralism developed in biblical studies in the 1970s. However, Thiselton observes that this method was subject to critique from several directions: (1) it lacked the generally recognized requirement of scientific theory, the possibility of falsifiability; (2) it took no account of socio-cultural factors; and (3) for all its efforts it was not very productive in terms of its results. The emergence of intertextuality reasserted the importance of the larger context; indeed, there was no dear means of designating where to draw boundaries in the search for other texts. This itself created a problem with intertextuality for it seemed to allow an infinite variety of interpretations with no criteria to judge one in relation to another. Indeed, the advent of the term 'reading' a text as a replacement for interpreting or understanding a text suggested a loss of communication and judgment in favour of semiotic effect. Texts become 'matrices' from which any of a variety of meanings can be developed. Thiselton argues that some biblical texts—poetry, for example—lend themselves more easily to a variety of readings, but other biblical texts, like modern traffic signs, do not so readily leave the matter of meaning with the reader.

Thiselton considers the work of *Holland* and of *Bleich*. Regarding Holland, who emphasizes the individual reader, he expresses concern over the possibility of creating an idolatry out of the text in which we project our own interests on it. Thiselton finds examples of this in the work of Bleich, whom he accuses of a socio-political agenda. In the end (p. 535), 'the most militant pressure-group actually carries the day about what satisfies their pragmatic criteria of "right" reading'. In Fish, there is the example of an interpreter who has carried socio-pragmatism to its final conclusion, that the community alone is the interpretative authority of a text. Therefore, there are no trans-cultural or trans-contextual meanings. Thiselton raises questions about language of pain, remorse, sincerity and lying, all of which he sees as p. 507 having universal communicative power. Observing the implications of this in biblical studies, Thiselton goes on to identify some 'disastrous entailments' of Fish (pp. 549–550), of which three may be identified:

(i) If textual meaning is the product of a community of readers, as Fish concedes, texts cannot reform these readers 'from outside'. In this case the Reformation then becomes a dispute over alternative community life-styles.

- (ii) Prophetic address as that which comes 'from beyond' virtually against human will is either illusory or to be explained in terms of preconscious inner conflict.
- (iii) It would be impossible to determine what would count as a systematic mistake in the development of doctrine. Pragmatism allows only the view that what gave rise to our past and present must somehow have broadly been right. Social pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria of truth.

The last 70 pages of Thiselton's text offer the reader a number of directions for the application of what has been surveyed throughout the book. This is the first place to which many who read this work will be likely to turn. Thiselton begins with a defence of reconstructing the original context of the text and its life-world. He accepts that many biblical texts express a form of address or goal, thus inviting examination of their original intention without committing the intentional fallacy. He reiterates Schleiermacher's emphasis to preserve both horizons of the text and of the reader. Thiselton moves through various models of reading, illustrating Kierkegaard's existentialist approach in his famous model of the interpretation of [Genesis 22](#), *Fear and Trembling*. He suggests four sample areas in which narratives can address readers: in catching us off guard and reversing our expectations, in explaining personal identities (including that of the God who acts), in stimulation of the imagination to explore new avenues, and in speech—acts of various sorts. Much of this, as well as the remainder of the book, was already considered in earlier chapters. However, there are *new* applications: for example, Jung's use of symbols and their identification can serve to integrate and to encourage further exploration of texts.

More importantly, Thiselton is concerned to affirm and to retain both the existence of universals in the interpretation of texts and the need for criteria to evaluate the success or failure of different methods as they are applied to texts. The concern for universal elements in interpretation leads him away from the reader-response theory of Fish toward a speech—act theory in which promises, confessions, and other types of texts move beyond the textual world alone and address commitments in the lives of authors, speakers and readers, i.e. [p. 508](#) readings of texts which call for self-involvement. The second major area of concern involves a distinction between what Thiselton calls socio-pragmatism and socio-criticism. Both address concerns of liberation and justice in specific communities. However, socio-pragmatism does not admit to universals and therefore concerns only a particular community. By the same token, it cannot be judged or evaluated and thus runs the risk of setting up its own system of injustices. On the other hand, socio-criticism admits as valid only those principles and critiques which are capable of judgment and application in all contexts.

The search for the appropriate model leads Thiselton back to the cross with its manifest value of power-in-weakness. It is combined with a promise of what is to come, the universal eschatological judgments and salvation. Thiselton concludes (p. 619) that in this context 'the Spirit, the text, and the reader engage in a transforming process, which enlarges horizons and creates new horizons'.

There are two areas which could profit from further exploration, however. The first of these is the rapidly expanding areas of related study and their methods. For example, what role do methods such as modern linguistics have in interpretation? What role is played by ideological/sociological approaches, especially those which retain an author-centred hermeneutic but apply socio-criticism to the ancient contexts by examining the societies for which the texts were supposedly written? Whether this is still hermeneutics or whether it is something else, it is becoming an issue of increasing importance in OT studies. A second area of further exploration concerns Thiselton's appeal to the cross. Even if this is intended as a change to a Christian perspective, it would be helpful to have more elaboration as to the epistemological basis for an appeal to the cross and to the 'third

horizon' of future judgment and salvation. Are these a basis for ranking and evaluating other hermeneutical theories? If so, how can they be justified? How does this avoid the criticism of being the product of one interpretive community?

Thiselton's study is vast in its scope and competent in its content. His criticisms will need to be considered by scholars who work in the field. However, his approach is irenic and appreciative, even where there is clear disagreement. There is much to learn from this book. It well serves his goals of providing biblical scholars with a first-hand acquaintance of hermeneutical theoreticians and with acquainting the reader with a diversity of hermeneutical models. It provides a contemporary discussion of this constantly expanding field which is both critical and comprehensive.

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## A Review Article

### **CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS: VOLUME ONE A THEOLOGY OF WORD AND SPIRIT: AUTHORITY AND METHOD IN THEOLOGY**

by Donald G. Bloesch

(US:IVP \$19.99, UK: Paternoster £14.99, 336 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

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*A Theology of Word and Spirit* is the first volume in a new series called *Christian Foundations* by Donald G. Bloesch (Phd University of Chicago, 1956) who has been on the faculty of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (Presbyterian Church USA) since 1957 and is due to retire in 1993. He is a prolific writer in the area of evangelical theology, spirituality and ethics, and is perhaps best known for *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (2 vols: Harper and Row, 1978–9) and *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

This is his 26th book, and previous works include two theological diaries, one edited work, one co-edited work, two co-authored and one book of songs; he has also published more than a hundred articles, reviews and contributions to symposia and reference works.

This ambitious new series (a projected seven volumes over the next eight to ten years) is designed to treat specific theological issues in greater depth and with broader appeal than his previous works. Appropriately, the first volume is devoted to theological foundations, and deals with topics such as revelation, faith, reason, authority, language and method with a view to establishing the basis for a theology that is comprehensive (or catholic) and evangelical, as well as one that serves the church in renewal, witness and worship.

However, in the compass of its 273 pages of attractively laid out text (plus extensive notes, complete indices and several appendices but no bibliography total 336 pp.), it manages to deal with many other issues, including apologetics, ethics, evangelism and

theology proper, as well as offering an analysis of contemporary theological trends and mapping out options for future development.

As usual, Bloesch presents a tightly integrated system, reiterating fundamental themes in the manner of a good teacher and showing how they relate to various aspects of his thinking even if this involves a certain amount of repetition. He also provides succinct summaries of p. 510 biblical material and surveys of historical theology, as well as making many applications to the life and witness of the church.

Gender neutral language has also been introduced for the first time in his writings, although not for divine names, an issue about which Bloesch has strong views. These views appeared in two of his earlier books, *Is the Bible Sexist?* (Crossway Books, 1982) and *The Battle for the Trinity* (Servant Books, 1985) and have been repeated in some detail in this latest offering (p. 81–94).

Readers familiar with his earlier books, especially *The Ground of Certainty* (Eerdmans, 1971), *The Christian Life and Salvation* (Eerdmans: 1967) and *Christian Witness in a Secular Age* (Augsburg, 1968) will notice that in *A Theology of Word and Spirit* he has provided an excellent restatement of his distinctive theological ideas, with ‘some slight changes in my theological perspective,’ as he puts it. (p. 11) These are largely changes of emphasis, (rather than of substance) due to changes in how Bloesch perceives the current theological climate. Most of these emphases have been noticeable in articles which have appeared over the last few years, but they are now brought together much more systematically.

Instead of the existentialism, secularism and neo-Protestantism which mainly occupied his attention earlier, he now focuses more on ‘undogmatic theology’ which is ‘free from the constraint of biblical or confessional norms,’ (p. 16) that is ‘divested of its metaphysical import’ and is ‘focused on the language and psychology of faith rather than its veracity and universal normativeness’. (p. 11)

Accordingly, he now places greater emphasis on the truth content and metaphysical implications of revelation, which leads to a small but subtle change in his definition of theology. This is now more clearly seen as the ‘faithful exposition of what God has revealed in Holy Scripture,’ (pp. 18, 38, 114, 129) rather than ‘a true understanding of the will and purpose of God disclosed in Jesus Christ’ (*The Future of Evangelical Christianity* Doubleday: 1983, 122).

In the interests of the ‘catholic’ aspect of his theology (universality in outreach and continuity with the whole church p. 124) he now consistently relates God’s self-revelation in Scripture to the tradition of the Church where it is witnessed or reaffirmed. Similarly he spells out in more detail the inter-relationships between the relative norms which he lays down as the sources and authorities for theology—Scripture, Church and conscience. (p. 196f)

But he still follows a Barthian line in strongly rejecting natural theology, natural law, rationalism and evidential apologetics (not least in their evangelical forms) in favour of what he now calls ‘fideistic’ or p. 511 ‘dynamic revelationism.’ (p. 21) He still faults Protestant and Catholic liberalism, process, liberation and feminist theologies (and now also narrative theology, the New Age movement and the pluralistic theology of religions) for accommodating and correlating themselves too much with the contemporary mindset and culture. He also repeats his charge accusing much evangelical theology of an irresponsible disengagement from modernity in its misguided efforts to restore the values of a pre-critical age.

Essentially, however, the book is an updated, more detailed and sharply focused outline of the basic elements of Bloesch’s theology of Word and Spirit which he has expounded from the beginning of his career.

Showing his fidelity to the classic Reformation doctrines, he begins with the living God personally addressing us in the Gospel of Christ, as attested in Scripture and reaffirmed in the teaching and witness of the Church. The appropriation of this salvation in the awakening to faith through the illumination of the Spirit is actualized only fully in a life of costly discipleship and devotion to Christ within the context of the Church, its worship, witness and service in the world.

What is distinctive in Bloesch's approach is first of all a profound integration of objective and subjective elements so it is truly a case of a theology of Word and Spirit. This has important implications for the nature of theology because it makes the experience of faith a correlative of revelation, although they are not on an equal par (p. 14) because of the total independence of the absolute norm, God's self-revelation in Christ. (p. 196)

It also means that the purpose of the theological enterprise is to lead the Church to greater devotion and conformity to the will of God as known in Christ. As a human formulation of the content of divine revelation, theology is a humble, open-ended intellectual exercise which seeks rational certainty about divine truth. It is 'a venture of obedience before it is a search for a deeper understanding—either of divinity or of humanity.' (p. 133)

This view of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' greatly enhances its role in relation to the Church, especially its witness, renewal and unity, which is a highly prominent feature of Bloesch's work.

Then arising out of the above, the second distinctive feature is the role of paradox and its extensive impact upon theological method and content. With Kierkegaard, Bloesch points to the foundational paradox of the divine-become-human in the incarnation as a key to understanding the Christian faith. He also builds a great deal on the paradoxical p. 512 authority, church and conscience, (pp. 199–202) and especially in salvation and the Christian life—the 'paradox of salvation' is that 'God does all but in and through human decision and obedience.' (p. 247)

Indeed, for Bloesch, paradoxical (and analogical) language is a necessity for the explication of the Word of God, not because there is ultimate mystery, but because of the limitations of fallen human reason. Bloesch is emphatic about the noetic effects of sin, which is the reason for his sharp rejection of natural theology and rationalistic apologetics and for his condemnation of semi-Pelagian forms of revivalism. But in this volume he is much more affirmative that 'there is no paradox in Christ himself nor in his relation to God,' for he is the 'divine rationality ... the Logos, the power and wisdom of God.' (p. 199)

Bloesch finds the concept of 'paradox' extremely effective when dealing with the 'new reality' (p. 200) of Christ and in many related matters. Thus he uses it not only to explicate the relationship of divine and human in salvation, but also as a means to resolve long-standing doctrinal and ecclesiastical conflicts. This commitment to a centrist approach which does not involve a compromise but a synthesis of theological polarities and a desire for Christian unity based on the gospel is a key feature of Bloesch's proposal for a catholic and evangelical theology.

He employs the idea of paradox in conjunction with his distinctive view of the nature of theology when advocating a confessional, kerygmatic theology that stands over against modern culture to transform it, rather than one that is in synthesis of correlation with it, as is the case with so much of the contemporary theology he describes in this book.

The overall purpose of his theological work is 'to equip the church to make a powerful and compelling witness [in both word and deed] to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as we find this in Holy Scripture' and thus to 'prepare the way for the kingdom of God.' (p. 24) However, by the end of the book he seems to have his eye more on the discordant

theological voices and the threat of an impending church conflict which calls for a 'new kind of confessional theology' (p. 267) than he does on the call for church renewal.

In this volume his customary dialectic style of writing is still apparent, which sometimes leaves the reader grasping for tangible content but at the same time experiencing a satisfying sense of illumination and edification. But in fact, this is intrinsic to those basic principles which have made his work so significant for evangelical and ecumenical theology. This book provides an excellent statement of those principles and offers a promise of more to come in the remaining volumes of the series.

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