

have happened because they could no longer regard the church issue as insignificant and have been compelled to ask what the Lord requires of them here and now. Who of us could suggest that the question can be avoided altogether in our own generation?

CONCLUSION

The Executive Council of the BEC is anxious that we should express as widely as is consistent with our separated principles the fellowship of the body of Christ today. It must be obvious that there is danger of the fragmentation of the body in a way that is neither healthy for the body nor attractive to the world. We are seeking to retain personal fellowship with evangelicals in other parts of the universal church both in the United Kingdom and overseas. We are actively concerned to keep the lines of communication open. No-one is able to predict exactly how the next decades will affect existing church structures. What is imperative is that we should know our own biblical principles and seek to live in a way which is sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is saying and doing in our own generation. The whole body of Christ is facing two inescapable challenges. The church stands in need of constant reformation, and for this we must work together. The church also stands in need of revival, and for this we must plead, together.

HERMENEUTICS

Rev John Legg

Mr Legg pastors an evangelical church in North Allerton, Yorkshire

About thirty ministers belonging to the churches affiliated to the BEC assembled in Northampton on March 13th for two days of concentrated study on the topic of 'Hermeneutics', the principles on which we interpret scripture. The five papers had been prepared and circulated beforehand, and a great debt is owed to all the speakers in preparing for the conference.

Pastor Peter Misselbrook presented the first paper, on 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology' and this was a stimulating beginning opening remarks charted the course of our later discussions with uncanny accuracy as he insisted that our study was not a mere academic exercise, but was relevant to our preaching: to the biblical authority behind our words, to the practical application and to the man in the pew, who

should be enabled to see for himself what God is saying.

The paper was based on the principle that scripture must be allowed to interpret itself, in character and structure as well as in content, and that we must therefore discern a coherence and unity which looks both forwards and backwards. In search of this he began with some general comments on the nature of biblical theology both in relation to non-evangelical varieties and also to that of Gerhardus Vos, in his important and generally helpful books. Mr Misselbrook expressed concern over Vos's limitation of the source material for biblical theology to 'God's verbal or doctrinal self-revelation ... to which the scriptures bear witness', which restricts the idea of revelation and effectively demotes some of the Bible, such as the narratives and the wisdom literature, to a second-class status.

In coming to his own 'interpretative structure' of the Bible, or rather recognising the Bible's own structure, Pastor Misselbrook set aside the 'well-developed' concept of the covenant of grace as the central and unifying theme of the Bible, regarding it as 'a static dogmatic conception which fails to do justice to the narrative character of scripture ... to the plurality of covenants in the Old Testament.' (While this is certainly true of the seventeenth-century covenant theologians, I personally felt that it was less than fair to Calvin and Professor John Murray). He also rejected the suggestions of the promise or the kingdom for this role, as, too, the idea of simply God himself, which says so much that it says nothing at all.

Mr Misselbrook would start from 'the fact that the Bible tells a story'. If this seems to be subject to the same criticism of vagueness, he would answer,

'The unity of a story is complex rather than simple. The unity does not consist in there being the same characters throughout, though there must be some continuity governing the changing subjects of the story. The unity does not necessarily consist in a single theme which dominates the story in all its parts: several themes may be interwoven throughout the story. Thus it may be difficult to give a single and unambiguous answer to the question, "What is the story about?" without collapsing into broad and unhelpful generalisations. Again, the unity of a story does not consist in the sameness of all its parts; one chapter may deal with characters and themes which are very different from those of another chapter. In one place the story may appear to move towards a climax and conclusion only then to move off

in a second and rather different direction. Thus the very different parts together form a unified and coherent story in which each part makes a significant contribution because it is set within the overall scheme ... The unity of a story is thus dynamic rather than static since it becomes evident only when we observe the way in which each section plays its part within the moving drama.'

The central focus of this story is Christ 'himself, but 'this does not mean that every text of scripture must be made to speak directly of him, rather that every text and portion of scripture is part of the one story which has its focus in him.'

Mr Misselbrook went on to trace the story through the various eras of revelation, from Genesis 1-3 'which sets the scene for the remainder of the story', through 'the dramatic story of the redeeming activity of God' from Genesis 4 on. A summary cannot give any true impression of the riches of this section as the paper noted the development of the story through the establishment of the monarchy and the prophetic era and on to the earthly ministry of Christ and the apostolic continuation in the creation and instruction of the church.

The writer had been asked to comment on two 'problem passages', Judges 11:30-40 and Exodus 4:24-26, but this was something of an anti-climax, as biblical theology appeared to cast little light on them. Mr Misselbrook also dealt with another difficult passage, the slaughter of the Canaanites in 1 Samuel 15, which he linked most effectively with 'the redemption of God's people and the possession of their inheritance' which had to be 'accomplished through an act of judgement'.

Pastor Misselbrook's two conclusions are well worth quoting. First, 'The methods and approach of biblical theology ... help us to understand the scriptures by viewing each scripture within its proper context within the Bible story'. Secondly, 'the story which the scriptures tell is our story. In reading the Bible we cannot be spectators of its redemptive drama ... for we are intimately bound up in this story and are carried along in its stream. The application of the biblical message is thus not left to the artifice, ingenuity and whim of the preacher, but springs directly from the relationship between the redemptive story of the Bible and those to whom this redemption is proclaimed.'

This paper stimulated an interesting discussion, especially on the relation between the Old and New Testaments in terms of finding Christ

'in all the scripture'. In this respect the question of the Song of Solomon and its 'canonical context' was raised, which leads us directly to the second paper, by Pastor Robin Dowling on 'Contextual Factors'. While it provoked some controversy in detail, the general substance of the paper commanded a large measure of agreement, providing a basis for profitable discussion. Once again the author's introduction stressed the essentially practical nature of the subject. 'If we are to apply a text of scripture to ourselves, we must understand what it means within its context', otherwise 'our application is invalid.' While thus highlighting the humanness of the scriptures, Mr Dowling in no way detracted from the Bible's divine inspiration; he was concerned only 'to acknowledge that God chose to reveal his word through men living in history.' From this basis, then, he dealt illuminatingly with three contextual factors.

First, we have the author's original intention in writing. This means the grammatico-historical approach with a stress on purpose. In presenting his paper, Mr Dowling made the necessary point that he was not limiting the meaning of the scripture to the author's meaning, but he was saying that God's meaning is 'never less' than the author's and is always consistent with it. Within this framework he then discussed the importance of semantics in providing a linguistic context and the limitations of word-studies which major on etymology and cumulative usage, and isolate words from their context. Whole passages should be dealt with, even when preaching on one verse, so as to avoid atomistic interpretation. 'If the text is expounded within its context, however, the sermon will be controlled by the intention of the inspired author.' This led to the necessity for a thorough analysis of the literary context for which he quoted a pattern of six steps, beginning with finding 'a provisional purpose statement' for the passage which will be revised and amended until the interpreter can 'formulate a succinct, polished, universal statement, which can be taken and specifically applied to his life.'

Secondly, we must take note of the situation of the people to whom he wrote: 'the background of a particular historical, ideological and cultural milieu ... We are not dealing simply with timeless propositions delivered in a vacuum.' Thus we must know the historical background of Isaiah if we are to grasp the theological significance of his prophecy. The nature of ideological factors is a little more controversial in the case of references to contemporary myths, but is sometimes helpful. However, it was the cultural factor to which our attention was most

forcefully directed, where there is a need to assess whether a teaching or injunction is culturally relative or 'culture-bound'.

In this respect Mr Dowling came to the conclusion that the prohibition on women teachers in the church found in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is not culture-bound or relative, applying only in Paul's day and culture, since Paul refers to basic creation principles found in Genesis 1-3. Mr Dowling's balanced attitude was shown by his treatment of the holy kiss in 1 Corinthians 16:20, which he does regard as culture-bound, since 'such an action simply does not have the same significance in our society as it did in the near-eastern societies of New Testament times. However,' he continues, 'even here it would appear that there is a principle enshrined in this culturally conditioned exhortation and that we should adopt such physical expressions of fellowship as are appropriate in our culture.'

The paper then dealt with the most controversial passage, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. It is not possible to follow here the details of his exegesis, in which he acknowledged help from J.B.Hurley's 'Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective', but it will be helpful to note his method of proceeding. His chief concern is that the fundamental teaching of the passage on headship should not be overlooked. Paul argues the point by reference to creation principles, not cultural matters. The issue of the covering/veil/hat/hair style (depending on one's translation) is the expression of that headship in terms of their culture and is not directly binding. Some of those present took issue with the speaker on this point, but it was interesting and encouraging to note that they too recognised that the issue was one of determining what arguments were used to support the practice in question.

The third aspect from which context may be viewed is the way the author writes, i.e., the literary characteristics which must be taken into account. The author referred to various literary genres, but laid most stress on 'the distinctive theological concerns' of the biblical writers. He illustrated this most helpfully from the Old Testament by pointing out the different, but not opposed, theological viewpoints of the authors of Kings and Chronicles respectively. The former, the so-called Deuteronomist, stresses the way blessing for Israel depends on the nation's obedience under its king, in terms of Deuteronomy 11:26-28, while the latter, priestly, writer concentrates on the line of David and the fulfilment of God's promise to him.

In the New Testament Mr Dowling dealt with the writings of the apostle John. John's Gospel, he maintained is true history, but it is interpreted history, fulfilling the purpose stated in 20:30-31. With due caution he warned us against the presuppositions of liberal and some neo-evangelical scholars and exponents of redaction-criticism, but also against the danger of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. The paper concluded with a warning that we should not regard these debates as making the interpreter's task impossible and an exhortation to devote ourselves to using every resource available to us to make the Bible's message clearer to our hearers.

Professor W.J.Cameron presented the third paper on 'The Importance of Types of Language in Interpretation'. His topic was more formal and factual than the other four and, therefore, did not yield so much material for discussion, although the content itself was most useful. The paper was marked by a running battle which he conducted with various opponents of evangelical interpretation and in introducing his subject Professor Cameron outlined three current tendencies which make his contribution vital.

First, we are faced with the 'New Hermeneutic' which largely devalues the traditional grammatico-historical approach, regarding this as merely a preliminary - and not even a necessary one - to the 'language-event' in which we can 'encounter' God, without actually receiving any knowledge of God himself. Thus human language is considered to be utterly inadequate to convey knowledge of God. This is true also of the second tendency in many academic literary circles to say that human language cannot express feelings and the inner life of man. On this basis, linguistic analysis of a purely functional kind controls much biblical interpretation. The third tendency comes from oriental ideas which discount the whole idea of communication between God and man, and regard 'non-being' as a prerequisite to religious receptivity.

Against all this Professor Cameron asserted that human language, while not wholly competent, is sufficient for the revelation of God. Thus God chose spokesmen who 'by the aid of the Holy Spirit ... were able to receive what he revealed and also to communicate it accurately in the ordinary forms of speech to their contemporaries. The biblical writings comprise a variety of literary forms ... They press into service almost all, if not all, the main kinds of language recognised today, in order to convey adequately a revelation from God, able to instruct men for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.'

It is impossible in a brief report to give the details of this paper, but we can indicate his headings with something of their particular relevance. On 'Informative Language' Professor Cameron was at pains to stress that while his idea of information about events included all that James Barr, for instance, would include, he regarded the latter's view as falling far short of a biblical conception both in terms of extent and accuracy, failing to take account, as it does, of propositional revelation. Similarly, on 'Performative Language', he pointed out that the biblical idea is not of a language event, a belief in the magic power of words, but faith in the power of the word of God. Passing more briefly over imperatival (commands) and celebratory language (praise and worship), Professor Cameron dealt helpfully with the imprecatory (cursing) language of parts of Jeremiah and eighteen of the Psalms. He did not accept that these writers 'were either mastered at that point by sinful human impulses or were reflecting a contemporary standpoint of thought lower than the requirement of scripture.' 'Illuminative' or figurative language is a case where a special form is used to make possible a fuller and clearer revelation.

Professor Cameron defended the gospel settings of the parables against modern theories of a later ecclesiastical context and also gave a balanced view of the way to interpret them. A rather brief section on types, partly because of some doubt as to whether they really belonged to this paper, was taken up in later discussion, linked with the question of finding Christ in the Old Testament. A treatment of symbolic and apocalyptic language led to the final, interesting section of the paper, which discussed 'Language of Creation and Consummation', comparing the usage of Genesis 1-3 with the closing chapters of Revelation.

Several times in the earlier papers and discussion the topic of the law had arisen, so we awaited with especial interest the Rev Philip Eveson's contribution on 'Law and Laws'. As he put it in his introduction, 'In fact the whole subject (of the law) is once more in the melting-pot and the settled convictions of a former generation are being challenged afresh.' Thus, 'the key question to which this paper is directed concerns the attitude to the law by the New Testament and, in particular, the way specific Old Testament laws are treated in their New Testament environment.'

Mr Eveson began to pick his way through the minefield by discussing the actual meaning of law and coming to the conclusion that while 'torah' does refer to a code of law, among other things, 'it is as if this code

were the instruction of a father to his son. All this is far removed from a cold, matter-of-fact legal document.' He distinguished the various codes given on different occasions and also the different forms of law: the casuistic or case laws which are impersonal, and the more direct, second-person apodictic commands and prohibitions. All are, however, set within a narrative framework.

Moving to more controversial areas, Mr Eveson asserted, 'Nowhere in the OT is law presented as a means of gaining salvation. Neither the individual nor the nation was saved by law. The Mosaic law is to be seen in the context of the Sinai covenant, and in form it is very like the ancient near-eastern vassal treaties. However, the essential thing is that God's covenant was an act of sovereign grace towards a people whom he chose to save from Egypt. All the law and codes of law are to be viewed in this light.' Then he adds, 'There is an even more fundamental context for law than the covenant, for both the law and the covenant itself are based on the character of God.' He finds justification within the torah itself for recognising the two great commands to love and the Decalogue itself as being 'more basic' than other laws, and 'the importance of the Decalogue is not ignored in the NT where quotations are made from it on many occasions and every one of the Ten Commandments is taught either by word or example.'

The great issue, of course, is the so-called 'third use' of the law in terms of its abiding validity for the Christian. Mr Eveson discusses and rejects those views which regard the law as no longer binding or which substitute the law of love or which arbitrarily divide the law into moral, civil and ceremonial. Finally he settles for Gordon Wenham's view that 'only the underlying principles of OT law are binding for the Christian.' In some cases, 'there is no need to look behind the actual law to find the principle. With other laws this is necessary ... because our situation is different. Nevertheless all the OT laws do contain moral and religious principles of abiding validity which our Lord and his apostles make abundantly clear.'

The second part of the paper consisted of a most helpful detailed study of Leviticus 19, based on these principles. I cannot reproduce the detail of this exposition, but one long and one short quotation will indicate the method adopted. 'In v.2 the exhortation to "be holy" stands apart from the rest of the chapter and all the laws that follow are dependent upon it ... holiness is the great theme of this book ... The holy God is associated with life, order, normality and cleanness. The

opposite of all this is death, disorder, deformity and uncleanness ... Holiness is a state to which people or things are brought and there are two aspects to it. It is God who sanctifies, but man is commanded to sanctify what God sanctifies ... In keeping the list of duties that follows, Israel will demonstrate that she is God's holy people. Not only the Ten Commandments and social laws but the food regulations and other laws of separation were reminders of moral values. For instance, by identifying the normal member of each system of creation, such as fish with fins and scales, as clean, God was reminding his people of the need for moral perfection ... In this chapter, holiness is given physical expression at every turn and so emphasis is placed on the fact that holiness is a life characterised by purity and integrity ... It is against the OT background of holiness and cleanness that Paul can speak of individual believers and the local church as a temple which should not be defiled.'

Then, to see the outworking of this, Mr Eveson refers to Wenham's understanding of the matter of forbidden mixtures in vv.19-25. 'In major and minor decisions of life Israel was taught and constantly reminded through such laws that she was different, that she was a holy nation set apart for God. Israel is clean and other nations are unclean. The ban on mixed breeding comes into the same category as the ban on intermarrying with other nations. They are to keep this principle of separateness which is embodied in the divine statutes ... The principle of separation still applies to the new Israel of God. Believers are to keep themselves unspotted from the world, to marry "in the Lord", etc.'

In his conclusion Mr Eveson reaffirmed that the law of Moses cannot save, or change lives. It 'must be seen in a different light since the coming of Christ. The law is fulfilled in Christ and must now be viewed through Christ ... Nevertheless all the principles of OT law are still binding on the NT people of God.' Although Mr Eveson's position seemed to command general approval, it appeared to me that not everyone meant the same thing by 'the underlying principles of the law'!

The final paper, by the Rev John Nicholls, was entitled 'The Kingdom of God'. This hermeneutic of the kingdom was the application of the general principles to a particular scriptural topic and as such was very satisfying. In discussion it did not produce any progress in formulating principles, but it did lead to the most lively session of the conference!

Mr Nicholls began by setting the scene biblically. 'In one sense the message is "the kingdom has come"; in another sense, the longing is for the kingdom that is yet to come. In other words, we meet the kingdom in terms of a tension between the "already" and the "not yet".' Neither element must be removed, as with C.H.Dodd and the dispensationalists (at opposite extremes), for 'the relationship is the key to biblical hermeneutic of the kingdom and the relationship is not a simple one.' In the light of this, the paper presented five salient features of the kingdom as revealed in the ministry of Jesus.

1. The effective presence of the King. This is linked with the basic meaning of kingdom as 'reign', with 'realm' only secondary. 'The kingdom is all about the immanence of God, the sovereign activity of God himself in redemption.'

2. The conquest of Satan and his forces. 'As against the evangelical tendency to "pietise" Satan, i.e., to think of him only in terms of the individual believer's experience,' we must see that 'the kingdom involves a decisive struggle between Jesus and Satan, a struggle in which Jesus is Christus Victor.'

3. The kingdom of God is universal, i.e., salvation is not limited to the Jews. The Acts of the Apostles is 'a description of how Jesus sent his apostles to proclaim the kingdom of God among both Jews and Gentiles.'

4. The kingdom of God is that which brings in true blessedness, effectively remedying the sufferings and miseries caused by sin. Thus 'although material blessings in themselves do not constitute the kingdom of God ... they must not be neglected or despised, for the reversal of the miseries of the Fall involves the restoration of all things.'

5. The kingdom has a quality of mystery about it. It is not 'of this world' and the surprising things associated with the kingdom centre on the 'absurdity' of the Cross.

Mr Nicholls dealt briefly with the Old Testament roots of the concept, before tracing the history of the coming of the kingdom most illuminatingly, by linking it, more closely than others have done, to the history of Jesus. In the light of Matthew 16:28 he concluded that 'Jesus spoke of an important new era in the history of his kingdom, subsequent to its first "coming" in his Galilean ministry, but prior to the

"consummation" of his return. This leads us to recognise that the "already/not yet" framework requires some modification.' This new stage involved Christ's authority over all things by which he equipped and enabled the apostles to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to all the earth, and depends on his presence with them by the Holy Spirit. 'The Bible knows of no other turning-point in the history of the kingdom until the return of Christ.' A most helpful comment, hermeneutically, is that this close relation between the kingdom and the presence of Christ, in whatever form, 'may also help to account for the terminology of the New Testament where Paul speaks of the "lordship" of Christ rather than the kingdom. Certainly there is a close relation also with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.'

Thus we may conclude that what has come is 'the Son of God to wage decisive battle against Satan, to establish a salvation that will ultimately reverse all the effects of sin, and to bring the good news of salvation to all the world. What has not yet come is the final peace ... the complete eradication of all the fruit of sin in the world. These things will be finally achieved with the return of Christ in visible glory, but the achievement is being advanced by Christ's present rule over all things, exercised especially through the giving of his Holy Spirit.'

The relevance of all this to many controversial interpretative issues is obvious but Mr Nicholls had to limit his application to two areas. On the relation between the kingdom and the church, he was unhappy with Herman Ridderbos's idea that they are two entities, which he sees as two concentric circles. If, instead, we think more of reign than realm, the difficulty largely disappears, and we can see the kingdom as a category, not of ethics or social action, but of the church's mission to the world. The church is the community of the kingdom, through which it works in the world.

Mr Nicholls felt that 'Liberation Theology' deserved a more extended treatment than he was able to give it, but he nevertheless succeeded, in short space, in showing the fallacies of this approach to, or abuse of, the concept of the kingdom. He also reminded us, however, on the basis that 'there is always a place where a heresy points to a failure or imbalance in the doctrine, life and work of the church', that we must look again at some of the traditional views and practices within evangelical churches. This initiated a very fruitful discussion on the relation of the church and kingdom to the world in terms of social action,

and on the application of the law to unbelievers and the structures of human society.

The conference must be rated a success on several counts. Under the firm, but spiritually and intellectually challenging, chairmanship of the Rev Hywel Jones, discussion ranged widely, fervently but tolerantly over many issues. Opinions may vary as to how much light was manifested, but at least the heat was only the warmth of fellowship and a common concern to understand and apply the word of God, on the part of men from widely contrasting theological and ecclesiastical traditions. To discuss the law, the Sabbath, veils, the covenant (and even mention baptism) without a trace of rancour is something to be noted in these days.

Frequently we went beyond our mandate to discuss the application of hermeneutical principles rather than the principles themselves. This was good in that it showed that we were not engaged in a fruitless and futile academic discussion. Among many other topics we considered our dependence on the Holy Spirit in every aspect of our work, how to preach so as to be understood and revival. On the debit side, while there was agreement on general hermeneutical principles, our stress on and differences over the outworking of these indicated that more work is needed on detailed principles, which would improve the likelihood of agreement on the outworking.

If such a conference is to be justified, (apart from the pleasure it gave to those who attended!) it must bear fruit in further work by those who gained, as I did, much mental and spiritual stimulus. Who from among or outside that number will produce detailed, practical answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a valid difference between principles and rules in interpretation or life?
2. How do we find Christ in all the scriptures when he is not there directly?
3. How do we decide which stage of kingdom development applies in any given reference?
4. What principles determine whether something in the Old Testament is typical or whether a parable in the New has more than one legitimate point?
5. How far may we bring extra-biblical information to bear in contextual

problems?

There is ample room for future hard work, for the profit of preachers and, through them, of the whole church.

THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

(PART 2)

Dr Eryl Davies

After suggesting some reasons why this is an important and relevant subject, the first article (Issue No.9, November 1982) described the origins and features of the New Hermeneutic. In this second article the weaknesses and challenge of the New Hermeneutic are briefly considered.

Although we are in radical disagreement with the New Hermeneutic, we must nevertheless acknowledge that this new approach has made a contribution to hermeneutics. For example, its emphasis on the existential character of human knowledge has helped to undermine traditional confidence in the role of human 'reason' to establish 'objective', 'impartial' knowledge. The New Hermeneutic has also exposed the barrenness and aridity of liberal theology and the critical approach to the Bible while Fuch's treatment of the parables helps us to appreciate the absorbing but disturbing way in which our Lord challenged his original hearers. We also have much to learn from the practical, pastoral concern of Ebeling and Fuchs to apply the Word in contemporary situations. But before we assess the challenge of the New Hermeneutic, we need firstly to draw attention to some of the weaknesses inherent in this approach and teaching.

WEAKNESSES

A major weakness of the New Hermeneutic is its critical view of the Bible. 'It is absurd', remarks Ebeling, 'to designate a transmitted text as God's Word'.¹ Many other quotations could be given not only from Ebeling but also from Fuchs and other exponents of the New Hermeneutic to illustrate their rejection of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture. The hermeneutical 'insights' provided by this school stem from a theological and philosophical framework diametrically opposed to 'the faith