

Themelios

An International Journal for Pastors and Students of
Theological and Religious Studies

Volume 5

Issue 2

January, 1980

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How do we interpret the Bible today?

I Howard Marshall

Professor Howard Marshall is an internationally known scholar and speaker. He has lectured for some years at the University of Aberdeen, where recently he was given a chair.

I Some definitions and principles

For the purposes of this paper the term 'interpretation' refers to the whole process of understanding a text and its significance. Sometimes the term 'interpretation' is applied only to understanding the significance of a text, to grasping its meaning for today, or to applying its message to our situation, and some different term is used to cover the task of finding out what the wording of the text means in its original context. We shall use the term to apply to the whole process.

Second, every text of whatever kind needs to be interpreted in order to be understood. My eyes can see before me at the moment a visual impression of what my brain recognises as a rectangular piece of white substance covered with small black marks arranged in regular lines. Were I to show it to a person who is illiterate, that is all that he would understand it to be; he might perhaps know that it was probably 'writing' of some kind, but it would convey nothing to him. I myself can understand the

writing and read what it says because I have been trained to interpret the 'code' that is being employed. But there can be difficulties in the way of understanding. If the particular code being employed is, let us say, Arabic script, then I shall not understand it; at most I may recognise that it is Arabic, but I shall still not know what it says. Or it may be that the handwriting is so poor that I cannot actually make out at first sight the meaning of more than a few words, and it will take a lot of intelligent guess-work to discover what the other words are likely to be. Or again, some of the words may be unknown to me, and I shall need to find out their meanings. Or again, the sentences composed by the words may not convey an intelligible message to me, whether singly or in combination, and again I shall need to puzzle over their meaning. And when I have managed to find out what is being said, I shall still have to find out whether what is said is true or false (and in what sense), what its function is, and what I am supposed to do in the light of it. In practice we do most of these things fairly automatically, and it does not perhaps occur to us that we are actually interpreting all the time in the whole of our activity—not just in reading books, but in looking at pictures and signs, in listening to

sounds and voices, and so on. We cannot avoid interpretation, and perhaps I should add that we cannot avoid misinterpretation. Hence our need is to find the *right* interpretation.

Third, we have already used the phrases 'understanding the significance of a text' and 'finding out what the wording of the text means in its original context'. In various ways we can draw a distinction between what a text means and what it signifies, between what the text said and what it says, and correspondingly we can differentiate between the two activities of 'exegesis' and exposition. As I use these terms, 'exegesis' refers to finding out what a particular text meant in its own context, and 'exposition' to finding out what a particular text signifies for us in our context. For example, it is an interesting test to ask a young person today what the words 'Lévi-Strauss' convey to him. The 'meaning' will not be in too much doubt. It is a personal name, and probably French. But it will depend on your companion's way of life whether it signifies to him a manufacturer of a certain type of denim clothing or a distinguished French anthropologist; there are, of course, students of anthropology who wear denim clothing and who will recognize the ambiguity.

The point is that the meaning of a text is constant and objective, whereas its significance may vary for different readers. The significance depends upon both the text and the readers, and is a function of their mutual interaction. Change the context, and you change the significance. But the meaning is constant, in the sense that by meaning we are referring to what the original author intended the text to say. In theory different interpreters should be able to agree on the meaning of a text; in practice they may not always do so because of lack of the requisite knowledge or skill. It is of special importance to recognize that the significance flows out of the meaning. There can be no by-passing of exegesis on the way to exposition and application.

Fourth, a further factor that has kept cropping up in what I have said has been the idea of context. We have spoken of the original context of a text and the modern context or the reader's context. The context of a text is the situation in which it was created and to which it speaks, and both meaning and significance are dependent upon context. A knowledge of the original context is essential in order to understand a text. A text, taken by itself, can be ambiguous or unintelligible. If I see the letters 'can' on their own and not within the context of a sentence, I may be reasonably sure that they represent either a noun, referring to a particular kind of container, or a verb expressing ability or

capacity to do something, but that is as far as I am able to go; the expression is meaningless unless it forms part of a larger whole. Similarly, the meaning of a text depends on what the words and phrases composing it will mean to the readers. In the same way the original significance will be related to the context of the readers and the present significance will also be dependent on the context of the new set of readers. One is tempted to say that the whole problem of interpretation is the problem of context.

Fifth, we must ask what is the unit of meaning. I have spoken of studying a text without specifying what length a text is. Much exegesis concentrates on the meaning of the single word or the sentence, although we recognize that a unit like a parable must be treated as a whole. But I would emphasize that when we read ordinary books and literature we look for the meaning of the work as a whole, and that we ought to do the same with the books of the Bible or with their larger subdivisions. It is a fault of some evangelical commentaries that, while they explain the difficulties in individual verses, they do not try to tell us what the verses put together in larger units mean, or what a whole chapter or a whole book means. We need to pay more attention to the structure of narrative or argument in any given book.

II The meaning of the text

Let us now try to see how these points relate to the understanding of the Bible. First of all, we have the basic task of getting at the original meaning of the text. Here we have a set of inter-connected processes which it is difficult to set out in a logical order, since the results of any one of them may affect the workings of any other.

Text and Translation

In the case of the Bible we have two special problems which do not arise with the average modern text. One is the establishment of the original text on the basis of the many later manuscripts with their frequent copyists' errors. The second is that of translation. A translation is the result of exegesis, since the aim of the translation is to express in another language the meaning of what the author said in his own language. Anybody who has attempted to do any translation will quickly realize the truth of this, and will find that a provisional translation, on the basis of which he may do some exegesis, will be altered in the light of fuller exegesis. But the situation is an odd one. If we all spoke New Testament Greek like natives, translation would not be necessary, and we might ask

ourselves what is the purpose of exegesis. Presumably it offers a commentary on the text which would explain it for readers who were not able to understand it; one can imagine that people in Corinth might well have asked the messenger who brought Paul's letters to them, 'What does Paul mean by this statement?' What we would then get would be in effect a paraphrase of the text which would remove the obscurity. Indeed a commentary might be said to be a very expanded paraphrase of the text with an explanation of how the paraphrase is arrived at.

Text and context

For brevity's sake let us assume that we have a reliable text and access to a good translation or the original text. Two basic principles arise in ascertaining its meaning. The first is that *all exegesis consists in seeing the text in the light of its context*, whatever that context may be, and a major part of the problem may be to decide what that context is. For example, we have already seen that a word can be understood only in the context of the phrase or sentence in which it occurs; 'can' only becomes meaningful in the sort of context provided by 'I can play the piano' or 'I poured water into the can'. A broader context is provided by linguistic usage. In Luke 6: 35 Jesus tells his disciples to make loans, '*apelpizontes* nothing'. The word *apelpizō* is a puzzle in the sentence. We look elsewhere to see what it means in other contexts and find that elsewhere in the Greek Bible it means to despair. But 'despairing of nothing' doesn't give a very good sense and can hardly be the meaning here; this can be seen in the fact that some scribes rewrote the text to give 'despairing of nobody', which isn't much better. So we look more widely, and discover that from the late fourth century onwards the word is found with the meaning 'to hope for some return'. This gives the required sense, 'without expecting any return', especially because the parallel thought in the preceding verse supports this view. Here is a case where the immediate context of Greek usage shows that this is possible. The interest in this case is that there happens to be no use of the word with this sense recorded for the next 300 years or so, but it is quite possible that this silence is purely fortuitous. Here, then, we see the need to determine the relevant context and to examine it.

The second principle is that *the relation between text and context is a dialectical one*. There is a circular relationship between them, in that the context itself needs to be understood, and part of its context may be the text which interests us. Thus Luke 6: 34 is part of the context for Luke 6: 35,

but Luke 6: 34 is a text which itself needs to be understood and which contains its own difficulties, and part of the context for solving those difficulties is Luke 6: 35. Hence we have to find meanings for the two verses which will fit harmoniously together, and we have to proceed step-by-step, moving backwards and forwards between the two verses. We have what is sometimes called a hermeneutical circle. Verses are understood in the light of the paragraphs in which they stand, and paragraphs in the light of the verses which compose them.

Types of context

We must now list the types of context which need to be examined in exegesis. First, there is the *lexical context*, of which I have already given an example. We need to know about the world of language to which our text belongs, so that we may know what individual words can mean, and how words can be connected together syntactically. Here the lexicon and the grammar are our tools, books which sum up what we know of the relevant areas. The language of the New Testament needs to be compared with various possible areas which include the common Greek of the time, of which we possess much evidence in the papyrus documents discovered in Egypt from the end of last century, and also in the Greek translation of the OT known as the LXX which was in effect the 'Bible' of the early church and shaped its vocabulary and diction.

Second, there is the *ideological context*. If we move beyond words to the concepts which they express, we shall expect that these concepts will be used by an author in ways that his readers will understand and appreciate. For instance, the term 'light' is used both in a literal sense and also in a metaphorical or symbolical sense in the Bible. What ideas would be evoked by its use as a symbol? Does it refer, for example, to guidance in dark and difficult situations, or does it refer to the searching beam which exposes hidden faults and judges us? Is it friendly or threatening? Concepts may have had different meanings and different force in the ancient world from what they have now. The term 'sacrifice' for example, could produce different echoes in the mind of an ancient person from what it would in our minds. Hence understanding of a text requires a knowledge of the thought world of the writer and readers.

A third area of context is the *historical situation* in which the text was framed. If we want to understand 1 Corinthians, we need to realize that Paul wrote it with two purposes in mind. One was to deal with certain faults in the church of which he had received information. The other was to answer

certain specific questions about which the Corinthians had sent a letter to him. If we want to understand the letter we must understand the situation which Paul was addressing. At the same time it is helpful to know as much as we can about Paul's own situation and the way in which his mind worked, so that we can see what led him to express himself in the way he did. Reading a New Testament letter has often been likened to listening in to one end of a telephone conversation, and realizing that in order to understand what we can hear we also need to know what is being said at the other end of the line. In some cases we have other information available to help us to reconstruct it out of Paul's own answers, the very answers that we are trying to understand. Here we have yet another example of a hermeneutical circle. So, then, an important part of context lies in the study of what we call Biblical Introduction.

A fourth type of context is *forme au genre*. Most things that we write are written in a definite form that is part of our social and educational background. If I were to write an account of what I did on Christmas Day, the style in which I would do so would vary depending on whether I was writing a letter to my aunt, or producing a report for a newspaper, or writing a Christmas story for children based on my experiences, or composing a poem about it, or even writing a song about it. There are different styles for these several occasions. So too in the Bible we can recognize different types of composition both on the scale of whole writings and on the scale of brief units within them. It makes a difference to our understanding of a book to know whether it is history or fiction, a letter or an apocalypse; and similarly it makes a difference whether a particular passage is prose or poetry, straight teaching or parable, a command or an example of a type of behaviour. The study of this kind of thing is what we call form criticism, and there is no need to be frightened of the term. It is important to know what kind of material we are reading, since this can greatly affect our understanding of it. At this point we should include attempts to determine the structure of a text, since this may help us to understand the meaning of the whole and the constituent parts.

A fifth type of context is the historical process of composition of the text. Many texts go through various stages in composition. Sometimes there may be two or three preliminary drafts before the writer produces something which he thinks is reasonably satisfactory. A person reading the final version, however, may find it illuminating to look at the earlier stages in order to see how the writer

got there and so to understand better what he is saying. In the case of the books of the Bible there was often a series of stages in composition. Stories about Jesus were remembered and handed down for some years before they were committed to writing. The words of a prophet were first uttered orally, and put into writing only at a later stage. The letters of Paul probably incorporated the kind of things that he said in his preaching. The *history of composition* may be important in understanding the final form of a text. It may also be extremely important in cases where a text conveys a historical report, or some historical incident lies at the root of it. In such cases we want to know whether the report is an accurate one, and a study of tradition-history is essential for this purpose.

The Bible as its own context

The principle of seeing a text in its context would apply to the study of any text, especially an ancient text. When Benjamin Jowett said 'Interpret the Scripture like any other book', his words aroused a storm of controversy. But is it not the case that the methods of study which we have outlined are those that would be applied to 'any other book'? So we must now go on to ask whether anything special happens when we study the Bible.

Perhaps the best known rule for biblical interpretation is *Interpret Scripture in the light of Scripture*. This principle means that the context for understanding a part of Scripture is provided by Scripture as a whole. If I find a difficult verse somewhere, it will be elucidated by looking elsewhere in Scripture. In general this is a safe guide. The lexical field for understanding NT Greek is largely provided by the LXX because the LXX was the Bible of the early church. At the same time, the Old Testament forms the ideological background for the New Testament. The reason is that there was a continuity between the two Testaments in that the early church used and studied the OT and consciously made it the basis of its thinking. In the same way, it is safe to say that the various books of the NT form the context for understanding individual texts, since we are dealing with a community of belief and practice which had an essential unity; we can thus legitimately understand the parts in the light of the whole.

But something more than this must be said to qualify and sharpen the principle. First, Scripture is not the *only* context for understanding individual texts. The biblical writers lived in a world which inevitably influenced both them and their readers, and it cannot be ignored. Even when the NT writers

read the OT they read it, as it were, through Jewish spectacles, and therefore it is essential for us to find out how the Jews read and understood the OT so that we may appreciate how their understanding influenced the early church both positively and negatively. The NT scholar needs to read the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other Jewish documents of the time.

Second, if the NT is to be understood in the light of the OT, is the OT also to be understood in the light of the NT? There is an important sense in which the OT must be understood on its own, since its original writers and readers were not aware of what the NT writers would say, and since the original writers wrote for their own time. This means that we should begin by asking what the OT authors were saying to the people of their own time, and that we should be careful not to come to hasty conclusions based on quotations and interpretations of the OT in the NT. Thus when Matthew regards Ps. 78: 2 as a prophecy of Jesus' teaching in parables, we should not let this close our minds to the question, what did Ps. 78: 2 mean for its original readers centuries before Jesus? But there is also a broader question. It has sometimes been observed how the OT leads up to both the Christian religion and also to the Jewish religion; both Christians and Jews would claim that they are holding fast to the essential message of the OT, and it is at this point that one may see two different total interpretations of the OT are possible; how do we decide which is the correct one, and what effect does adoption of it have on our detailed understanding of the OT?

A third point arises. The principle I have been discussing is sometimes put in the form that if we find a difficult text in the Bible, the key to understanding it will be found in other texts whose meaning is clearer to grasp. It is not quite as simple as that. This approach runs the risk of domesticating the difficult verses and making them harmonize all too easily with the familiar ones. In a detective story all the facts except one may seem to be most easily explained in terms of the theory that X is the murderer, and it is then easy to ignore that one obstinate fact or give it a forced interpretation in line with the other facts. But it could also be the case that this one obstinate fact holds the key to the situation; it leads the detective to see that all the other facts are capable of a different interpretation and that the evidence taken as a whole shows that Y was the guilty party. We must be sure that we do justice to the significance that 'difficult' texts may have for the interpretation of those whose meaning seems to be simple and easy.

The unity and truth of the Bible

The principle that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture is based on an important assumption, or set of assumptions, and it is here that our Christian belief becomes significant. The assumption is that the Scriptures form a unity and that their contents are trustworthy. That is to say, we assume that the Scripture as a whole is a proper context for understanding its various parts. But is this the case?

There is certainly a historical case that the writings of the NT were written within a fixed period of time (somewhere between AD 30 and 100) and that therefore they have the unity which belongs to a group of writings representing the outlook of one particular group of people. It is justifiable to consider them as a corpus separate from Jewish writings during the same period or from second-century Christian writings. The unity of the OT is more complex, since its writings span a much longer period; here we have the only surviving Jewish writings from the period in question, and to that extent they form a historical unity. Later writers regarded these writings as forming a closed 'canon' or collection of authoritative books, not simply because of this historical fact about their composition but also because they were regarded as uniquely inspired.

Recently a book was written on *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* in which J. D. G. Dunn argued that while the different NT writings manifest a unity of thought in the central truths which they express, at the same time they show an astonishing diversity among themselves. Most scholars would recognize that fact. One has only to compare the theological vocabularies of Jesus and Paul, for example, to see that they speak with very different accents. There can be a wide variety in the style of presentation of the same message by different writers. But Dunn's book has proved controversial because it claims that the diversity is a good deal wider than many of us would suppose, and correspondingly the area of unity is somewhat smaller. This raises an issue of great importance. Are the biblical writers in fundamental harmony with one another, or are there irreconcilable differences between them? The believer in the inspiration of the Scriptures will want to argue for the harmony of the Scriptures, and this may well affect the way in which he does his exegesis. In the same way, the believer in inspiration will want to affirm the truth of what the Scriptures say, and clearly there is a big question-mark against the truth of scriptural utterances if there is an *irreconcilable* diversity among them.

The evangelical Christian thus comes to the Bible

with a belief in its harmony and accuracy, and this will affect his exegesis of its meaning. It is here that evangelical exegesis differs from the approaches of other scholars. And yet it must be noted that this approach does not solve all our problems. The evangelical must still ask what kind of unity he is to expect in the Scriptures, and what kind of accuracy he hopes to find in them. There are statements and commands in the OT which require to be modified in the light of NT teaching; there is a historical development in the apprehension of revelation of which we must take account. There are passages in the Bible, such as the accounts of creation and the last days, which were probably never intended to be taken literally as conveying scientific and historical fact, and belief in biblical inspiration does not solve the problem of how to deal with such passages.

III The significance of the text

We must now move on to the second aspect of our task, which is that of determining the significance of the text. The basic principle is that the significance of the text is derived from its original meaning; the meaning determines the significance.

Three false approaches. There are various types of error that arise at this point. The first is the view that once we have determined the meaning, our task is finished: the meaning gives us the original significance, and the original significance is the current significance. In an exaggerated form, the error is that of the person seeking a blessed thought from Scripture who looked in the Scripture at random, and found the text 'Judas went and hanged himself', and then found himself confronted with 'Go and do thou likewise'. There are several errors here, but the basic one is failure to ask whether particular scriptural principles are universal. Much of the criticism of evangelicalism arises from the suspicion that we do not take such differences of context into account.

The second type of error is again one that ignores the original meaning of the text, perhaps because taken literally it appears to be unacceptable, and finds a new meaning by allegorization. If a text is deliberately constructed as an allegory, like *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Gulliver's Travels* or the parable of the sower, the correct way to understand it is as an allegory; we are simply looking for the originally intended meaning. But the allegorization of Scripture that captivated the church in the middle ages fell into two errors. One was that it allegorized passages which were not meant as allegories by their original authors. I suppose that

the justification was that the Holy Spirit intended these passages to be understood as allegories for later readers, but no convincing scriptural proof was ever produced for this theory. The other error was that there were no clear principles enunciated by which the interpreter could know what were the divinely intended allegorical correspondences. The sheer variety of allegorical interpretations proved this up to the hilt. It is no wonder that the Reformers in general condemned allegory and argued for a literal understanding of the text.

The third type of error is one that over-emphasizes the difference between the contexts of the original authors and their audiences, on the one hand, and the context of the modern reader, on the other hand. It is argued that our situation is so different from that of the biblical world that we cannot do a straight re-interpretation of the meaning of the biblical text in order to gain teaching for ourselves. To treat the Bible as evangelicals do, namely as a source of Christian teaching, is an erroneous procedure. Those who adopt this kind of outlook have then to find other, quite different ways of using the Bible. This is the kind of approach taken by D. E. Nineham in *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* or by M. D. Hooker in a recent lecture on 'The Bible and the Believer' (Epworth Review 6:1, Jan 1979, 77-89). Nineham's book contains a great many points but the essential one seems to be that the biblical writers not only lived in a different world from us but also thought in such a different way from us that we cannot use the Bible as a source of teaching from which to read off the answers to our questions by way of suitable translational procedures; along with this point he makes the further one that the sheer variety of biblical thinking makes it impossible for us to use the Bible as a teaching source. Hooker's article takes the same general approach and makes the point that the centre of Christianity is Christ, not the Bible, and that we are in danger of stressing the written word more than the living presence of the Spirit. The Bible is like a series of signposts set up to destinations to which we may not be going, but by seeing how it functions in this way, we may be able to gain guidance and help on our journey. Both authors affirm the importance of exegesis and understanding the text, but they are disputing that the meaning intended by the original authors can be the basis for theological statements for today. Neither is denying that the Bible is a source of Christian insight, and hence of great value; their quarrel is with any attempt to regard it as a textbook of theological statements, or, even worse, as a code of rules for Christian living. For them the

Bible is not a source of authoritative truth; Hooker sums up by saying 'The method of Bible Study which assumes that we should first ask "What did it mean for them then?" and then "What does it mean for us now?" may be far too simple. It is often very difficult to discover what it meant for them then; and we cannot assume that a particular way of understanding the truth will necessarily mean anything for us today' (op. cit., 86f).

What is wrong with this view? First, it adopts a view of Scripture contrary to that of evangelical Christianity, claiming that the variety in biblical teaching is of such a character that the different authors contradict one another. I have already indicated that I do not share this opinion, although I must stress that this view needs some detailed substantiation. Second, I question whether the biblical writers thought in as different a manner from us as Nineham alleges. My impression is that Nineham thoroughly over-emphasizes the differences between the ancient world and the modern world and under-stresses the elements of continuity between them. The particular points which cause him difficulty are the biblical writer's lack of attention to secondary causes and their belief in supernatural phenomena, including particularly the activity of demonic forces. He makes effective use of the point that when somebody falls to the ground in a fit, we don't summon an exorcist but rather a doctor, and we should not be too hasty in replying that of course we believe in the demonic and cite a few examples to prove it; the point is that in the majority of cases we still summon the doctor first and find that his kind of treatment is effective without recourse to the exorcist. It is important for us to tackle the problem of this kind of thinking, and to ask how far biblical thinking is controlled by it, and how our thinking may differ. Here I should comment that in the Bible the activity of the Holy Spirit is expressed in a way that is analogous to the way in which the activity of demonic spirits is conceived; if in practice we assign little place to the demonic, are we being inconsistent in retaining our belief in the parallel activity of the Spirit? It may well be that when the matter is put this way, our response should be to say that we must let our modern scientific thinking be corrected by the biblical way of thinking, just as we insist that the biblical understanding of miracles must prevail over any modern closed-universe type of outlook. Nevertheless, it is possible that we may feel that we need to express in different categories of thought what the Bible expresses in its own categories. Some kind of translation may be needed, but it is not the case that the biblical way of thinking is so differ-

ent from ours that it cannot be translated at all.

At the same time, I should want to stress the close similarities between biblical thinking and our thinking, which are not, I think, wholly due to the fact that as Christians our thinking has been strongly moulded by the Bible. The point is that, like other literature from the past, the Bible presents a picture of man and the human situation which rings true in the modern world and offers a diagnosis of our maladies which is profoundly true and relevant. Its prescription for our maladies deserves equal respect.

These comments are inadequate, but show some of the problems raised by Nineham and others which we must not duck but which are in my view insufficient to make us reject our view of Scripture.

We come back, therefore, to the point that we have to discover the meaning of a scriptural text and then ask what its contemporary significance is.

Unintelligible teaching. First, in some cases we may find that the biblical teaching is not intelligible to modern people because the way in which it is expressed is unfamiliar to them. One can easily think of situations in which biblical concepts mean something different to modern people because of the associations they have acquired, for example, the case of the child with a brutal father for whom the idea of God as Father is disastrously misleading. In such cases translation of *concepts is required*.

Unacceptable teaching. Second, there may be cases where biblical teaching is unacceptable to modern people. Biblical teaching on creation or on the sinfulness of man may need to be defended against views based on scientific materialism and humanistic optimism, and these latter views may be strongly defended by appeals to appropriate evidence and reasoning. In such cases, the Christian must be sure that what he defends as biblical doctrine truly is biblical. He is not, for example, necessarily called on to defend creation in seven (or rather, six) literal days or to deny the evidence of geology. But he must be prepared to stand firm for biblical faith, however unpopular it may be, and however unconvincing it may appear to the dominant materialism of the age. The measure of biblical truth is not necessarily what modern, non-Christian man is able to believe.

The need for new models. Third, there may be cases where the biblical way of expressing doctrinal statements needs translation into other forms of statement. (This point is similar to my first one, which dealt with terms that are now misleading and

inadequate.) All our knowledge of God is analogical in character, and hence biblical statements have the character of models of divine reality and action (just as scientific statements are often no more than models of physical realities). It may be that sometimes we can substitute other models for the biblical ones, always provided that when we do so, it will be possible to translate the new models back into the biblical form and get back to where we started from. (The test of an accurate translation is retranslation!) For example, there are a number of passages where Jesus Christ is said to intercede for us with the Father (Rom. 8: 34; 1 Jn. 2: 1). The biblical writers are using the model or analogy of intercession by a human advocate to indicate that Jesus pleads with the Father to forgive our sins. But this model would suggest that the Father needed to be persuaded by the Son to forgive us, whereas the same biblical writers know full well that it was the Father's love for sinners which caused Him to send His Son into the world to be our Saviour. Hence the 'model' is revealed as being nothing more than a model which in a sense simplifies the actual position and does not do justice to every aspect of the reality. In such a case we may feel that other models could be substituted for the biblical one in order that the one-sided character of the biblical one, taken on its own apart from the balance provided by other biblical teaching, may not mislead the unwary.

A more important issue is that of 'heaven'. The Bible conceives of this in spatial terms as 'up there', and the story of the ascension suggests that heaven is simply remote spatially from the world, far above us. But other biblical teaching speaks of the nearness and omnipresence of God as Spirit and the idea of a spatially remote heaven is not easy to square with modern cosmology. In this situation we may feel that, for example, the notion of heaven as being located in some kind of 'fourth dimension' 'outside' (note how difficult it is to get away from spatial terms!) our space-time co-ordinates is more helpful. If so, we shall have to say either that the story of the ascension is a mythical way of expressing the transference of Jesus from one dimension of existence to another (and thus that the ascension did not happen in the way recorded by Luke) or that the event was an acted parable which expressed this transfer in a way that the disciples (who knew nothing of other dimensions) could comprehend. I personally find this latter way of looking at the event helpful, and the whole concept of a spiritual dimension is extremely valuable in other areas also.

the problem of doctrinal statements I turn, fourth, to cases where the application of biblical commands and exhortations causes difficulties in the modern world. The difficulty is usually that a literal fulfilment of the command is inappropriate in our culture in the modern world as a means of expressing the principle that lies behind it. Not only so, but there are various contemporary situations for which there is no direct biblical guidance provided. In such cases we need to go behind the biblical commands and ask what underlying principle they express, and then we must re-express them in ways that are appropriate in our situation. One obvious example of a command that it is difficult to carry out literally in the modern western world is that of washing one another's feet. Not only are there practical difficulties about this thanks to changes in ways of female dress but also the action no longer has the symbolical value which it had in the time of Jesus. It is therefore necessary to ask why Jesus gave the command, to recognize the injunction to love and humility which lies behind it, and then to find ways of showing these qualities in a modern context. Similarly, to take the hackneyed example, the wearing of a veil by women is not usual today, nor does it have the symbolical value which it had in ancient Corinth; it is, therefore, foolish to demand literal obedience to it today, and since the wearing of hats today does not have the symbolical value of the veil in the ancient world, even that slight touch of modernization does not meet the need. On the other side of the same question, the Bible does not give us direct information about how to behave as members of a trade union, since these were unknown in the ancient world, and practical guidance can be obtained only by extrapolation from biblical principles originally given in other contexts. To say this is not of course to deny that much biblical teaching can be directly applied to the modern situation without much or any change. The need for reapplication should not be exaggerated.

Making a fresh impact. There is a fifth type of problem that should be mentioned. There are numerous cases where the biblical teaching fails to make its intended impact upon us because of our over-familiarity with it, or because the emotional force of the words fails to reach us. Some of the imagery in the Song of Solomon is not at all appropriate for expressing endearment. No modern wife is going to be flattered by: 'Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an arsenal, whereon hang a thousand bucklers, all of them shields of warriors' (Cant. 4: 4). We have all heard the

Underlying principles and fresh applications. From

parables so often that the element of surprise which was one of Jesus' most powerful weapons fails to make any impression upon us. We need, therefore, not only to translate the meaning of the text into terms understandable today, but also to find ways of getting across its literary effect. A direct accusation of David for murdering Uriah and taking his wife would have had little effect in convicting the king of the sinfulness of his deed and bringing him to repentance; the novel approach that Nathan took when he told his parable had the

desired effect. We face the same problem as Nathan did in getting across the Christian message to people who may be over-familiar with it, or who think that they know it and have made up their minds against responding to it.

Here, then, are various ways in which we may need to deal with the problem of communicating the significance of the biblical message today. Our treatment has inevitably been sketchy, but perhaps it may at least serve as a stimulus to a more thorough investigation.

Hermeneutics: A brief assessment of some recent trends

D. A. Carson

Don Carson is a teacher at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School at Deerfield. He has contributed to a number of journals and works and is well known as a scholar and speaker.

Background

The recent explosion of interest in hermeneutics should not be taken to mean that the subject was of no concern before 1950. One of the most profitable ways for the student to approach the subject is by studying its history.¹ Every debate in the history of the church is conditioned in part by hermeneutical considerations; and those happy souls who naively think they can without loss avoid such considerations and 'just believe the Bible' in fact adopt all sorts of hermeneutical stances un-awares. Although hermeneutical positions *alone* do not necessarily determine one's theological conclusions in advance, the role they play is much larger than is often allowed.

Especially in the North American context, evangelicals still rely very largely on the conservative works of Ramm² and Mickelsen,³ and to some

extent on the reprints of Berkhof⁴ and Terry.⁵ These works are largely unknown outside North American evangelical circles: a recent and invaluable bibliography, prepared in Britain,⁶ lists only Mickelsen. Nevertheless these books have some important things to say, however dated they may be. They treat the Scriptures as the given, the thing to be studied, and then trace out the principles by which various forms, figures and topics in the Scripture should be understood—parables, diverse poetical forms, typology, apocalyptic language, assorted figures of speech, riddles and fables. Moreover they include some reflection on the use of the Bible for establishing doctrine, and on the piety, devotion or spirituality of the interpreter engaged in his hermeneutical task. Hermeneutics in these works is conceived primarily as the enunciation of principles of interpreting the sacred text, principles largely derived from previously

¹ See, for example, the 1885 Bampton Lectures of F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1886); and, more recently, R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

² B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Text-book of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956).

³ A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

⁴ L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: Evangelical Press, 1950).

⁵ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, repr. 1974).

⁶ *Viz.*, the bibliography at the end of *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977).

established epistemological, philological and literary categories.

In the past, evangelical writers have sometimes designated their approach to interpreting the Bible as 'grammatico-historical' exegesis, over against the 'historical-critical' method; but by and large the four works cited avoid the pitfalls implicit in such distinctions. Ramm, for instance, takes pains to defend the word 'critical', defining it to mean 'that any interpretation of Scripture must have adequate justification. The grounds for the interpretation must be made explicit',⁷ whether these grounds are lexical, historical, grammatical, theological, geographical, or whatever. For Ramm, the critical approach stands in opposition, not to orthodoxy, but to highly personal interpretations, or to interpretations determined arbitrarily, dogmatically, or speculatively.

These works are dated (Mickelsen's less so); but their understanding of hermeneutics as the study of principles used to interpret the given text to determine its meaning, in a simple subject-object relationship, constitutes both their strength and their weakness. Their approach may appear simplistic in the light of the later developments I shall survey in a moment; but they preserve some invaluable emphasis too easily sacrificed on the altar of hermeneutical fads for which *exclusive* claims are temporarily made. It is very refreshing to observe that in a very recent book, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*,⁸ Robert H. Stein focuses attention on some of the same interpretive questions as these older books, albeit in an up-to-date context.

For introductory surveys of developments in hermeneutics, largely outside evangelical circles,⁹ one may turn with profit to the books by C. E.

Braaten,¹⁰ W. G. Doty,¹¹ and R. W. Funk.¹² In what follows I shall survey five large areas of discussion in contemporary hermeneutical debates, but restrict bibliography to representative works. The presentation will be largely descriptive, only occasionally evaluative, until the concluding section, which attempts to assess these developments.

Modern Literary Tools

Seventeen years ago Otto Kaiser and Werner G. Kümmel collaborated to write a little book which, in English translation, was titled, *Exegetical Method: A Student's Handbook*.¹³ Although the book avoided terms like 'source criticism', 'form criticism', 'tradition criticism', 'redaction criticism', 'audience criticism', and the like, in fact it included a gentle, low-key introduction to these and other literary tools. The same year that the English translation put in an appearance, George Eldon Ladd came out with his *The New Testament and Criticism*,¹⁴ essentially a competent effort to introduce conservative students to the legitimate aspects of literary criticism, coupled with the occasional warning about the dangers. Over the years, several publications have attempted to introduce students to one or more of the modern literary 'criticisms', no series being as widely received as the one published by Fortress.¹⁵ Now, I. Howard Marshall has edited a symposium entitled *New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Principles and Methods*.¹⁶

It is important to grasp the development that this book represents. When these literary tools were first introduced, they did not make their appearance as hermeneutical principles but as ways of getting behind the Gospels as we have them in order to illumine the 'tunnel' period and perhaps learn something more about the historical Jesus. To use these tools at that stage usually meant buying into a large conceptual framework concerning the descent of the tradition—a framework with which evan-

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁸ (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

⁹ Within evangelical circles, little development has taken place in the area of hermeneutics, aside from the work of a handful of men. What has been written has often been for in-house consumption, not infrequently in the area of prophecy: e.g. Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), a book as remarkable for its ignorance of primary sources as for its *non sequiturs*; J. Wilmut, *Inspired Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Swengel: Reiner, 1975), a book with a very different eschatological perspective, but sometimes guilty of generating more heat than light. Even the more responsible books in the area are designed primarily for lay persons: e.g. P. E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque, ed., *Dreams, Visions and Oracles: The Layman's Guide to Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

¹⁰ C. E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

¹¹ W. G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

¹² R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

¹³ (tr. E. V. N. Goetchius; New York: Seabury, 1967; German, 1963).

¹⁴ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

¹⁵ Some of these have been published in the UK by SPCK: e.g., N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970); cf. also E. V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). Cf. also R. S. Barbour, *Tradition-Historical Criticism of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1972).

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*

gelicals (and many others, for that matter) were bound to differ.

Yet in the case of the Synoptic Gospels, at least, we have enough comparative material to be certain there are literary borrowings; identifiable forms whose history can be traced, however tentatively; and demonstrable re-arranging and shaping of the pericopae to support certain theological ends. The literary 'criticisms' were not necessarily evil after all; they became increasingly acceptable as *exegetical* tools, devices to enable us better to understand the text.

Now, however, we have moved one stage further. Traditionally, 'exegesis' was the actual study of the text in order to determine its meaning, and 'hermeneutics' the principles by which one attempted to perform 'exegesis'. But Marshall's book is subtitled, *Essays in Principles and Methods*: have the literary 'criticisms' been upgraded to the status of hermeneutical principles or has the word 'hermeneutics' broadened its semantic range? It is no accident that Marshall, in introducing the questions to be studied by the contributors, calls them 'hermeneutical questions'.¹⁷ Of course, since in the traditional distinction both 'exegesis' and 'hermeneutics' deal with the interpretation of Scripture, there is some legitimate semantic overlap; but we shall discover that one of the corollaries of modern 'hermeneutical' debate is that the word 'hermeneutics' is skidding around on an increasingly broad semantic field.

More than the semantic range of a word is at stake; for as 'literary tools' become 'hermeneutical principles', they are upgraded not simply in dignity and in their ability to dominate the discussion, but in their ability to dominate what is legitimate in interpretation. That is not itself bad; but the situation is worsened by the fact that these 'hermeneutical principles' are frequently handled, outside believing circles, as if they enable us to practise our interpretive skills with such objective distance that we never come under the authority of the God whose Word is being interpreted, and never consider other personal, moral and spiritual factors which have no less 'hermeneutical' influence in our attempts to interpret the text. And not all the contributors to this volume have escaped these malign influences.¹⁸

The New Hermeneutic

For the student brought up on traditional hermeneutics, the 'new hermeneutic' is an extremely

difficult subject to get hold of. The writings of Gadamer, Fuchs, Ebeling¹⁹ and others are not easy, even in English translation; and many of their essays have not been translated. English expositions of the new hermeneutic have been prepared by, *inter alios*, Robinson and Cobb²⁰ and by Walter Wink.²¹ Two articles by A. C. Thiselton²² and another by Richard B. Gaffin²³ provide helpful introductions to the subject.

According to the exponents of the new hermeneutic, the starting-point for understanding any text is the recognition of the common humanity and historicity of the text's author and the text's interpreter. The point was made by Schleiermacher, and is related to Bultmann's conception of *Vorverständnis*. As developed by Bultmann's students, this common historicity dismisses the nineteenth-century claims to sheer objectivity in interpretation, and establishes a pattern of dialogue: the interpreter asks questions of the text out of his own psychological, historical, cultural limitations, and finds that the text, in answering his questions subtly *changes* his psychological, historical, cultural condition. As a result, the next round of questions posed by the interpreter is somewhat different—as indeed are the answers and implicit questions provided by the text. This sets up a 'hermeneutical circle'. The interpreter recognizes the 'distance' between himself and the text (not least in documents written twenty centuries or more before he was born, in different languages and cultures!), and seeks to come to common horizons with the author of the text by means of this dialogue.

So far, so good. However, as this new hermeneutic is normally expounded, both the interpreter *and the*

¹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975). Of the many works by Fuchs and Ebeling, cf. esp.: E. Fuchs, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. I: *Zum hermeneutischen Problem in der Theologie: Die existentielle Interpretation* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965); *idem*, *Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970); *idem*, several essays in *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964); G. Ebeling, *God and Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); *idem*, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (London: Collins, 1973); *idem*, several essays in *Word and Faith* (London: SCM, 1963).

²⁰ James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, ed., *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). Cf. also P. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

²¹ W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

²² A. C. Thiselton, 'Explain etc.' in NIDNTT I, esp. pp. 582-584; *idem*, 'The New Hermeneutic,' in I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation*, op. cit., pp. 308-333.

²³ 'Contemporary Hermeneutics and the Study of the New Testament,' in J. H. Skilton, ed., *Studying the New Testament Today* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), pp. 3-18.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Cf. especially V. Poythress, 'New Testament Interpretation,' *WTJ* 41 (1978-79), pp. 190-201.

text are swallowed up in a sea of historical relativity. In interpreting the text, the interpreter finds that the text interprets him. As horizons are increasingly shared and an *Einverständnis* (Fuchs' term, rendered either by 'common understanding' or by 'empathy') develops, the text is capable of grasping hold of the interpreter and radically altering his thinking by introducing something shocking and unexpected. Fuchs treats the parables in particular this way. The language of the text becomes a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*) by challenging the interpreter toward 'authentic human existence'. Moreover, the 'hermeneutical circle' thus set up has no necessary *terminus*: it is not the objective meaning of the text that is the goal, since the text is considered to be no more 'objective' than the interpreter. 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. Obviously that might be a different thing for a different person, or different things for the same person at different times, or different things for different generations of students of Scripture. Moreover, to share common horizons does not entail shared world-views. The 'distance' between text and interpreter is, as I have indicated, repeatedly stressed.²⁴ A Bultmann may discount the possibility of supernatural phenomena in coming to grips with texts abounding in reports of such phenomena; but modern exponents of the new hermeneutic would point out not only that the adoption of supernatural categories by the first century writers is historically conditioned but so also is Bultmann's rejection of the same. It makes no difference: provided Bultmann and the text develop *Einverständnis*, it is possible for *Sprachereignis* to take place. This is the true 'meaning' of the text; and it is the goal of the new hermeneutic.

This painfully brief summary of the new hermeneutic verges on the simplistic; yet it should be obvious that there is much of merit in these developments, even if there is not less of demerit. The new hermeneutic is certainly a welcome antidote to nineteenth and early twentieth-century belief in the impartiality and neutrality of the interpreter, the Enlightenment commitment not only to human autonomy but also to the capacity of human reason to achieve, by itself, objective knowledge. Moreover, the new hermeneutic, when utilized within a less sceptical framework, offers valuable insights

into the parables and other forms of Biblical language, enabling us to sense again the shock of the first hearers, the first readers of Scripture. The danger engendered by our very familiarity with them is thereby partially overcome.

Nevertheless it must be clearly understood that the term 'hermeneutics' (or, to be pedantic, 'hermeneutic') is undergoing a considerable semantic shift. We are now no longer interested in the principles whereby an interpreter attempts to understand the meaning of a text within its original context. Rather, hermeneutics becomes the discipline by which we examine how a thought or event in one cultural and religious context becomes understandable in another cultural and religious context. In Thiselton's terms, 'Whilst the new hermeneutic rightly faces the problem of how the interpreter may understand the text of the New Testament more deeply and creatively, Fuchs and Ebeling are less concerned about how he may understand it correctly.'²⁵ Of course, to word a criticism of the new hermeneutic in this way is to accept what is regularly denied, viz. that there is a 'correct' interpretation to be pursued. If the new hermeneutic and her twin sister the new history have delivered us from believing in our own omniscience and impartiality, they must not be permitted to seduce us into thinking we can enjoy *no* true and certain knowledge of objective truths and events. If they have delivered us from the false notion that a historical record may be exhaustively true (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) and have taught us that historical records, including the documents which constitute Scripture, are at best partial statements, partial interpretations; nevertheless they must not be permitted to seduce us into thinking that partial knowledge is necessarily false knowledge. Finite human beings may know truly, even if they cannot know exhaustively. The study of history is the study of objective phenomena, akin to geology if not to physics, as Passmore has brilliantly argued.²⁶

It follows, then, that the new hermeneutic pursues 'what is true for me' at the expense of 'what is true'. Theology proper becomes impossible. It is not for

²⁵ A. C. Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic,' *art. cit.*, p. 323. One cannot help wryly observing that the editor of this volume, I. H. Marshall, has wisely included this essay not under the second section, 'The Use of Critical Methods in Interpretation', nor under the third, 'The Task of Exegesis', but under the fourth 'The New Testament and the Modern Reader'.

²⁶ J. A. Passmore, 'The Objectivity of History,' in W. H. Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York/London: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 75-94. Cf. also the important work by Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976).

²⁴ This is one of the chief characteristics of the new hermeneutic, according to C. F. Evans, 'Hermeneutics,' *Epworth Review* 2 (1975), pp. 81-93.

nothing that the first volume of Fuchs' collected essays bears for its subtitle *Die existentielle Interpretation*. Among the things overlooked by such an approach is the possibility that the transcendent, personal God has chosen to reveal himself at historical intervals in both events and in propositions. At the strictly hermeneutical level, the exponents of the new hermeneutic overlook the crucial distinctions between 'meaning' and 'significance' ably advanced by Hirsch.²⁷ To say that the 'meaning' of such and such a text is the claim it makes upon me in the *Sprachereignis* of the hermeneutical encounter is to adopt an approach which, were it applied to the writings of the exponents of the new hermeneutic, would dissolve their work in a sea of subjectivity. They have written to be understood, to convey information and theories which they regard as true and important: is it too much to suppose that some of the Biblical writers entertained similar intentions? And when we accept the Scriptures' own perspective and hold that God himself addresses us by the words of Scripture, it does not seem too bold to think that God has something to say—that is, that there is intent in the text, meaning which must be discovered, however many secondary significances there may be and however far such secondary significances may sometimes lead us astray from that meaning. If the new hermeneutic forces us to an awareness of these diverse significances, and helps us hear the Word of God afresh by challenging our alleged objectivity, it will have served us well. But if the new hermeneutic denies that writers, including God, have intent and can convey meaning, it is but another faddish aberration in theology.

Canon Criticism and Hermeneutics

One may wonder why canon criticism and hermeneutics belong together. Perhaps they wouldn't, had it not been for the fact that J. A. Sanders, one of the leading proponents of canon criticism, was asked to write the article on 'Hermeneutics' in the new *Supplement* to IDB.

Sanders claims that, as used today, the term 'hermeneutics' 'signifies (1) the principles, rules, and techniques whereby the interpreter of a text attempts to understand it in its original context [i.e., the classical definition]; (2) the science of discerning how a thought or event in one cultural context may be understood in a different cultural context [i.e., a definition associated with the new

hermeneutic]; and (3) the art of making the transfer [the direction in which Sanders himself is moving].'²⁸

After sketching in the rise of the new hermeneutic, Sanders insists that the task today, the challenge ahead, is 'canonical hermeneutics'.²⁹ Essentially, this is the study of the means whereby early authoritative traditions were utilized by Israel (in the Old Testament) and the Church (in the New Testament) to span the gaps of time and culture to be re-formed according to the needs of the new believing communities. The process itself is as canonical as the traditions found in the canon. *Canonical hermeneutics* is thus 'the means whereby early believing communities pursued, and later believing communities may yet pursue, the integrity (oneness) of God, both ontological and ethical.'³⁰

It would take us too far afield to detail the principles and rules which Sanders enumerates. What must be pointed out, however, is that Sanders focuses not on what the text says, but on how the traditions are transformed from generation to generation. 'Hermeneutics,' he writes, 'is as much concerned with the contexts in which biblical texts were and are read or recited as with the texts themselves. It is in this sense that one must insist that the Bible is not the Word of God. The Word is the point that is made in the conjunction of text and context, whether in antiquity or at any subsequent time. Discernment of context, whether then or now, is thus crucial to biblical interpretation.'³¹

Sanders is partly right in what he affirms, and certainly wrong in what he denies. His emphasis on keeping an eye on context is most helpful, especially from the pastoral point of view. A man careless in prayer might better hear Luke 18 than Matthew 6; a man given to thinking that God hears him and blesses him in proportion to his much speaking, the reverse. Recently Longenecker has studied the 'faith of Abraham' theme in the New Testament and, noting the rich diversity of emphasis, has underscored the 'circumstantial' nature of the New Testament documents.³² But to establish as normative the *changes* in tradition, and not the content

²⁸ IDB *Supp.*, p. 402. The rich literature on canon criticism, springing in part from the biblical theology movement, is too extensive to be treated here. But I cannot forbear to mention the latest (and magisterial) volume by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). This substantial work is immensely suggestive; but it arrived too late for consideration in this paper.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

³¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1967). Cf. also his *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

³² R. N. Longenecker, 'The "Faith of Abraham" Theme in Paul, James and Hebrews: A Study in the Circumstantial Nature of New Testament Teaching,' *JETS* 20 (1977), pp. 203-312.

(with all due regard for the varying contexts) is certainly a false step. Contexts are not as easy to retrieve as Sanders intimates. Moreover, Sanders' approach looks good when it is applied to attitudes and morals, but it is extremely difficult to see how it could establish much doctrine—which is the first purpose of Scripture to be listed at 2 Tim. 3: 16.

In any case, the term 'hermeneutics' as Sanders wants us to use it establishes principles, not for understanding or obeying the text *per se*, but for isolating 'conjunctions of text and context' in such a way that modern parallels may be guided aright. However, unless the text itself is normative in some sense, it is not easy to believe that the *conjunction* of text and context should have any normative status or authoritative value.

Structuralism

For the unwary, structuralism is a minefield of explosive and sensitive topics, laced with the barbed wire of an esoteric language and pitted with deep unknowns. I cannot hope to introduce the subject here; but fortunately three recent essays, one of them in the pages of an earlier number of this journal, have undertaken the challenge.³³ These three essays are not redundant: structuralism is such a vast field, and the ways of approaching it so numerous, that perhaps it is not too surprising how little they overlap. To plumb the subject it is necessary to go back at least as far as de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, and, in linguistics, to the work of Noam Chomsky.³⁴ From there one may move forward to a veritable flood of literature.³⁵

³³ V. Poythress, 'Structuralism and Biblical Studies,' *JETS* 21 (1978), pp. 221-237; A. C. Thiselton, 'Keeping up with Recent Studies II. Structuralism and Biblical Studies: Method or Ideology?' *ExpT* 89 (1977-78), pp. 329-335; Carl Armending, 'Structural Analysis,' *Themelios* 4 (1979), pp. 96-104. Cf. also V. Poythress, 'Philosophical Roots of Phenomenological and Structuralist Literary Criticism,' *WTJ* 41 (1978-79), 165-171.

³⁴ I cannot forbear to mention also a virulent attack on the latter: I. Robinson, *The New Grammarians' Funeral: A critique of Noam Chomsky's linguistics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975).

³⁵ To list but a few examples, all in English: D. Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); J. Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976); J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler, ed., *Rhetorical Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); R. M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977); R. Detweiler, *Story, Sign and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary-Critical Methods* (Missoula: Scholars, 1978); P. Pettit, *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976); R. Barthes et al., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); S. Wittig, ed., *Structuralism: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975); A. M. Johnson, Jr, ed. and

Structuralism is extraordinarily difficult to define. At one level it does little more than examine literary structures (e.g. chiasm, repetition, various kinds of narrative interchange), often in terms of set roles, schematized plots, and binary oppositions, in order the better to understand a biblical passage.³⁶ As such it becomes another hermeneutical tool, nothing more. However, the nerve centre of structuralism is at the other end of the spectrum. This radical structuralism, if I may so label it, no longer assumes that truth from Scripture (or any other piece of writing) derives from the intent of its authors, and that such intent may be discovered by patient, painstaking literary and historical analysis. Structuralism, or structural analysis, seeks truth at quite another level. Structuralists hold that the study of the relationships among words and themes reveals codes, codes which reflect the 'deep structures' of the human brain and which, potentially, could enable researchers to map the human mind. As these codes are revealed most clearly in language, the relationship between linguistics and structuralism is a very close one. Structural analysts of the extreme sort disavow the historical critical method,³⁷ focus on the text as a whole made up of constituent parts which may be analyzed and classified, in the hope of decoding the text into a series of structures of increasing abstraction, leading ultimately to the deep structures. Here there is strong, anti-historical bias, dismissal of diachronics, and little concern with what the text says at the 'surface' level.

The literature already cited attempts to list some of the strengths and weaknesses of structuralism: I shall not repeat them here. There are only two things I want to emphasize. The first is that structuralism in its radical form is offering a total package, a wholistic method of approaching Scripture (and other literature) which at its most virulent renders the historical irrelevant and provides a *method* for avoiding the transcendent at every level. The second is perhaps more important yet. So far proponents of existential hermeneutics and the new hermeneutic have denied the relevance of

transl., *The New Testament and Structuralism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976). Most of the fascicles of *Semeia* have also been given over to structural analysis of one sort or another.

³⁶ E.g., B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2: 1-11 and 4: 1-42* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1974). Not a few of the essays appearing in *Semeia* are of this sort. Cf. also the studies by P. Auffret which have appeared from time to time in *NTS*, *VT*, *RevQum* and elsewhere.

³⁷ One of the strongest statements to this effect is by B. W. Kovacs, 'Philosophical Foundations for Structuralism,' *Semeia* 10 (1978), pp. 85-105.

structural analysis to their own studies and see it merely as an alternative way of approaching the text. Recently, however, Edgar V. McKnight, in a brilliant book entitled *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics*,³⁸ has convincingly shown how the two approaches are necessarily linked. Such linking, as it is worked out in the future, will offer our generation some of the toughest hermeneutical challenges ever faced.

Once again it is worth stressing that I am referring only to one extreme but vociferous group of structuralists. As far as I am able to discern, most structural analysts—e.g. the majority of those contributing specific examples to *Semeia*—have not developed an exclusive approach to structuralism which turns more on ideology than method. Despite the arbitrariness of much structural exegesis, there are nevertheless important lessons to be learned; and the field is wide open for mature, programmatic assessment.³⁹ Just as we refuse to think that we have a corner on all truth, we must equally refuse to think that we have nothing to learn from developments of a hermeneutical nature.

The Maier/Stuhlmacher Debate

Gerhard Maier and Peter Stuhlmacher have for some time been involved in an important debate over the historical-critical method. Each man has a book on the subject, translated into English, where the essence of his position is presented,⁴⁰ although in fact the debate has waged beyond the pages of the two books.⁴¹

Both of these books deserve thoughtful reading. Maier argues that the historical-critical method is an invalid approach to the Bible because it is not suited to its subject matter, *viz.* divine revelation. The problem, he affirms, is that the historical-critical method becomes the historical-critical method: *i.e.* the emphasis comes to be placed on the interpreter's autonomous intellect and assessment of what he feels he can or cannot accept from God. This inevitably leads to some form of 'canon within the canon', a concept which Maier devastatingly exposes for the ambiguous and useless category it is.

The only proper approach to the Bible is to accept its claim and operate on that basis. Twice

³⁸ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

³⁹ Cf. the preliminary conclusions of A. C. Thiselton, 'Keeping up,' *art. cit.*, pp. 334f.

⁴⁰ G. Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St Louis: Concordia, 1977); P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

⁴¹ Earlier essays were published in German in *ZTK* and *ZNW*; and a continuing debate has been carried on in *Theologische Beiträge*.

he refers to John 7:17 as the touchstone of his approach: *credo ut intellegam* [I believe in order to understand], he insists; not *credo, quia intellego* [I believe because I understand].⁴² Maier in these passages comes perilously close to basing his adoption of the position that all of the canon is itself the very Word of God, on his understanding of John 7:17. John Piper, in criticizing Maier in this regard,⁴³ is correct in pointing out that John 7:17 in its context has nothing to do with *establishing normative Scripture*, but with a person's desires in discerning whether or not Jesus' teachings are in conformity with the will of God already revealed; but perhaps Piper is over-reacting when he accuses Maier of a simplistic fideism which is not guided by knowledge. Maier, after all, includes substantial sections of his book, proportionately speaking, to what the Scriptures claim for themselves, what the scope of the canon is, how to approach alleged contradictions and scientific errors, and the like.

What Maier wants to do is replace the historical-critical method with what he calls the 'historical-Biblical' method. He concludes his volume by outlining the specific elements he defines as constitutive of the method.

Peter Stuhlmacher is scarcely less upset with recent developments in theology than Maier himself; yet he reserves his strongest language for disagreement with Maier. Stuhlmacher wants to preserve the historical-critical method, but with two important *caveats*. He insists that the notion of absolute 'objectivity' be scrapped (here he leans on Schleiermacher and Gadamer); and he appeals for what he calls a 'hermeneutics of consent'. By this he means that the historical-critical method must not be applied to the Bible in such a way that analogical arguments rule out *a priori* the possibility of supernatural events, of unique events; rather, the interpreter 'consents' to leave himself open to the possibility of 'transcendence'. Stuhlmacher represents a growing movement in Germany against the sterility of existential theology.

What shall we say of the profound differences that divide these two men? Maier, it is true, adopts a stance *vis-à-vis* the Scriptures which is closer to the traditional evangelical position than is Stuhlmacher's; but that does not mean his entire position is thereby vindicated.

I suspect that at least part of the difference between the two positions turns on definition and on some difficult problems in epistemology. If the

⁴² *Op. cit.*, pp. 23, 56.

⁴³ J. Piper, 'A Reply to Gerhard Maier: A Review Article,' *JETS* 22 (1979), pp. 79-85.

historical-critical method *necessarily* means that the interpreter claims independent authority over the text *in such a way as to exclude the possibility* that he might come to the position where he understands the text to be nothing less than the very Word of God, with absolute authority over him, then the historical-critical method is invalid: it is too limiting. If, however, 'historical-critical method' be understood in a way akin to that proposed by Ramm in the first section of this paper (and n. 7), it is difficult to see why either Maier or Stuhlmacher would object to the term. Maier is loading the expression 'historical-critical method' with unsatisfactory conclusions; but other men may use the same method without demonstrable *methodological* distinctions, and come out with conclusions perfectly acceptable to Maier. Is it the method *per se* that Maier finds objectionable, or its results in the hands of most (but not all) of its practitioners? Is it the historical-critical method that is offensive, or the claims to intellectual autonomy that are the heritage of the Enlightenment?

To put the matter this way raises a host of epistemological problems about how we came to know that the Bible is indeed the very Word of God; but it enables us to detect that, terminological problems aside, there are probably few *strictly hermeneutical* (in the classical sense) questions which divide Maier and Stuhlmacher. What divides them is that one holds the position that the entire canon is the Word of God, while the other, fighting against extreme scepticism, allows for the possibility of meeting transcendence in Scripture but does not think it justifiable to posit a traditional doctrine of Scripture. *The problem is that both men camouflage their essential doctrinal differences and choose to meet in the hermeneutical arena instead*, despite the fact that their essential differences of opinion are only marginally hermeneutical. From the point of view of a more traditional definition of hermeneutics, both men are confusing *hermeneutics* with the results of hermeneutics. Their early hermeneutical results become fresh hermeneutical controls: *i.e.* both men implicitly accept the validity of the 'hermeneutical circle' and therefore see the entire debate in terms of hermeneutics; but such hermeneutics is no longer essentially methodological, but includes *every* factor which influences the interpreter to come to an interpretive decision.

One of the immediate effects, of course, is that 'hermeneutics' is again *enlarged in its semantic range*. It is true that one's beliefs *about the Bible* will at many points affect how one will interpret the Bible; and in this sense such beliefs have a hermeneutical function. But clearly, this means we

have arrived at the place where almost anything—one's presuppositions, one's literary tools, everything one has learned so far (true or false), one's sleep the night before—might be meaningfully labelled 'hermeneutical'. But equally clearly, such 'hermeneutical' factors, as influential as they might be, are not tools or principles independent of the interpreter; rather, they are *everything* that prompts an exegetical or interpretive decision. But at that point the term 'hermeneutics' has become so broad as to be well-nigh meaningless. Certainly it is no longer an appropriate term for referring to a distinct discipline. And that, I submit, is one of the painful lessons to be learned from the Maier/Stuhlmacher debate.

Interpreting the Old Testament

I am not referring by this heading to the peculiar problems surrounding Old Testament interpretation which face the modern interpreter,⁴⁴ but to the manner in which the Old Testament is interpreted both by early Jewish writers and by the New Testament. For a long time the most popular category employed by Christian writers assessing the latter problem was 'typology'.⁴⁵ Now however our ears ring with words like *peshet*, *midrash*, *halakah*, *haggadah*, *gal wahomer*, and the like.

In principle, the study of how the Old Testament is used by writers roughly contemporary with the New Testament writers promises significant results. This is one of the reasons why the Dead Sea Scrolls are so important,⁴⁶ and why the books by Daube,⁴⁷ Doeve,⁴⁸ Longenecker⁴⁹ and others make important advances along the right lines. These works have been followed up by very competent specialized studies.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, three cautions are needed. The

⁴⁴ Issues confronted, for example, by C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: John Knox, 1963), or by A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Vom Verstehen des Alten Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).

⁴⁵ Cf. the reprint of P. Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1975). Cf. also the classic by L. Goppelt, *Typus: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, repr. 1973).

⁴⁶ Cf. esp. F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (London: Tyndale, 1960).

⁴⁷ D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956).

⁴⁸ J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1954).

⁴⁹ R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

⁵⁰ See, for example, the brief bibliography in I. H. Marshall, *op. cit.*, 379f.; to which one must at least add many of the essays by E. Earle Ellis in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1978).

first is that the literary categories are ill-defined, and used variously by different scholars. One of the best features of a recent doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of St Andrews is its tracing of the range of meanings attributed to *midrash*.⁵¹ Similar semantic range can easily be detected for *peshet* and for other words.

The second caution comes from Walter C. Kaiser. Over the years Kaiser has published a number of essays⁵² warning students of Scripture against applying the *middoth* (the rules of interpretation) so indiscriminately to the New Testament writers as to be left with connections between the Old and New Testaments less univocal than the New Testament writers perceive them to be. Kaiser has recently put together his total perspective in a readable book.⁵³ One need not heed every aspect of his argument to profit from his warning.

The final caution is that, once again, use of these comparative materials does not itself guarantee faultless hermeneutics or invariably agreed results. One need only compare the work of, say, Longenecker,⁵⁴ with that of Lindars,⁵⁵ to find the point well made. Nevertheless there is much work to be done in this area by students who will submerge themselves in the several related but highly technical fields where competence must be achieved before significant contributions can be made.

Some concluding observations

1. Hermeneutics is a growing discipline, bursting its borders in several directions. It is an important and fast-paced area of study which urgently needs the close attention of evangelical students.

2. Hermeneutics is a slippery discipline, not least because the terms keep changing definition. Some of this terminological disarray stems from the legitimate growth of the discipline; but some of it springs from the imposition of alien ideologies onto the biblical data.

⁵¹ Douglas John Moo, 'The Use of the Old Testament in the Passion Texts of the Gospels' (unpublished PhD dissertation, St Andrews, 1979).

⁵² E.g. 'The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25: 4 in 1 Corinthians 9: 8-10,' *JETS* 21 (1978), pp. 3-18; 'The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9: 9-15 and Acts 15: 13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,' *JETS* 20 (1977), pp. 97-111.

⁵³ W. C. Kaiser, Jr, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978. The book, of course, deals with more than this one hermeneutical question; but this hermeneutical question is everywhere presupposed and occasionally enunciated.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.*

⁵⁵ B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London, SCM, 1961).

3. Hermeneutics is raising difficult questions in the areas of object/subject relations, historical particularity vs. historical relativity, and Jewish hermeneutics applied to the interpretation of the Old Testament.

4. Some movements with hermeneutical ramifications have developed somewhat exclusivistic attitudes or (otherwise put) a kind of inner ring syndrome. Structuralism for instance, often stumbles into this pitfall. Such an attitude is to be strenuously avoided: it is not axiomatic that one or two hermeneutical methods may justly claim either exclusive rights or sufficient power to exclude some other methods.

5. Although no particular *hermeneutical method* (in the traditional sense) *in itself* guarantees either heterodox or orthodox results, nevertheless each such method at least recognizes that there is a meaning to be discovered, however difficult that might be. But 'hermeneutics' in some of its modern usage is so irretrievably bound up with larger theological and ideological commitments that the possibility of discovering the objective meaning of a passage is *a priori* ruled out of court. Terminological disarray between those two poles everywhere abounds. I recently received a letter from a student inquiring about certain professors and their suitability as doctoral supervisors: he wanted to know if they were 'open to students of a conservative hermeneutic'. If 'hermeneutic' is taken in a classical sense, the question is naive. If 'hermeneutic' is taken in a more modern sense, it is difficult to see how 'conservative hermeneutic' means anything very different from 'conservative theological stance (which of course influences further interpretive decisions)'. I think I know what the letter-writer meant; but I suspect that what he said reflects the growing terminological and conceptual confusion surrounding 'hermeneutics'.

6. Just as there is a danger that exegetes will go about their task with too little awareness of hermeneutical questions, so there is a danger that the experts in hermeneutics will surpass themselves in sharpening and examining their tools, yet never use them. The proper goal of the study of hermeneutics is the better understanding of and obedience to holy Scripture. >

7. Yet the most touted hermeneutical approaches today never enable anyone to hear a sure word from God: indeed, they positively preclude such an eventuality. They are too closely allied with unacceptable ideological commitments in which the only absolute is language itself. Despite the many things we must learn from these hermeneutical developments, we must not worship at their shrine.

Interpreting texts in the context of the whole Bible

David Baker

Dr David Baker holds a PhD from Sheffield. He was formerly the Secretary of the Tyndale Fellowship. Since 1976 he has been a missionary in Indonesia, and from January 1980 will be lecturing at Batak Theological College in Sumatra.

A naked brown body splashing in a muddy Sumatran river, a fully-clothed undergraduate floundering in the Cam—two men in the water, but for quite different reasons. One is taking his daily bath, the other has fallen off a punt.

Both the Israelites and the Egyptians entered the Red Sea, but only the first group came out again. Naaman's business in the river Jordan was different from that of the penitent Jews who flocked to join John the Baptist there. In each case the event is similar, but its meaning different depending on the context.

Words, too, cannot be separated from the context in which they are said. In the film 'For Heaven's Sake!' we see Peter Sellers as an incompetent but well-meaning vicar doing parish visitation. At one door he is rebuffed by an unfriendly parishioner who knows enough of the Bible to quote it out of context: 'Matthew 27: 5, "Judas went and hanged himself"; Luke 10: 37, "Go and do thou likewise"! But infinitely more serious is the subtle quotation of scripture out of context that can genuinely deceive, as for instance that of the Devil himself (Matt. 4: 6).

An understanding of context is a vital part of hermeneutics. It is generally obvious that words and events are related to their immediate context. What is not always fully appreciated is the need to consider the whole background to the immediate context. A man bathing in the river Musi does not mean the same thing as if he were taking a bath in an English river: in one context he would be perfectly normal, in the other an eccentric or exhibitionist. The English student's style of recreation would probably seem even more eccentric to an Asian villager, for whom spare time is for resting, not wasting precious energy. If the fellow wants to go to Granchester, couldn't he take a bus?

So the meaning of an event or word is affected

by its place within the context of a whole culture and way of life. In terms of biblical hermeneutics, this means that a text needs to be understood not only in its immediate context, but also in its wider context, which is the whole Bible.

The biblical context: history and theology

The Bible records the history and theology of God's chosen people. After a short theological account of the beginning of the world, the first major event in biblical history is Abraham's call out of one of the great centres of pagan civilization to found the holy nation Israel (Gen. 12: 1-3; Exod. 19: 4-6). The history of the people of God is then traced through two millennia, up to the apostle Paul's arrival at the centre of the unholy Roman Empire with God's message of salvation to all nations (Acts 28: 16-31). The record is concluded by a collection of letters dealing with theological and pastoral matters, and visions relating to the end of the present order.

In theological language, biblical history is usually called *heilsgeschichte* (salvation/saving history; e.g. von Rad, Cullmann). By this is meant that the events of that history are presented not purely as human activity but also as the activity of God, who is at work in them to save. History is not the product of chance, nor does it derive ultimately from human endeavour, but is the outworking of the divine purpose. The Bible proclaims how God is calling men out of darkness into his marvellous light, and incorporating them into his own people: the chosen race, royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Pet. 2: 9). In other words, the Bible contains theological history. History is the sphere of God's revelation of himself to man, both in words and in deeds. For example, God revealed his greatness and power in the Exodus and the events associated with it; and he revealed his will and purpose for the people he saved in the writings which record and interpret those events.

The biblical history is divided into two eras, corresponding to the Old and New Testaments. The relationship between the two is a complex one, but one of its main aspects has conveniently been

a New Testament passage which deals with the subject of prayer, such as Jesus' invitation to ask for what we need (Luke 11: 9) or Paul's encouragement to pray in faith (Phil. 4: 6). In this way it can be shown that God's offer, 'What would you like me to give you?' was not only for Solomon, but is an offer and challenge to every Christian.

A few months ago the set text in our church was Jer. 8: 4-9. This is an example of a text that is not irrelevant to the Christian, but is clearly incomplete without being supplemented from the New Testament. It teaches clearly about the nature of sin, which is a good enough start for a sermon, but the preacher would be unfaithful to his call to preach Christ if he left it at that. One solution would be to refer to Romans 3: 23, which sums up the point of the text in Jeremiah ('Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence'), and then to point to the following verse, which gives the answer to the separation between God and man ('But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus', v. 24).

Secondly, the preaching of New Testament texts in context needs to be considered. In practice it is much easier to preach from the New Testament without reference to the Old than vice-versa, because it is more obviously relevant to the Christian. All the same, to preach the whole counsel of God involves preaching a New Testament text in the context of the entire Bible, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Often a New Testament text quotes or alludes explicitly to a word or event in the Old Testament, and in that case an explanation of the purpose of the reference is clearly called for. Texts from books such as Matthew, Romans and Hebrews, for example, that set out specifically to relate the Christ-event to the Old Testament salvation history, can only be correctly interpreted in that light. There are many books and articles on the New Testament use of the Old which help us to do this (see Baker: 32-40).

In other New Testament texts a specific interpretation of the Old Testament is implied, which was no doubt obvious to the original readers, but is not necessarily so obvious to a modern pew-sitter. For instance:

'As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been born blind. His disciples asked him, "Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?"' (John 9: 1-2)

It does not occur to the average Indonesian-in-the-street to ask such a question about those who sit

on the pavements and bridges of Jakarta. Fate determines such matters, not sin, in this part of the world. The disciples' question is based on their understanding of the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 3; Exod. 20: 5). So it may be necessary to explain the Old Testament background of such a text.

Another way in which the Old Testament is essential for preaching from the New is in the definition of terms. Many of the basic theological concepts of the Christian faith come from the Old Testament: sin, reconciliation, sacrifice, forgiveness, God, man, Christ, grace—to name but a few. A sermon on Romans 12: 1, for example, may not require explicit quotation of the Old Testament. But in fact almost every significant word in this text (mercy, sacrifice, holy, worship) comes originally from the Old Testament and can only be fully understood in that context.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is not coincidence that the Old and New Testaments are bound in one volume. The God who reveals himself in the Old Testament is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament recounts the fulfilment of promises made centuries beforehand. So the two Testaments form one historical and theological work, in which each event and word can only be understood fully when interpreted in the context of the whole; and the whole can only be rightly interpreted in the light of its central event and Word, Jesus Christ.

The Bible is about God and man, theology and history. Once upon a time, nearly two thousand years ago, when the old covenant was exhausted and the new still a dream, God came to earth. The Son of God became the Son of Man. The promised Messiah appeared in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter-King, the Word Incarnate. That is the message of the Bible and the starting-point of our hermeneutics.

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The Willowbank Consultation Jan 1978— A personal reflection

Kwame Bediako

Dr Kwame Bediako holds degrees in French and theology, and has taught at Christian Service College in Ghana. He is at present at the university of Aberdeen engaged in studies for a Theological doctorate.

When it was decided that the Theology and Education Group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization should convene a consultation to study and reflect on the interrelation of the Gospel and human cultures, it was felt that this was one of the most important questions which needed to be examined in the light of the Christian world mission. The discussion of Gospel and Culture has, of course, an extensive history, even if the matter has not always been perceived with the same acuteness.¹

For contemporary evangelical Christians, the 'Gospel and Culture' issue seems to have emerged as one of the major preoccupations at Lausanne '74. In what was, culturally, the most representative gathering of the evangelical Christian Church, it became apparent that the Church's mission was no longer (if ever it had been assumed that it was), to consist in the exportation of Western values to the rest of the world. That one could speak of 'Western culture Christianity' indicated that we could no more identify the Gospel with Western culture than St Paul's judaizing opponents could insist on the

circumcision of Gentile Christians.² The call for 'moratorium' which had been made shortly before the Lausanne Congress also showed that, for some African Christians at least, the preponderance of Western personnel and finance in the Church's mission was a hindrance rather than a help. There was the feeling that we were on the threshold of a 20th century version of the 'Galatian problem'. The Willowbank Consultation, therefore, met in the light of a new evangelical awareness that the Church's missionary mandate was required to be obeyed on all six continents, in the secularized and nominally Christian West as well as in the traditional 'mission fields' of the Third World.

Unfortunately, the Consultation never quite abandoned the older traditional moulds, and it failed to wrestle adequately with the realities and needs of Christian mission in its global dimensions. The fact that the Third World was not as well represented as it could have been, may have had something to do with this, though the point must not be pressed too far.³ There was, for instance, an undue attention directed towards the dangers, real or imagined, of syncretism facing the 'younger churches', and correspondingly, an insufficient alertness to similar phenomena threatening the churches

² Dr René Padilla's contribution at Lausanne (1974) was particularly pertinent to this issue. See C. René Padilla, 'Evangelism and the World' in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *Let the Earth hear His Voice*, World Wide Publications, Minneapolis, USA, pp. 116-146.

³ See Orlando Costas' evaluation of the Consultation in *Gospel in Context*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1978, pp. 16-17.

¹ For the purposes of this article, we shall concentrate on the implications of the discussion for contemporary evangelical missionary thinking and strategy.

of the West. The Report of the Consultation does occasionally express this imbalance; in fact at one point it states quite candidly, for the particular benefit of Western churches, that, 'perhaps the most insidious form of syncretism in the world today is the attempt to mix a privatized gospel of personal forgiveness with a worldly (even demonic) attitude to wealth and power.'⁴

Furthermore, the term 'missionaries' (or the less emotive, if somewhat cumbersome, 'cross-cultural witnesses') was used with exclusive reference to Western Christian personnel working in Third World contexts, thus unconsciously and subtly perpetuating the old 'imperialist' Western missionary—Third World national pattern of relationship in Christian mission.

What is clearly needed is a radical reorientation of outlook and attitude on the part of all those engaged in mission. Admittedly, it is not going to be easy for those who have held pioneer roles in the history of world mission to achieve this on their own. However, failure to realize the need for a 'change in key'⁵ not only carries serious consequences for cross-cultural Christian fellowship, but also gravely vitiates the perception of the realities of our contemporary situation.

Two main aspects of the contemporary situation need to be highlighted. The first is outlined by Prof. A. F. Walls of Aberdeen University, a leading authority in the study of the modern missionary movement. In 1976, Prof. Walls wrote:

'One of the most important, perhaps one of the two or three most important events in the whole of Church history, has occurred in the lifetime of people not yet old. It has not reached the textbooks, and most Christians, including many of the best informed, do not know it has happened. It is nothing less than a complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the Church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but in Latin America, in certain parts of Asia, and most important for our present purposes, in Africa.'⁶

Prof. Walls' article was concerned with an inter-

pretation of the place of Africa in Christian history, and we do not need, in the present paper, to follow through in detail all the suggestions he makes or the conclusions which he draws. It is significant, nonetheless, that two years later, in November, 1978, Prof. Walls, discussing the vexed question of the identity problem of African Christians,⁷ felt able to stress, yet again, the shift in the geographical and cultural balance of the Christian Church in modern times, with the added insight into a peculiar historical connection between Christianity and the primal religions of the world. Prof. Walls points out that primal religions 'historically have been the most fertile soil for the Gospel', with the result that, 'they underlie the Christian faith of the vast majority of Christians of all ages and all nations.'⁸ This would be true in the first instance, of the peoples of the Roman Empire of the early centuries of the Christian era, then, of the barbarian tribes of Western and Northern Europe, and latterly, of the vast masses of the modern Third World nations. From this remarkable historical evidence, Prof. Walls points to the irrefutable conclusion:

'Indeed, it is hard, in the two millennia of Christian history so far, to find *large* adhesions to the Christian faith *except* among primal peoples.'⁹

The second aspect relates to the prolific growth of the so-called independent churches in the Third World. In 1975, Gottfried Oosterwal called on Western churches and mission agents to recognize in the rise of new prophet movements and independent churches in the Third World, 'the working of the Spirit in African, Asian, and Latin American leaders whom God has chosen as His instruments to advance His mission'.¹⁰ Oosterwal stressed, therefore, the need for 'new attitudes and new relations' in the strategy and pursuit of the Christian world mission, insisting on a 'process of mutual sharing' between Western missions and these 'indigenous' churches and their 'charismatic' leaders. For a long time Western missionaries and so-called mission churches were hostile or at best unsympathetic to the new movements. The vast majority of Westerners who took a keen interest in them were social anthropologists operating with reductionist theories of religion. By equating, incorrectly, Christianity with Western religion *tout*

⁴ *The Willowbank Report—Gospel and Culture* (Lausanne Occasional Papers No. 2), 1978, p. 26.

⁵ *Mission from the West in a New Key* is the significant title of the 'missiological agenda' of Charles Taber (currently editor of *Gospel in Context—a Dialogue on Contextualization*), published by Partnership in Mission, Abington, USA, 1979.

⁶ A. F. Walls, 'Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History', in J. S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1976, pp. 180-189. In a personal communication, Prof. Walls informs me that his article was written about 1971.

⁷ A. F. Walls, 'Africa and Christian Identity', in *Mission Focus*, Vol. VI, No. 7, Nov. 1978, pp. 11-13.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 11. Walls' emphasis.

¹⁰ Gottfried Oosterwal, 'New Religious Movements: A Challenge to Mission', in *Mission Focus*, Vol. III, No. 3, May 1975, p. 4.

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court, some Western scholars, in examining these movements which have arisen from the impact of Western missions on traditional, 'primal' societies, have tended to explain them in terms of their socio-political significance. The implicit assumption is that if Christianity (i.e. religion) is on the decline in the West, then these movements ought to be understood in non-Christian terms, in the light of non-religious factors. Not many Western scholars seem to have realized that the same inter-war period which saw in Europe the rise and growth of despair, the erosion of faith in God, and seeping nihilism, produced in Africa especially, the waves of prophetic movements which filled mission churches and gave birth to new churches. In missionary circles, men like William Wade Harris, Simon Kimbangu, Joseph Babalola and others, were often regarded as political agitators and 'false prophets'; now with some humility and the benefit of hindsight, we can understand them better as prophets of Christ. They won converts to Christ where Western missions had stalled or were losing ground. The despair in Europe found a counterpart in Africa in socio-political distress, cultural disruption and psychic disturbance, further aggravated by physical disasters like the influenza epidemic. The African prophets related the social, psychological and physical upheavals to the ways of God, and called people to repentance and prayer. Almost all of them worked miracles of healing, and they offered their hearers peace, stability, a new security and a reason for hope in Jesus Christ, *not* in a return to the old traditional religion. Since Oosterwal's essay, it has been noted that the distinction between so-called 'mission churches' and 'indigenous churches' in the Third World has become 'of decreasing value'.¹¹ The 'process of sharing' required will involve all Christian churches everywhere which are committed to a common vision in mission.

These facts of the present situation raise several questions. What, for instance are their implications for our understanding of the nature of the Christian faith? It is quite probable that an investigation along these lines would lead to a startling reappraisal of the generally accepted notions about Christianity and primal religions. It would be interesting to find out to what extent the decline of Christianity in the modern West is related to the abandoning of the religion-centred world-view characteristic of primal peoples; for it would seem that whenever the

primal religious outlook loses its hold on people's minds and ceases to inform their perception of reality, a religion of the supernatural like Christianity is likely to lose its power of conviction as well.¹² The distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' religions is now a thing of the past; the matter is certainly more complex than that, and we may be surprised to discover that Christianity has after all a closer affinity with the primal religions than we thought.¹³

However, for our present purposes, it is for the insight which they can give us into the situation of the Christian world mission that these facts are of interest to us. If the analyses of world church statistics do in fact accurately indicate the direction of events, that the growth areas of world Christianity are increasingly to be found in the Third World, or, to use Orlando Costas' expression, 'the Two-Thirds World',¹⁴ is it not fair to ask, how deeply the structures and strategies and attitudes in Christian world mission are being affected by the facts of our present situation? Perhaps one needs to ask afresh what the Christian world mission is meant to achieve. Does mission cease when churches emerge? In places where churches exist, and have done so for many centuries, as in the West (and yet there is a noticeable decline in Christian fervour and discipleship, as well as a widespread rejection of the Christian message), where does missionary responsibility lie?

These are very pertinent questions, and yet it would seem that they are not being pursued adequately in the very circles where the commitment to world mission is most deeply felt. With very few

¹² It is worth noting, though, that we are not here concerned with the merits or demerits of a so-called modern scientific world-view. More than 20 years ago, John Foster drew attention to the similarities between Celsus' objections (see Origen—*Contra Celsum*) and modern criticisms of Christianity, showing that modern objections to Christianity are not necessarily the product of the modern scientific outlook. See John Foster, *After the Apostles (Missionary Preaching of the First Three Centuries)*, SCM, London, 1951.

¹³ Prof. Mbiti has suggested that in spite of the widespread condemnation of African (primal) religion by the early official bearers of Christianity to Africa, 'in reality without African (i.e. primal) religion, Christianity would not have spread as rapidly as it is doing today. It is African Religion which has made the people very religiously disposed towards the Christian message. It is African Religion which has produced the religious values, vocabulary, insights and practices on which Christianity has been able to build so readily. . . . The points of continuity between Christianity and African Religion have been sufficiently compatible and numerous for the Christian Gospel to establish a footing among African peoples.' See John Mbiti, 'The Encounter between Christianity and African Religion' in *Temenos*, Vol. 12, 1976, Helsinki, pp. 125-135. Prof. Mbiti's comments are very much in line with Prof. Walls' observations quoted earlier.

¹⁴ See Orlando Costas—op. cit. p. 16.

¹¹ See A. F. Walls, 'The Anabaptists of Africa? The Challenge of the African Independent Churches', in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* (April 1979), cited in *Partner-Scan*, Vol. IV, No. 3, June 1979, p. 9.

exceptions, most evangelical missionary societies and agencies based in the West continue to perpetuate the traditional image of the Third World as the 'mission-field' of the Christian Church. Consequently, the post-Christianity and secularity of the West are not adequately perceived in the Third World, where, at the grassroots at least, the myth of the Christian West is still largely accepted uncritically. Whether post-Christianity in the West with its attendant crisis of faith and decline in spiritual outlook is sufficiently perceived by many Western Christians is, perhaps, not for us to say.

Moreover, the sheer economic dominance of the West in world mission tends to falsify the issues involved in mission, and especially to remove them from truly spiritual concerns. Much time and energy is expended on the administration of structures, missions changing policy often only in response to external pressure, and little attention is devoted to listening, together, to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The Willowbank Report notes the fact of churches,

'... still almost completely inhibited from developing their own identity and programme by policies laid down from afar, by the introduction and continuation of foreign traditions, by the use of expatriate leadership, by alien decision-making processes, and especially by the manipulative use of money.'¹⁵

This statement is not intended to suggest that the exercise of such control arises necessarily from deliberate perversity or a self-conscious desire to oppress, although it 'may be felt by the churches concerned to be a tyranny'.¹⁶ The tragedy of it is that it could simply emerge from an unconscious attitude of domination, arising from culture, of which the 'expatriate leadership' is a product. Perhaps the most distressing aspect of the present situation is that we are still far from the authentic 'cross-fertilization' in mission and church renewal which René Padilla urged upon participants at the Congress in Lausanne in 1974.

A symptom of the persistence of this 'serious obstacle to maturity and mission'¹⁷ is the way in which the powerful Western agencies of evangelical world mission have neglected or refused to explore creatively the positive aspects of the 'Moratorium Debate'. The Consultation did not feel able to deal with the issue, though the Report mentions it. Whilst some participants would rather have avoided

the word 'moratorium' because of a supposed 'emotive' connotation, it was retained 'in order to emphasize the truth it expresses'.¹⁸ We have yet to witness the outworking of that measure of truth extensively in mission policy and practice.

Much of the discussion of 'new trends' in mission appears unfortunately to reinforce old patterns, simply making Western missionary societies aware of the errors of the past (and present?) so that they may perform *their* tasks better. No sooner have we begun to raise questions about contextualizing the Gospel in our different cultures and social contexts than a 'professor of missions with cross-cultural experience' offers us a 'package' on 'how to do it'! In recent times, those sections of the Church who have the most efficient machinery for getting the work done have usually been the pace-setters. It is understandable therefore that the churches of the West, and particularly North America, with their vast resources, especially in technology, have largely borne the burden of Christian world mission to the non-Western world. In the process, Christianity itself has emerged historically as part of the cultural impact of the West on the rest of the world.

However, we have now learnt that we ought to dissociate the Christian Gospel from the trappings of western culture. But the interrelation of Gospel and human culture is a complex one; the Gospel can only be perceived by us in some cultural form or other—a pure Gospel devoid of cultural embodiment is simply imaginary. The trouble is that we all wear cultural blinkers, and whilst we may affirm an absolute Gospel and accept the relativity of our diverse cultures, each of us fails to perceive some important facets of the one Gospel. It seems hard to convince some Western Christians that theological and missiological thinking and strategies developed in the West are as much products of human culture as they are of Christian reflection, fallible and imperfect as they both are.

Thus the positive implications of the 'Moratorium Debate' involve not so much a pulling out of mission personnel as an acknowledgment that other Christians in other cultures are also called to develop creatively their own insights into the Gospel and its communication; that non-Western Christians need to make such contributions as they are enabled to in ways peculiar to them. There can be no doubt that genuine cross-fertilization in theology and mission will grow only where cultural diversity and specificity is appreciated within the bonds of Christian fellowship under the Lordship of Christ. It is only in the context of a true sharing and

¹⁵ *The Willowbank Report*, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 25.

partnership in mission that there will occur that maturing of the entire Body of Christ, for which spiritual endowments are bestowed by the sovereign Lord (cf. Eph. 4: 11ff). The majority of evangelical Christians will probably accept that mission is the work of the whole body; but the expression 'the whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world' remains an empty slogan until a genuine and meaningful fellowship in world mission is a reality.

It must not be imagined that what is being advocated in this paper is that by means of some mechanistic theory or practice we should attempt to 'redress the balance' in missionary involvement in favour of Third World participation. Whatever contribution Third World Christians consider they can make to world mission must be manifestly demonstrated and validated through the Spirit, who is Himself the prime mover in Christian world mission; nor is it to be assumed that 'Go ye . . . preach the Gospel to all creation' involves necessarily, and at all times, the crossing of geographical barriers. We mention the continuing North Atlantic dominance in Christian mission simply to show that when that dominance is assumed as normative, it is likely to produce a distorted and unbalanced perception of the nature of the Church's mission to the world.

One clear-cut example of such distortion is the uncritical application of pragmatic, sociological research to the interpretation of the history of the Church and to the pursuit of mission, by the theorists and strategists of Church Growth. F. W. Norris has shown recently how tenuous is the connection of Church Growth theory, especially its central tenet—the homogeneous unit principle, with New Testament or early Christian history.¹⁹ We must be careful not to discount the insights of the Church Growth School into 'how churches grow'. But it is precisely the contention that the major objective of mission is church-planting which constitutes the central problem here. Mission is defined rather narrowly as evangelism, multiplication of converts, the planting of homogeneous units of churches. Consequently the 'success' or 'failure' of mission is assessed largely in terms of what can be measured and computerized. Less tangible factors and more painful ethical demands of the Kingdom, faithfulness to the Gospel, growth in grace, the fruit of the Spirit, the socio-political implications of

the Gospel message for the life-style of its hearers are generally ignored. Yet for an African, for example, these 'intangibles' are important, for they affect his relationship with God and his fellow men. The price that is paid by converts to such a truncated Gospel is incalculable.

Another effect of this distortion is the 'technological Gospel', elaborated in the context of a pragmatic, naturalistic world-view, and to meet materialistic ends. Such a Gospel is inadequate in situations of deep spiritual conflict and psychic trauma resulting from disaster or unexpected social upheaval. If social context and culture have an effect on religion and vice versa (and the social sciences have taught us that lesson), then we can understand what Jacob Loewen, a missionary anthropologist, means, when among South American Indian Christians, he found himself excluded from a praying circle in order that a healing could be effected. Dr Loewen comments:

'It came as a very rude shock to me when I suddenly realized that my western naturalistic and materialistic view of germs and illness actually made it next to impossible for me to "believe" sufficiently to heal.'²⁰

On the other hand, his hosts, the Choco Indians, 'who operated on an animistic world-view—one much more akin to that of the Bible—could much more readily appropriate the power of God than I could'.²¹ Loewen's observation about South American Indian Christianity could equally well be made of situations in Africa and other parts of the Third World. René Padilla is surely right in observing that:

'Western missionaries took to the Third World not only the Gospel, but also a Western naturalistic outlook. They carried a world-view in which disease and disaster were explained in terms of the natural law of cause and effect. The supernatural was restricted to a small area of human experience. They stressed man's technological responsibility for the natural world, rather than his interdependence with his environment.'²²

The undeniably advanced secularity of Western culture, together with the encroaching rationalism, have had a deep enough impact on the Church to partly explain the decline of Christianity in the

¹⁹ F. W. Norris, 'The Social Status of Early Christianity', in *Gospel in Context*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Jan. 1979, pp. 4-14. Some of the responses to Norris' paper indicate the difficulty of even this enlightened dialogue for renewal. See C. Peter Wagner's comments, pp. 25-26.

²⁰ Jacob A. Loewen, 'Evangelism and Culture', in C. René Padilla (ed.), *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1976, p. 182.

²¹ Ibid, p. 182.

²² C. René Padilla, 'An Age of Liberation', in Tim Dowley et al. (eds.), *The History of Christianity*, Lion Publishing, 1977, p. 625.

West, remarkable in the face of the increased interest in spiritualism and the occult which is widely witnessed in the modern West. Western Christianity, in succumbing to secularism and rationalism, is fast becoming unable to meet Western spiritual needs.

The Church in the West is in danger of missing out on truly vital Christianity, in contrast to other parts of the world, which are still 'under-developed' from a Western technological viewpoint. Here, where demonic powers are reckoned with, and the truth of spiritual conflict is acknowledged, churches which take a stand on, and proclaim, the reality of the Personal God, the living presence of Jesus Christ and the availability of the power of the Spirit, still draw crowds, from both the high and the lowly, and seem to experience, in the 20th century, the life of New Testament Christianity. The inescapable fact of Christian world mission at the moment is the shift in the centre of gravity of vibrant Christianity from the northern continents to the south,²³ from the more affluent nations of the West to the relatively poor and less powerful 'younger' nations of the Third World.

This situation ought not to be allowed to erect barriers between 'older' and 'younger' churches. Rather, the sheer diversity of the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which we are called to live out the implications of our common allegiance to Jesus Christ provides the Church with greater opportunities than ever before, for self-criticism, mutual encouragement and cross-fertilization in spiritual renewal, mission and outreach. The real problem is how positively evangelicals who claim to be the most concerned for world evangelization and mission react to the new reality.

It is, perhaps, pointless to speculate on what kind of changes Western missionary societies and 'sending' agencies might conceivably be required to make to meet the challenges of world mission. The responsibility for changes rests with those bodies themselves. However, they cannot ignore indefinitely the lessons of Christian history, nor can the church world-wide avoid the consequences of present failure to 'discern the signs of the times'. An issue which readily comes to mind is whether Western missionary societies, as presently constituted, are the best agents to effect world evangelization. The answer cannot come from one person, and the present writer will not presume to supply it.

But if the 'shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity' is as significant for world mission as has been suggested above, then there are at least two very important issues which call for serious consideration.

The first is whether Third World churches are capable of assuming their fuller responsibilities in world mission, and not only in their own contexts. It seems obvious, for instance, that Third World churches lack the means and the technical skills to mount and pursue a missionary programme similar to what Western churches have been able to maintain for several centuries. The question here really is whether Third World churches have to seek to produce replicas of Western models; to expect them to do so is simply another way of saying that they may as well resign themselves to a role of passivity and a position of perpetual juniority in the Body of Christ. Mission, in essence, is the outflow of life from the Church—the life and the love of God in Christ shed abroad in the hearts of the people of God by the Holy Spirit—as we respond in faith and commitment to the call of God to participate in His redemptive mission in the world. In this process each of us brings to our common task the endowment and enabling given by the Spirit. Luis Palau of Argentina, arriving in Britain in June, 1979, for evangelistic crusades in Scotland, may well have expressed something of what the peculiar contribution of the churches of the Third World today could be:

'I believe I do have something to share: mostly the fire of the Gospel. Britain has the knowledge; what she needs is the fire. And if in any way the Holy Spirit can use me to His glory in bringing some fire to Britain, that would be my greatest dream.'²⁴

The churches of the Third World may have to admit to not having the 'silver and gold'; but on balance, a great many of them can more easily say to a sick and dying world, 'In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk'. Existing in circumstances of relative poverty and material weakness they can be the means of proclaiming to a world more and more trapped in consumerism and materialism, that 'God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking'—material affluence—but of the righteousness, peace and joy which the Holy Spirit gives' (Rom. 14: 17 TEV). And yet the level and quality of giving in some churches of the Third

²³ It is interesting that the distinguished Church historian, K. S. Latourette, nearly half a century ago, saw the trend which is now being confirmed. See his, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity—The First Five Centuries*, Harper and Bros, New York, 1937, XXIII-XXIV.

²⁴ *Crusade*, June 1979, p. 28.

World are almost proverbial,²⁵ and there are churches which do not require any foreign financial aid. As John Gatu, of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, has pointed out:

'The long-cherished assumption that the churches of the Third World are poor is a fallacy that must be discarded.'²⁶

Rev. Gatu is a key figure in the 'Moratorium Debate', and his views have not found universal acceptance. But we find little to quarrel with when he states:

'In the Third World, too many churches have become and remained "receiving" churches. We are very fond of receiving personnel and their salaries, gifts of old clothing, equipment, theology, and even church organizations and structures. We believe the churches overseas to be wealthy and better off, while, on the other hand, we are poor and need help. While we must reject any attitude of triumphalism and self-sufficiency on our part (cf. Rev. 3: 14-22), we must at the same time affirm that when we commit God's work to His own hands and direction, He will find not only the money but also the necessary resources to complete the task.'²⁷

Perhaps what is at stake for the churches of the Third World today is their freedom from the bondage to Western value-setting which has been acquired through a prolonged phase of spiritual tutelage and cultural assimilation, the freedom of the servants of God. But in learning freedom from Western dominance, Third World churches must not, in turn, substitute a new parochialism and provincialism. The great need of the hour is for all to recognize that 'a new missionary era has dawned . . .',²⁸ in which the responsibility for world mission belongs to the whole Body of Christ.

The second issue of crucial importance for world mission is the more profound one of theology and the theologizing ministry of the Church. On this issue the Willowbank Consultation limited itself to questions of Biblical hermeneutics as being the task of 'the whole Christian community seen as both a contemporary and a historical fellowship'. It therefore encouraged churches to seek a 'continuous growth in knowledge, love and obedience' by means

of a dynamic 'contextual' approach which shows 'awareness of concerns stemming from culture', and yet lets Scripture remain 'always central and normative'.²⁹ The particular question here is whether the churches of the Third World have the resources to engage meaningfully, on behalf of the universal Church, in the activity of reflective theology which has been ably championed hitherto by many churchmen of the West. Much has been said about the 'theological deficit' in the vast majority of Third World churches; and yet not a little interest has also been shown in their theological potential. If, in the providence of God, Third World Christians are in fact to share more substantially in the saving activity of God, then they ought to be the first to recognize that the theological task which attaches to that call is, indeed, formidable, and will require just as much intellectual rigour and honest discipline as has been demanded of Christian leaders and thinkers of other generations and climes.

However, the question will be falsely put if it is assumed that Third World churches will need merely to 'translate', albeit in their own thought-forms and idioms, the theological reflection of Western Christianity. There can be no doubt that the Western theological heritage belongs to the whole Church, and that Third World churches must learn to make it their own, for they stand in continuity with, and in the company of, the people of God of all ages and nations. But it is quite conceivable that the fundamental theological concerns of the Christian Church in our time will be given new direction and form by the responses emerging from the reflection of the Third World churches on the Word of God and the encounter with the issues of human existence. For, in the process of contextualizing the Gospel anew for their generation, Christians of the Third World may well, as has been suggested in various quarters,³⁰ discover fresh insights into the eternal purposes of God towards His creation. These could well be such as Western Christianity has culturally been unable, hitherto, to see.

This may come about in virtue of the particular socio-historical and cultural context of Third World churches. The vast majority of them have their origins in the massive missionary advance of the Western European imperialist expansion. Now, in

²⁵ The present writer knows from his own experience of a congregation in Ghana which increased its annual thanksgiving offering by 100% when the national economy was labouring under double digit inflation.

²⁶ John Gatu, 'The Urgency of the Evangelistic Task', in C. René Padilla (ed.) op. cit. p. 173.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 172-173.

²⁸ 'The Lausanne Covenant' (Article 8) in J. D. Douglas (ed.) op. cit. p. 6.

²⁹ *The Willowbank Report*, p. 11.

³⁰ cf. Norman J. Goreham, 'Towards an African Theology' in *The Expository Times*, May 1975, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 8; J. S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, London, 1971; Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, London, 1975; A. F. Walls, 'Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History', in J. S. Pobee, op. cit.

the post-colonial era, these churches are having to live down the embarrassing associations of their past. In doing so, they are being compelled to grapple all the more intensely with the fuller implications of their adherence to Christianity. In the days of national political consciousness and cultural revival, how do they validate to their generation what used to be the religion the Europeans brought, and is now also their own? How does their new and often fierce allegiance to Christ relate to their past, and religious pre-history? The deep heart-searching which such questions invoke can often be read between the lines in the writings of Third World Christian thinkers today.

The basic issues at stake are perhaps not new; surely they have been faced before in the history of the expansion of Christianity. The closest adequate parallel to the modern situation may be found in the early Roman Empire with the cultural transposition of the centre of gravity of the Christian Church from its Jewish cradle into the Gentile Hellenistic arena.³¹ The real problem, then and now, is what to do with the inescapable tension of any authentic Christian existence, namely, the tension between our immersion in our culture, and our attachment to Christ; in other words—our continuity in culture and our identity in Christ. It is those who seek to understand the nature of this tension who know also the threat of syncretism.

And yet, paradoxically, when a society has so domesticated and institutionalized Christ into its patron saint, that it fails to perceive the tension, then syncretism has, in fact, gained a foothold. Consequently the question of Christian identity ceases to be asked. It is this more subtle and therefore more deadly syncretism which appears to be the basic affliction of considerable sections of Western Christianity in the 20th century; and it may well require a more active partnership with Third World churches to effect the rescue of Western churches from their captivity to culture. Theological reflection from the 'younger churches' could 'help to recover for us all something of the lost radiance of the Christian faith'.³²

The theological task of the growing churches of the Third World ought, therefore, to include a fresh

affirmation of the truth that theology, in its essence, is missiology, theology of the church in missionary encounter with the world, and the principalities and powers opposed to God. This is simply another way of saying that the only valid Christian theology is the theology of the living Church, that every theology stands or falls as to how it understands, interprets and communicates Jesus Christ, 'Lord of the universe and the Church'.³³

The Willowbank Consultation affirmed that 'the most outstanding thing about a Christian should not be his culture, but his Christlikeness'.³⁴ It is perhaps not insignificant that one of the most perceptive statements made on the matter of Gospel and Culture has been made by a theologian of the Third World, Prof. J. S. Mbiti:

'With the tools of our cultures we are both defenders and traitors of Christianity, and this is a paradox which belongs to the whole relationship between Christianity and cultures. We live between the polarities of Christian ethics and cultural boundaries. Yet, the process of transformation means, ultimately, that we become more and more Christian and less and less African (or Japanese, American or Swiss). The only identity that counts and has full meaning is identity with Christ and not with any given cultures. . . . Paradoxically culture snatches us away from Christ, it denies that we are His; yet when it is best understood, at its meeting with Christianity, culture drives us to Christ and surrenders us to Him, affirming us to be permanently, totally and unconditionally His own.'³⁵

In less than a year from now, evangelical Christians will be meeting again in an important consultation on world evangelization, and this time, in a clearly Third World setting (Pattaya, Thailand). The Lausanne Covenant recognized the hand of God in the growth of Third World churches in our time, and called upon all churches to undertake a 'continuous re-evaluation of our missionary responsibility and role', with a view to fostering 'a growing partnership of churches'.³⁶ Perhaps June 1980 will be the time to evaluate how far this cross-cultural partnership has progressed, and whether the Church, in its responsibility for world mission, has been obedient to the will of God.

³¹ Modern evangelical Christians are unlikely to accept Justin Martyr's claim that Socrates was a Christian for having lived 'according to Reason (Logos)'; nor would the suggestion by Clement of Alexandria that philosophy was God's pre-Christian provision for Greeks as the OT was for Jews, find a warm acceptance with many of us. However, there was also an attempt to validate to themselves, and to friend and foe alike, that the Christ in whom they believed was, in some way, hard to convey perhaps, at home in their 'pagan' culture too.

³² Norman Goreham, op. cit. p. 236.

³³ *The Willowbank Report*, p. 30.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31.

³⁵ J. S. Mbiti, 'African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development' in R. Pierce Beaver (ed.), *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, USA, 1973.

³⁶ 'The Lausanne Covenant' (Article 8), in J. D. Douglas (ed.), op. cit. p. 6.