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A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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A few years ago I wrote an article with a somewhat similar title, viz.: 'Hermeneutics: A brief assessment of some recent trends'.¹ In this new essay I do not intend to repeat the earlier material, but rather to proceed along a line that simultaneously probes a little more deeply and yet skips rather superficially over certain difficult questions in order to deal more immediately with the bearing of hermeneutics on the theology of the international Christian church. One danger of the current hermeneutical debate is that hermeneutics may mire itself in introspection: it begins to overlook the fact that, from the perspective of Christian theology, hermeneutics, however defined, is not an end in itself, but a means to the end. To press beyond the confines of the discipline in order to discover what makes it tick and what impact it has on theology is therefore to escape the introspection and to probe more deeply; but it is also to deal rather superficially with narrowly hermeneutical questions of enormous complexity. In an international consultation like that represented by the papers in this volume, the risk must be taken.

I shall eliminate from the discussion the concerns of classical hermeneutics (for instance, all consideration of the principles of how to interpret various figures of speech and the like), and likewise I shall eliminate discussion of structuralism *per se*. The latter is becoming extraordinarily important in academic discussion in the West; but it is not yet a burning issue in the church elsewhere. It is worth mentioning in this paper only as a

symptom of a greater issue. What I propose to do is list five critical problems with substantial hermeneutical implications, and offer some reflection on how the manner in which we treat these problems will to a substantial extent determine our exegesis.

A. THE PROBLEM OF PRE-UNDERSTANDING

We have rightly abandoned the positivism of nineteenth century historical study: competent historians do not today follow von Ranke. Not only because we are sinful, but also because we are finite, we cannot have an exhaustive understanding of any historical event (or of anything else for that matter). Bultmann and his successors have done us a great service by reminding us that whenever we approach the sacred text we carry with us an already established understanding of many issues to which the text speaks; and therefore we do not arrive as impartial observers ready to sop up neutral data and integrate it exactly into a coherent and true understanding. This recognition leads to the problem of the new hermeneutic (see below); but it deserves separate reflection. Most who read these pages will already have come to the position that problems related to one's pre-understanding do not exclude the possibility of true understanding. They will have seen that finite human beings who cannot understand anything exhaustively may nevertheless come to know certain things truly. They will recognize that an individual's pre-understanding is not necessarily immovable: for the reflective person, such pre-understanding is a 'functional non-negotiable'² which, given enough pressure, can be amended into a stance with increased proximity to the text.³

But a problem arises in that the term 'pre-understanding' seems to cover a variety of different epistemological phenomena. If 'pre-understanding' refers to the mental baggage, the 'functional non-negotiables' that one brings to the text, Christians will happily recognize the problem and learn a little humility in their exegesis. They will insist that their 'non-negotiables' *function* this way only until further insight into the teaching of Scripture forces them to change. In this way the Scripture can retain meaningful authority in the believer's life. But if 'pre-

understanding' comes to mean something like 'immutable non-negotiables', a function of an entire world view at odds with Scripture, then Scripture can never enjoy the right to call such 'pre-understanding' into question. Bultmann seems to use *Vorverständnis* in this way from time to time; and certainly this attitude stands behind his famous 1941 essay⁴ where he argues that the modern man, familiar with electricity, bombs, trains, metal processes, and the whole array of modern scientific discoveries, cannot possibly believe in a world inhabited by demons, angels, miracles—and even a transcendent-personal God who becomes incarnate.

The problem, however, cannot be dismissed as a merely semantic one: some people use 'pre-understanding' for one thing, and some for another. Rather, when 'pre-understanding' slips into this second range, it becomes *impossible* for the Scriptures to exercise corrective authority over our thoughts and lives in those matters where our 'pre-understanding' is immutably non-negotiable. The epistemologically controlling factors which govern our direction and beliefs are in this case no longer controlled or deeply corrected by Scripture, but by our presuppositions established on quite other grounds. To confuse these two uses of 'pre-understanding' is to devastate both theology and epistemology. The one use helps us to be more careful, encourages us to follow the 'hermeneutical spiral' to bring our horizon of understanding into line with the horizon of understanding of the original author, and ultimately brings our mind into increasing proximity with what the text actually says; but the second becomes a reason for transmuting the text into something else. The arguments in favour of a sympathetic treatment of 'pre-understanding' are *formally* the same in the two cases; but in the first case they lead to improved hermeneutical self-criticism, whereas in the latter they lead to epistemological solipsism and a complete inability to hear any word from God with which we cannot agree. It becomes a way of denying, through the back door as it were, the authority of the Scriptures over our lives.

The paper by Gerhard Maier⁵ in this collection charts an example of this phenomenon in the common dismissal of the authenticity of the *ἐκκλησία*-sayings in Matthew (viz. 16:18; 18:17). The heart of this dismissal is content-criticism, a procedure more intensely shaped by unacknowledged 'pre-understanding' than any other.

The line between these two approaches to 'pre-understanding' is theoretically sharp and clear; but in practice it may be rather hazy. Several essays in this volume deal with this problem. For instance, Peter O'Brien⁶ traces the principal steps in the semantic shift of 'principalities and powers' from the spiritual realm to the structures and dynamic forces of society. Some contributors to this development doubtless adopted the kind of naturalistic world view that Bultmann ably defended, and felt either that Paul's categories *had* to be changed, or that at very least Paul would have recognized that his spiritual powers stand behind structures and forces in a contemporary society. Once the position became increasingly entrenched, and a new awareness arose regarding international injustice that seemed to confirm this analysis, all kinds of people whose general treatment of 'pre-understanding' belongs in the first camp nonetheless came to adopt some form of this semantic change — without, of course, denying that spirit-beings do exist and may be involved. Precisely at this juncture it is important to return to the primary sources again, and track down as dispassionately as possible exactly what Paul's phrase meant to him. We may agree or disagree with his results, we may like them or not, but both sound scholarship and the desire to be faithful to Scripture demand that we make the attempt.

Another fine example of the difficulties that may arise in treating pre-understanding dispassionately is found in the paper by Tite Tiénou.⁷ Tiénou points out that Sawyerr asks some important questions about church models in Africa that have largely been imposed by the West. It is scarcely surprising that Baptists on the whole develop baptistic ecclesiology among their converts, complete with Roberts' *Rules of Order*; and the same or similar things could be said about virtually every other group. Sawyerr points out how important the family is both in African society and as a unit of the church in the New Testament, and then goes on to make some valuable suggestions regarding the restructuring of African church life. So far so good: Sawyerr has exposed some of the unwitting 'pre-understandings' of the West, and is creatively trying to think through what implications might follow. But Tiénou rightly points out that before long Sawyerr is introducing some 'pre-understandings' of his own, making the New Testament text seem to justify things which are nowhere near its focal concerns, and which are in some cases antithetical

to them. What started off as a valid critique of western pre-understandings has degenerated into the adoption, witting or unwitting, of African pre-understandings, both sets rather distortive of Scripture, and neither side sufficiently self-critical to introduce the necessary changes to bring church life into greater conformity with the Scriptures. The problem becomes more difficult when a denomination, deeply entrenched in long held patterns, simply refuses to think these things through afresh; or when an African (for instance) is so deeply concerned with African independence from the West that the authority of the Scriptures no longer really matters. In both cases, consciously or unconsciously, unacknowledged pre-understandings of the first type, when exposed by the opposite group, are in great danger of becoming pre-understandings of the second type: that is, the Scriptures are no longer heeded. The same sad result ensues when people hope and work and pray for capitalistic or Marxist salvation and then read such schemes into the Scriptures, without thoughtfully assessing whether 'salvation' (for instance) means the same thing on the lips of Jesus as it means on the lips of (say) Jerry Falwell or José Miranda. The papers by Emilio Nuñez and Russell Shedd touch on this kind of question.⁸

What is needed is a self-conscious dependency upon the Word of God and an equally self-conscious brokenness and contrition that hungers for the illumination of the Holy Spirit as that Word is studied. Only then will the inevitable auxiliary influences on our theology—such as long-standing tradition, denominational affiliations, our cultural and theological heritage—provide creative energies and ask probing questions, instead of usurping the place of control. Only then will the Word have the power to reform our traditions as well as our lives. Only then will Bible students from vastly different cultural and theological backgrounds entertain any real hope of so learning from one another that it becomes possible to be corrected by one another; for only then will there be an agreed revelation more important and more dominant than our unreconstructed cultural preference.

B. THE PROBLEM OF THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

This problem is of course related to the last one. One begins with the epistemological limitations imposed by 'pre-understanding',

and recognizes that as one approaches the text the kinds of answers the text will give will in some measure be determined by the pre-understanding brought by the interpreter. However, the answers will to some degree affect the understanding of the questioner, so as he approaches the text for further reflection and study his new 'pre-understanding' inevitably elicits fresh answers from the text. Thus a hermeneutical circle is set up. In more conservative thought, this is seen rather as a hermeneutical spiral than a circle: it is argued that it is possible in substantial measure to fuse the horizon of understanding of the interpreter with the horizon of understanding of the text so that true communication across the ages or from text to interpreter is possible. More radical interpretations of the problem argue that as the horizons of understanding are progressively shared, the interpreter is interpreting the text while the text is interpreting him. An *Einverständnis* (Fuchs's term, usually rendered either by 'common understanding' or by 'empathy') develops, making the text capable of grabbing the interpreter, as it were, and radically changing his thinking. Thus the language of the text becomes a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*) by challenging the interpreter toward 'authentic human existence'. The goal is not so much for the interpreter to comprehend the text, since the text is considered no more 'objective' than the interpreter, as for a 'language-event' to take place. 'The goal is that moment of encounter between text and interpreter in which the "meaning" occurs or takes place: that is, it is the encounter between text and interpreter in which the interpreter hears and responds to some claim upon his person.'⁹ There is no *assured* 'meaning' since the encounter might produce different things in different people, or different experiences in the same person at different times.

The subject is too complex to be treated here. Related to this question are complex philosophical issues and profound questions about the very nature of language. The notes provide some resources for pursuing this matter further, and for formulating credible ways of escape from a vicious form of hermeneutical circle.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that if the circle is as strong as a few of its defendants proclaim, I cannot possibly know it; for I would be unable to understand their own work as they want to be understood. Most scholars of course are aware of this danger; and partly for this reason, some now insist that the hermeneutical spiral is a far better model than the hermeneutical circle.

My purpose here is more modest: to draw attention to recent developments in evangelical missiological literature that relate to this question, one development helpful and insightful, and another fundamentally mistaken. The first points out that the missionary (or for that matter any Christian who witnesses cross-culturally) must concern himself not only with *two* horizons, but with *three*.¹¹ He must attempt to fuse his own horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding of the text; and having done that, he must attempt to bridge the gap between his own horizon of understanding, as it has been informed and instructed by the text, and the horizon of understanding of the person or people to whom he ministers. Strictly speaking, of course, this third horizon comes into play every time a person attempts to pass on to another person what he has learned from an original source: it is not necessary to envisage a cross-cultural target. But the problem is particularly acute when the second horizon must cross linguistic and cultural barriers to the third.

This model has two implications, both rather obvious. First, unless one admits that the bridge from the second to the third is impossible, it is difficult to see why anyone would want to argue that the bridge from the first to the second is impossible. Doubtless Fuchs and Ebeling do not expect their readers to possess *perfect* and *exhaustive* knowledge of what they say; but they do expect to be understood, and they seem to be interested in winning disciples to their positions. Scholars are certainly right to point out how difficult the transition from horizon of understanding to horizon of understanding may be; but the best of them recognize that to reduce all communication to a mere fusion of horizons resulting in a 'language-event' brings with it the entailment that they themselves have nothing objective to transmit. Regardless of the theoretical models, no one acts in this way in practice, unless he suffers from severe autism.

These observations have an obvious bearing on problems of contextualization. There is a sense in which every theology will inevitably be shaped by the culture in which it springs up; but this does not necessarily mean that each contextualization of biblical theology remains true to the Bible. To appeal to the demands of the interpreter's cultural context is legitimate, provided the intent is to facilitate the understanding and proclamation of the Bible within that context, not to transfer the authority of the Bible to conceptions and mandates not demon-

strably emerging from the horizon of understanding of the biblical writers themselves. Ideally, the diversity of culturally sensitive theologies should not only remain fundamentally faithful to Scripture, but should have the potential to bring about mutual enrichment as exposure to different theological formulations results in self-criticism and broader integration. But the ideal is seldom real. In harsh reality, different cultures may so stress Christ the liberator, or Christ the king, or Christ the Saviour, or Christ the peace-giver, or Christ the eschatological judge, to the exclusion of balancing truth, that complementary biblical presentations are not only unseen but self-consciously excluded. Worse, some appeals to contextualization are wittingly or otherwise dependent on the more radical formulations of the new hermeneutic. The resulting contextualization not only tolerates theological structure substantially removed from biblical theology, but openly mandates control of such structures by the receptor culture, not by the Scriptures. What begins as legitimate insight into biblical truth degenerates into the arbitrary imposition of conceptual structures, whose genius and control spring from authoritative voices alien to the Bible, onto the Bible itself. This can be true, of course, both in the missions-sending society and in the missions-receiving society. What is indisputable is that in this way, essentially *hermeneutical* questions become largely *missiological* questions. The problem has been discussed rather widely;¹² but the links between recent hermeneutical study and recent studies in cross-cultural communication have not always been clearly perceived or delineated. Several essays in this volume aim to make such links at least a little clearer.

The second implication is that the missionary task is far more complex than is often recognized. The problem is doubtless multiplied in the case of short term missionaries who never really grasp the language, let alone the thought processes, of the people to whom they minister. A tremendous number of barriers can doubtless be overcome by a profoundly Christian, loving empathy for the people to whom we minister, and a growing self-critical awareness of the baggage we bring with us; but there are no easy, formulaic solutions. Modern cultural and anthropological awareness is helping to meet some of the needs in new students; but fresh areas keep opening up in front of us, and

long-accepted theories are being challenged. For instance, there is a rising interest in the need for distinctively cross-cultural training in counseling;¹³ and although the subject is open to abuse, it clearly has some strong merits.

The second development, and in my judgment a fundamentally dangerous one, is the appeal in some recent literature to establish what is *supracultural* in the Scriptures or in one's personal religion, and communicate that. Everything depends on what is meant by 'supracultural'. I am not referring, for instance, to 'universals' of human thought as discovered and formulated by anthropologists. Such 'universals' exist—though doubtless certain formulations demand more testing. For instance, the so-called 'Parry-Lord' theory,¹⁴ which seeks to establish universal, formal distinctions between oral literature and written literature, with the introduction of the latter in any society automatically halting the former, has been shown by Finnegan's careful African field studies¹⁵ to need considerable qualification and revision. Yet Christians will cheerfully concede that 'universals' exist—indeed, they will insist on it, believing as they do that every man reflects the *imago Dei*, however much the image be distorted. In any event, the term 'supracultural' in the context of this paper refers not to purely anthropological commonalities but to content revealed by God. Even so, the term is ambiguous. If it simply refers to the fact that God has revealed certain truth that is objectively true in every culture, it is not offensive; but if there is an attempt to distinguish among parts of the Bible, for instance, according to whether this snippet or that is supracultural or culture-bound, then the attempt is fundamentally misguided and the pursuit of the supracultural an impossible undertaking. The point I am making is that every truth from God comes to us in cultural guise: even the language used¹⁶ and the symbols adopted are cultural expressions. No human being living in time and speaking any language can ever be entirely culture-free about anything. A statement such as 'God is holy' resonates with cultural questions: what does 'God' mean (compare, for instance, 'God' in Dutch reformed thought and in secular Japan!), what does 'holy' mean (compare Isa. 40ff. and the thought world of animistic tribes), and what does 'is' mean (Does the verb here indicate symbol, analogy or ontology?)? The aim of those who make frank appeal to the supracultural in the

Scripture is in most cases a laudable one: they point out that much of the message of the Bible is clothed in ancient Semitic dress which as to be removed before the message is easily preached in Montreal or Nairobi. But it is doubtful if 'supra-cultural' is the happiest rubric for what is desired. It might be closer to the *desideratum* if we were to say that what we must do is so fuse our horizon of understanding with that of the text that we sympathetically and reflectively grasp the principles and arguments and coherence of the subject matter, and do our best to apply such matter in our own lives and cultural contexts. And even then, how we apply some particular passage from Scripture is going to depend on other considerations: the way such material can be integrated with other Scriptures, the pastoral function of such material in its own context, and more besides.¹⁷ This brings us close to the next problem; but my point at this juncture is that appeal to the *supracultural* in Scripture is fundamentally dangerous and may lead to whimsical subjectivity.

C. THE PROBLEM OF THE CANON WITHIN THE CANON

Long recognized by biblical scholars, the problem of 'the canon within the canon' is that although the church officially recognizes a written 'canon', viz. the Bible (whether the sixty-six books of Protestantism, the inclusion also of the Apocrypha in Roman Catholicism, or some other refinement), it invariably shapes its theology by greater reliance on some parts of this canon than on others. This creates a shorter 'canon within the canon' that will almost certainly be at variance with some other 'canon within the canon' utilized by some parallel ecclesiastical grouping. In other words, two churches or two Christians may share a common canon, but disagree implicitly or explicitly over their respective 'canons within the canon'. In such a case it is not surprising that their respective theologies differ substantially from each other. Whether this difference is the *result* or the *cause* of the disparate 'canons within the canon' cannot always be determined; and it is easy to suspect that with the passage of time result and cause intermingle.

What is not always perceived, however, is that there are at least three different ways in which the problem of the canon

within the canon may develop. *First*, an ecclesiastical tradition may unwittingly overemphasize certain biblical truths at the expense of others, subordinating or even explaining away passages that do not easily 'fit' the slightly distorted structure that results. Galatians, say, may define a church's grasp of justification and grace in such a way that 1 Corinthians or the Pastoral Epistles are somewhat muted. *Second*, an ecclesiastical tradition may self-consciously adopt a certain structure by which to integrate all the books of the canon, and earnestly believe that the structure is not only sanctioned by Scripture but mandated by it; and as a result, some passages and themes may *automatically* be classified and explained in a particular fashion such that other believers find the tradition in question sub-biblical or too narrow or artificial. Dispensationalists and covenant theologians, for instance, are on the whole equally convinced that their opposing numbers have imposed a grid on Scripture in such a way that the canon cannot enjoy its free and reforming power: some other, lesser canon has intervened. *Third*, many others reject parts of the canon as unworthy, historically inaccurate, mutually contradictory or the like, and adopt only certain *parts* of the Scripture. The parts they accept constitute their 'canon within the canon'. Of course, this third alternative is the most serious, and reduces in one way or another to the question of the truthfulness and authority of Scripture.¹⁸ Even some who lie more or less within the evangelical camp have now defended the position that the New Testament documents, for instance, do not provide us with any unified theology, but with a range of acceptable (yet at places mutually contradictory) theologies.¹⁹

I have treated this question at some length elsewhere;²⁰ and to avoid mere repetition, I shall restrict myself here to less severe forms of the problem. But before I do so, it is necessary to emphasize that this third type of 'canon within the canon' problem is *qualitatively* different from the other two. Although the expression 'the canon within the canon' is most frequently applied to this third alternative, the application of the rubric to this approach to Scripture is in one sense deeply regrettable; for strictly speaking, this third procedure no longer has an 'outer' canon, a Scripture that truly serves as 'canon' in any regulatory sense, within which the narrower canon might be found. The 'outer' canon, the Bible, is simply the raw stuff from which the

'inner' canon may be drawn. Yet ironically, this 'inner' canon, the 'canon within the canon', is equally misnamed, for it does not truly enjoy any regulatory status or function either. It is drawn from the 'outer' canon on the basis of (usually unstated) principles not derivable from Scripture; and it is these principles that are truly 'canonical' in that they exercise the real regulatory power.

Thus it ill becomes someone who has arrived at his 'canon within the canon' on the basis of this third procedure to dismiss criticisms of his position by pointing out that *all* Christians fall victim to *some* sort of 'canon within the canon'. The other two procedures for arriving at a 'canon within the canon' are either inadvertent or else honest (if mistaken) interpretation of the structure of the entire canon (i.e. the Bible). The canon stands with its regulatory status and function still intact; and therefore provided the participants in the debate display humility and grace, there is at least the possibility of reform *by* the Scriptures into greater conformity *to* the Scriptures. Problems of hermeneutics and of authority may overlap; but they are distinguishable, and should not be confused.

If we turn to a moment's reflection on the type of 'canon within the canon' established by the first procedure, we restrict ourselves to theological argumentation advanced by many Bible believers in all parts of the world when that argumentation is based on a prejudicial selection of the biblical data.

Suppose, for instance, that a pastor wishes to encourage people to accept his authority and to follow his leadership almost without question. This might arise because he is a demagogue; or it might arise because in his cultural setting people naturally reverence leaders and eschew iconoclasm. He can foster what he regards as a healthy spirituality in this respect by citing passages such as Heb. 13:17 *ad nauseam*; but he will probably be less inclined to cite 1 Pet. 5:11ff. or Matt. 20:24–28. Such a leader may have a theoretically unified canon; but he operates with a canon within the canon when it comes to certain preferred doctrines. The resulting aberration may be entirely unwitting, or it may be perverse; but either way it distorts the Scriptures and has important ramifications in the life of the church.

Many western Christians, for instance, simply do not hear the Scriptures when they speak about the poor; their own experience

has been limited to segments of society which from a world perspective are immensely privileged. Their counterparts in the third world may feel very deeply the passages in Scripture which treat poverty; but by the same token they may focus primarily on a subset of those passages—viz. those which insist the rich be far more generous and which warn against hoarding. This situation is somewhat paralleled, at the microcosm, by the pastor of a small church who is very concerned to get across to his congregation the responsibility for the church to pay good teachers with 'double honour' and a respectable stipend, while the church leaders themselves may be very exercised about those passages which insist that spiritual leaders must be free from greed and covetousness and love of material goods. Not only is each side focusing a disproportionate amount of attention on passages which most tellingly apply to others rather than to themselves, each side is also developing, wittingly or not, a canon within the canon.

Two things will help us to escape from these traps. First, we badly need to listen to one another, especially when we least like what we hear; and second, we need to embark, personally and ecclesiastically, on systematic studies of Scripture that force us to confront the entire spectrum of biblical truth, what Paul calls 'the whole counsel of God'.

The name of the game is reductionism. It occurs in many different ways, and needs to be recognized for what it is. And sometimes the first way of proceeding toward a 'canon within the canon' metamorphizes into the third. For instance, G. Ernest Wright argued forcefully some years ago that God's revelation is focused in saving events, in mighty acts, and not in propositional discourse.²¹ If he had argued for his positive point without proceeding to the disjunctive negative, he would have been correct; but his disjunction involved him in a reductionistic denial of part of the truth,²² and unfortunately he has not been alone in his opinion. From time to time it has been argued that the Semitic concept of truth involves integrity in personal relationships and general reliability, but not propositional truth; but again, more comprehensive analysis has demonstrated that the reductionism is false,²³ and results in another form of the truncated canon. The tragedy of all these procedures is that by some route we may avoid hearing the Word of God precisely

where we most need to hear it. In this way, an issue at first hermeneutical is in danger of overturning the reforming authority of the Word of God.

D. THE PROBLEM OF SALVATION-HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Broadly speaking, this is another way of referring to the second procedure for developing a 'canon within the canon', discussed above; but it can be divided into two sub-types. In the first, the interpreter adopts a theological framework for interpreting the Bible which he deems true to Scripture (whether or not it be so in fact); in the second, the interpreter adopts a procedure for *using* the Scriptures, and especially certain parts of them, without worrying very much about how the Scriptures fit together. This procedure is usually some form of *paradigmatic* approach: i.e. it fixes on some biblical narrative and seeks to use it as a *paradigm* for current belief or action, without considering very deeply how that narrative fits into the broad stream of salvation-historical development. In the worst case, this way of developing a 'canon within the canon' becomes difficult to distinguish from the third procedure (discussed in the last section).

Perhaps it is easiest to get at this problem by an example. Gustavo Gutiérrez writes:

The exodus experience is paradigmatic. It remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the people of God undergo. As Neher writes, it is characterized 'by the twofold sign of overriding will of God and the free and conscious consent of men.' And its structures are faith in the gift of the Father's love. In Christ and through the Spirit, men are becoming one in the very heart of history, as they confront and struggle against all that divides and opposes them. But the true agents of this quest for unity are those who today are oppressed (economically, politically, culturally) and struggle to become free. Salvation—totally and freely given by God, the communion of men with God and among themselves—is the inner force and the fullness of this movement of man's self-generation which was initiated by the work of creation.²⁴

Gutiérrez is aware of the charge to which he leaves himself open, viz. that he is taking an event of the Old Testament and

turning it into a paradigm which ignores how the New Testament treats it. Gutiérrez himself responds to his critics by arguing that the temporal/spiritual disjunction is a false one:

But is this really a true dilemma: either spiritual redemption or temporal redemption? Is not there in all this an 'excessive spiritualization' which Congar advises us to distrust? All indications seem to point in this direction. But there is, perhaps, something deeper and more difficult to overcome. The impression does indeed exist that in this statement of the problem there is an assumption which should be brought to the surface, namely a certain idea of the spiritual characterized by a kind of western dualistic thought (matter-spirit) foreign to the Biblical mentality. And it is becoming more foreign also to the contemporary mentality. This is a disincarnate 'spiritual', scornfully superior to all earthly realities. The proper way to pose the question does not seem to us to be in terms of 'temporal promise or spiritual promise.' Rather, as we have mentioned above, it is a matter of partial fulfillments through liberating historical events, which are in turn new promises marking the road towards total fulfillment. Christ does not 'spiritualize' the eschatological promises; he gives them meaning and fulfillment today (cf. Luke 4:21); but at the same time he opens new perspectives by catapulting history forward, forward towards total reconciliation. The hidden sense is not the 'spiritual' one, which devalues and even eliminates temporal and earthly realities as obstacles; rather it is the sense of a fullness which takes on and transforms historical reality. Moreover, it is only *in* the temporal, earthly, historical event that we can open up to the future of complete fulfillment.²⁵

There is insight here, of course; but it does not get to the heart of the issue. The New Testament treats the Passover as a paradigm of Christ and his sacrificial death (1 Corinthians 10), and the exodus as a kind of typological anticipation of the great release which Christ's people come to know when they are freed from their sins. This is not a question of the temporal versus the spiritual: the Bible promises a physical resurrection and a new heaven and a new earth. If Christ 'catapults history forward' in anticipation of the ultimate reconciliation, that ultimate hope is dependent upon Christ's return at the end of the age, not on social revolution; and failure to recognize this point reflects a substantial misunderstanding of the 'already/not yet' tension in New Testament eschatology. Moreover, even the exodus event

itself, far from serving as a paradigm of social revolution within a society to transform that society, pictures a people *escaping* that society and forming a new community—and that by the powerful and intervening hand of God. To argue that the miraculous events surrounding the exodus are fulfilled in modern revolution by the oppressed is something like arguing that the proper application of the feeding of the five thousand is the distribution of one's lunch to the poor. There may be in this some remote application somewhere that is not entirely illegitimate; but it rather misses the point. This is not to say there are *no* political implications to the exodus event, but that even from within the framework of an appeal to paradigmatic relationships the 'fit' is not very good. Competent scholarship that appeals to biblical paradigms must be as forthcoming with the discontinuities between a biblical event and the present circumstance, as with the continuities.²⁶ Moreover, one wonders *on what basis* the exodus event is selected as a paradigm for oppressed peoples today. Why not choose, say, the prophetic insistence that the oppressed people of God do not rebel against Nebuchadnezzar? To ask such a question is to expose the methodological bankruptcy of an appeal to mere paradigms, as long as there is not rigorous and even-handed rationale for the choice of paradigm and for the parallels drawn; and this bankruptcy invites us to pay more attention to intra-canonical relationships and to salvation-historical development. We are forced to ask, for instance, what biblical ground, if any, supports the identification of 'church' and 'kingdom of God', or 'social justice' and 'kingdom of God', upon which various theologies depend.²⁷ Again, we are forced to ask *why* some particular metaphor for the church should arbitrarily be given controlling authority.²⁸ I hasten to add that this is not a surreptitious plea to avoid the many passages in Scripture which deal with the oppressed; it is simply an insistence that the salvation-historical lines of thought within the canon must not be overthrown or distorted.

The problem of developing a theology based on a canon with organic growth is not an easy one. The organic model is as good as any. The acorn grows into an oak tree. The botanist who formulates 'the doctrine of the oak tree'—i.e. who writes the definitive tome on oaks—cannot say about acorns everything that he says about oaks; but on the other hand he cannot make the

acorns so central in his account that the oaks are displaced; and certainly he cannot in his account turn the acorns into poplars or machine guns. Canon criticism, if it has been wrong in placing the locus of authority in the *changes* in the tradition rather than in the tradition itself, is right at least in forcing upon us a canonical perspective which forbids the *ad hoc* alignment of some canonical event or discourse with something else that bears no relation to canonical development of revelation.

We urgently need some more creative thought on the relationships between the Testaments; but such thought must be principally submissive to the canon as we have it.

E. THE PROBLEM OF TOO LITTLE SELF-CRITICISM

Writing now as a lecturer in an evangelical seminary, I am only too aware of how often students who propound some thesis become very adept at criticizing the alternative positions but rather weak in the matter of finding awkward spots in their own proposals. Good theses depend on criticism and self-criticism of the most even-handed variety.

The same can be said for good theology. There is no doubt that Western missionaries and theologians have exercised a disproportionate and sometimes thoughtless influence in 'third world' churches; and a great deal more needs to be done to rectify the errors and wrongs. But one also senses in the current climate that rising theologians in some third world situations now wish to turn the tables and make Western churches a whipping boy. Ironically, precisely because of the sensed guilt over previous wrongs, an increasing number of Western theologians not only accept this criticism, but do so without evaluation and in a flood of self-abuse. Little of this is helpful to the cause of Christ, the strengthening of his church or the glory of his name. The more communication develops on a basis of frank and equal partnership between church groups from diverse cultures, the more it is important that criticism and self-criticism be even-handed.

Many other hermeneutical foci could be profitably discussed; but if we manage to make some headway on the points introduced thus far, the gain will already have proved substantial.

NOTES

1. D. A. Carson, 'Hermeneutics: A brief assessment of some recent trends', *Themelios* 5/2 (Jan. 1980) 12-20; reprinted in *ERT* 5 (1981) 8-25.
2. cf idem, 'Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel—After Dodd, What?' *Gospel Perspectives II*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield 1981) 83-145, (esp. pp. 100-104).
3. Among many useful discussions, see *inter alia* Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Exeter 1980); Graham N. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism', *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter 1977) 60-71; Robert C. Roberts, *Rudolf Bultmann's Theology: A Critical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids 1976) esp. pp. 201-215.
4. Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', ET in H.-W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London 1972) 1-44.
5. 'The Church in the Gospel of Matthew: Hermeneutical Analysis of the Current Debate', pp. 45-63.
6. 'Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church', pp. 110-150.
7. 'The Church in African Theology: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis', pp. 151-165.
8. Respectively, 'The Church in the Liberation Theology of Gutiérrez: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis', pp. 166-194, and 'The Church and Social Justice: Underlying Hermeneutical Issues', pp. 195-233.
9. Carson, 'Hermeneutics', 15.
10. cf *inter alia* Thiselton, *Two Horizons*; idem, 'The New Hermeneutic', *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter 1977) 308-333; NIDNTT vol. 1, pp. 573-584; J. I. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Leicester 1983) 325-356, 412-419; and the bibliography cited in these works.
11. Some writers are now introducing 'fourth horizon' terminology; but this refinement need not detain us here.
12. One of the better treatments is that of Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Exeter 1979).
13. David J. Hesselgrave, 'Missionary Psychology and Counseling—A Timely Birth?' *TrinJ* 4 (1983) 72-81.
14. cf esp. M. Parry, 'Studies in the epic technique of oral verse-making. 1. Homer and Homeric style. 2. The Homeric language as the language of an oral poetry', *HSCP* 41 (1930) 73-147; 43 (1932) 1-50; M. Parry and A. B. Lord, *Serbo-croatian heroic songs, I. Novi Pazar: English translations* (Cambridge, MA and Belgrade 1954); A. B. Lord, *The singer of tales* (New York 1968); idem, 'Homer as an oral poet', *HSCP* 72 (1968) 1-46.
15. cf Ruth Finnegan, 'Literacy and literature', *Universals of Human Thought: Some African Evidence*, ed. Barbara Lloyd and John Fay (Cambridge 1981) 234-253, and the literature she cites.
16. I am not saying that human language cannot be used to speak of a transcendent God, nor am I suggesting that human language is entirely adequate for talking about God. One of the better brief treatments of this

- difficult subject is that of John M. Frame, 'God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence', *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis 1974) 159-177.
17. cf D. A. Carson, 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: On the Possibility of Systematic Theology', *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids and Leicester 1983) 65-95, 368-375.
 18. see esp. E. Käsemann, ed., *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen 1970), not least his own essay in that volume, 'Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?' (pp. 124-133).
 19. see esp. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London 1977); and his more recent essay, 'The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture', *Churchman* 96 (1982) 104-122, 201-225.
 20. 'Unity and Diversity'.
 21. esp. *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London 1952).
 22. cf esp. Wayne Grudem, 'Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture', *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids 1983) 19-59, 359-368.
 23. cf NIDNTT vol. 3, pp. 874-902; Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth', *Scripture and Truth*, op. cit. 287-298, 410-411.
 24. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, tr. and ed. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll 1973) 159.
 25. *ibid.* 166-167.
 26. cf esp. the closing pages of the paper by Nuñez in this collection, pp. 166-194.
 27. cf the essay by R. T. France in this volume, 'The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues', 30-44.
 28. cf the paper by Edmund P. Clowney in this collection, 'Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology', 64-109.