

EDITORIAL

The Interpreter's Task

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Hermeneutics, or the science of interpreting the Scriptures, was never more challenging or difficult than today. The term hermeneutics (from the Greek *hermēneia*—I Cor. 12:10, 14:26), synonymous with the Latin *interpretandi* (interpretation), has been revived through the influence of German scholars, especially Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Fuchs. The latter's *Hermeneutik* (1954) was something of a landmark in that the emphasis was shifted from the older meaning of interpretation to an emphasis on language or translation. In current usage the term is almost the equivalent of biblical theology. Attention is being given to language as the vehicle of communication between the biblical idiom and contemporary idiom.

The interpreter's main task remains that of making the written word become the living word. In this task he can learn much from current issues and emphases in the hermeneutical ferment of the times. From the existentialists he can welcome the emphasis on the necessity of *response* to the Scriptures. From them also he can be warned about the importance of bringing to the Bible the best possible presuppositions, not however, wedded to any particular philosophical or even theological system; he must realize his own inclination to bias and strive to be as objective as possible in his approach. He must recognize, with the Reformers, that the Scriptures normally have one plain meaning and that his task is to seek it honestly with a maximum of initial objectivity. Once he has found the meaning he should make it his own by choice.

Most scholars will agree that the interpreter's prime task is to employ the grammatico-historical method to learn what the original writers intended to say to the reader. The interpreter needs to go beyond the form to the content, seeking content within its extant form, enlisting the aid of

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others who have labored there without accepting uncritically the conclusions of others. He should concern himself first and last with primary sources, not permitting secondary sources to usurp or supplant the primacy of the Bible, to be a "man of one book" in the sense of priorities but not in the sense of showing contempt of other "helps." As John Bright well says it, a relatively "objective, grammatico-historical exegesis is . . . possible; and through it alone is a right interpretation of the biblical word to be arrived at."¹

DANGERS TO BE AVOIDED

1. *Provincialism.* In spite of modern facilities for communication there remains a surprising degree of provincialism in the contemporary theological scene. Some continental thinkers tend to disdain scholars in England as scarcely worthy of note. English speaking scholars, due in part to language difficulties, find it difficult to keep abreast of continental scholarship. Biblical scholarship in North America is often a generation behind European scholarship except in the sphere of biblical archaeology. Much of this lag is due to the fact that most Americans are mono-lingual. Copyright restrictions often make it difficult to market books outside the country of origin. Within this nation "liberals" and "neo-liberals" show little knowledge or interest in evangelical scholarship, preferring to dismiss it as "fundamentalism" with nothing of significance to contribute. Evangelicals, to a lesser degree, also reflect a marked provincialism, putting forth insufficient effort to acquaint themselves with current issues and spending most of their scholarly efforts in reacting to the "progress" of their "liberal" contemporaries. Causes for this continuing provincialism include prejudice, complacency, pride, inertia and the press of duties which leave little or no leisure for excursions outside normal activities.

2. *Subjectivism.* Evangelicals, especially those in the Pietist tradition, are sometimes beguiled by the emphasis in existentialism on the subjective response to the Word. While the evangelical appreciates the emphasis on the necessity for confrontation and decision, he recoils before existentialist reaffirmation of the dictum of Protagoras that "Man is the measure of all things." The reader's response to the Bible is important so far as the reader is concerned, but the authority and the relevance of the Bible are not invalidated by his failure to find there the very "Word of God" or the "word of faith." The authority of the Bible is not simply in the inner consciousness. The alleged necessity for the subjective validation of the Bible is the Achilles' heel in most of neo-orthodox and existentialist hermeneutics. Like Isaiah, the evangelical believes that man cannot understand

1. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Abingdon, 1967), p. 42.

himself until he has seen the Lord (Isa. 6), that theology leads to anthropology rather than vice versa.

3. *Egotism*. A common abuse of the Bible is to use a biblical text merely as a launching pad for the preacher's or teacher's own opinions, prejudices or convictions. Often there is unmentioned assumption that the Bible, taken by itself, is unintelligible or irrelevant. Yet because of its traditional status, it is a useful foil against which to introduce one's ideas to the public. The practice is not unlike that of ancient pseudepigraphists, who in order to gain recognition, presented their works in the name of some ancient authority (e. g., The Odes of Solomon, the Gospel of Thomas). Often the expositor is goaded by the fear that unless he produces some novel interpretation, the message and messenger will be ignored or dismissed as naïve and irrelevant.

4. Similarly, other interpreters apparently feel it incumbent upon them to superimpose upon the Scriptures their own trademark, a distinctive school of thought that will bring recognition and project their names into future ages. They may feel impelled to maintain a reputation for originality, or for conservatism, for radicalism, or for orthodoxy. Scripture is then discounted, or twisted to suit the necessities of the occasion.

5. Some exegetes feel compelled to "water down" and blunt vigorous truths of the Bible, to accommodate the message to the tastes and mores of their constituents. They feel that the message must be reduced in voltage or adulterated to fit the degree of tolerance of readers or auditors. This could not be said of the method of St. John, or Jesus, or Paul!

THE PRESENT GOALS

The world of biblical scholarship needs constantly to assess and re-assess the fruit of its own research in the Scriptures. One factor which the expositor can ill afford to overlook is the insights which often come to those who brood over the biblical records and who report in sermon and devotional literature.² The Scriptures are everyman's property and not the specific preserve of the scholarly elite; no individual church or group has a monopoly on correct exegesis. There is some truth in each of the contemporary "schools" of interpretation, some having more truth than others. The mature scholar is likely to glean insight from each without rendering allegiance to any one.

1. *Subjective preparation* for interpretation is an important part of the exegete's task, especially in the study of the Bible. A certain mental

2. Brevard Childs, in a lecture to the Society of Biblical Literature, Dec. 29, 1967.

and spiritual condition is essential for effective biblical interpretation since the Bible is unique in its appeal to the conscience—"deep calleth unto deep." A prayer for spiritual illumination is appropriate. A willingness to respond affirmatively facilitates learning ("if any man will do his will he shall know"—John 7:17). However, it is well to remember that the authority and the relevance of the written Word are not dependent upon man's response; God's message will not be vetoed by man's reaction or neglect.

2. *Objective preparation* is indispensable, preparation in which no pains are spared to get into the inner message of the Scriptures. Each discipline should be allowed to make its full contribution. The valid contributions of form-criticism, textual criticism, source criticism, archaeology and other approaches should be welcomed. But it should not be overlooked that the basic task of the interpreter is to come to grips with the extant literacy vehicle. To expect the end without the means is presumptuous. Word studies and syntactical studies come into play here. A threefold objective should guide the use of tools. The task is first to ascertain the author's original purpose and message. This calls for a knowledge of the *Sitz im Leben* of the passage or text. The second necessity is that of ascertaining the basic *principle* which emerges from the study and which was applicable to that historical situation. The third step is the courageous application of this principle of truth to the contemporary situation, both personally and corporately.

3. The expositor's prime task is not only to understand the meaning of the passage but to enter empathetically into the historical situation and into his own existential situation so completely that he can translate the message of the Scriptures from that idiom to one meaningful to his own contemporaries. The prophets and evangelists were skilled in this task as demonstrated by Nathan's parable, Isaiah's vineyard song, the object-lessons by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the dialogue of Malachi. In John's Gospel such terms as bread, water, light, life, lamb, shepherd, vine and word (*logos*) reflect the evangelist's eagerness to communicate to his contemporaries and to readers of all times and climes.

4. Persuasiveness is second only to clarity in importance. The biblical message is so important that it is incumbent upon the interpreter not only to clarify but also to persuade, to secure commitment. His persuasiveness will be in proportion to his own commitment.

5. Finally, the effective interpreter must translate the message into flesh and blood, into actual life situations. The evangelists themselves had no sympathy for those who gave assent to propositions, but stopped short of involvement with the needs of their neighbors (I John 3:17). Jesus Himself "wrought and afterwards he taught." The historian reported what Jesus began "to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1). When Henry Joel Cadbury, New Testament scholar at Harvard, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1948, was asked how he combined his social services (as Chairman of the

American Friends' Service Committee) with the world of scholarship (as a member of the Translation Committee of the Revised Standard Version) he replied simply, "I am trying to translate the New Testament." The hermeneutical task is not complete until the Word becomes flesh.