

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)

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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

once delivered to the saints' (Jude 3).

Having abandoned the objective authority of the Bible, the New Hermeneutic is guilty of a subjectivism which relativises revealed truth in a radical and alarming way. This criticism can be illustrated in several ways. For example, while Ebeling and Fuchs countenance the critical-historical method as a preliminary towards interpretation, they nevertheless seriously disparage the role of the mind in interpretation. Commenting on this, Hans Jonas criticises Herdegger's notion of openness which underlies the approach of Fuchs and Ebeling. If we exchange our initiative in thinking for a mere 'listening' then rather than escaping from our own historicity, he warns, we make everything 'a matter of the chance factor of the historical generation I was born into'.² Furthermore, for the New Hermeneutic there can be no 'objective' and final meaning of a text yet, in reply, we insist that because God's self-revelation has been inscripturated perfectly we must take seriously, as the words of God, the text of the Bible and its original, intended meaning. Professor Howard Marshall expresses the point admirably: '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 ... It is of special importance to recognise that the significance flows out of the meaning'.³

But what, according to the New Hermeneutic, do we achieve when we interpret the New Testament text? What are we doing? Fuchs replies that 'in the interaction of the text with daily life we experience the truth of the New Testament'.⁴ This sounds impressive but the answer is deceptive and ambiguous. Ebeling expresses it differently: 'the text ... becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience.'⁵ Fuchs explains in more detail what this means or what the interpreter receives from the understanding of a text. God's Word, he says, concerns 'the meaning of Being' and its truth is the call of Being. The language-event is essentially a call or a pledge and not the communication of doctrines. Instead of conveying ideas, Jesus MAKES a promise, LAYS DOWN a demand, or EFFECTS a gift.⁶ In his treatment of the parables, Fuchs explains this essential nature of the language-event as 'call' and 'pledge'. The 'call' involves an engagement with the verdict of Jesus. 'The parable', he writes, 'effects and demands our decision'.⁷ Fuchs explains that 'to have faith in Jesus now means essentially to repeat Jesus' decision'.⁸ Basically, this means our willingness to abandon pride and self-assertion and thus repeat the 'decision' of Jesus to love

and even suffer, if necessary.⁹ No doctrinal instruction then is provided in this language-event and this fact prompts Clark Pinnock to describe the New Hermeneutic as a 'linguistic mysticism. Faith arises in an encounter with words.'¹⁰

Another weakness inherent in the approach of the New Hermeneutic is its mystical and inadequate view of the nature of language. Ebeling and Fuchs are almost exclusively concerned with imperative, direct language and discredit informative and descriptive language. 'The basic structure of a word is therefore not statement ... but appraisal', writes Ebeling, 'certainly not in the colourless sense of information but in the pregnant sense of participation and communication'.¹¹ Criticising this position, A.C. Thiselton appeals to Amis Wilder's verdict: 'Fuchs refuses to define the content of faith ... He is afraid of the word as convention or as a means of conveying information ... Fuchs carries this so far that revelation reveals nothing ... Jesus calls, indeed, for decision ... But surely his words, deeds, presence, person, and message rested upon dogma, eschatological and theocratic'.¹²

We must widen the discussion in order to highlight further the inadequacy of this view of human language. According to Hebrews 1:1-2 we have a 'LANGUAGE-USING GOD'¹³ but the language God used in his self-revelation was not restricted to performative (eg Genesis 1:3), imperative (eg decalogue and details of God's revealed will relating to human behaviour as well as the command to sinners to repent) or direct language between persons. Another important function of language is to convey information to people who lack the relevant knowledge or data. This must be regarded as one of the primary functions of language within revelation for God has taken the initiative to reveal truth which otherwise we would never have discovered. There is also the illustrative or illuminative use of language where pictures, parables, metaphors are employed to enrich our appreciation or understanding of a doctrine as in Matthew 6:26-29, and other parables of the Lord. Language may also be laudatory conveying the response of astonishment, worship and appreciation. We must also insist that language itself is neither 'reality' nor 'Being' but, for example, the words of scripture point beyond themselves to God Himself.

The New Hermeneutic also exaggerates the difference between the original writers and the interpreter. Admittedly it is not easy to appreciate the background and etymology of many biblical words or the original intention of the authors so here is a challenge for us to use the

grammatico-historical method as thoroughly and extensively as possible. Proponents of the New Hermeneutic, however, argue that the situations and outlook of biblical writers were radically different from those of the contemporary interpreter and, consequently, it is unreasonable to use the traditional hermeneutical method in understanding the text. Professor Howard Marshall replies to this position: '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'¹⁴ While our criticisms of the New Hermeneutic have not been detailed or exhaustive, we have hopefully said enough to indicate some of the major weaknesses and errors inherent in its teaching.

CHALLENGE

While the New Hermeneutic is in error at many crucial points, it would be foolish for us to ignore its challenge. What then can we learn from this hermeneutical approach?

One immediate challenge to us is the pastoral concern underlying and motivating the New Hermeneutic; it is certainly not an arid, academic approach unrelated to everyday life. 'Our concern is proclamation', declares Gerhard Ebeling and it is from this perspective that he and Fuchs attempt to explain how the language of the Bible speaks afresh to modern man. The answers they provide, of course, are wrong but their concern is nevertheless genuine and practical. Throughout his writings, for example, Fuchs grapples with the problem, 'What do we have to do at our desks, if we want later to set the text in front of us in the pulpit?'¹⁵ Ebeling is concerned that 'the rift between theology and the so-called "faith of the congregation" has become oppressively wide.'¹⁶ He also stresses the ecclesiastical character of theology and warns that absorption 'in theological work should never mislead a person into becoming distant from life and from that which serves it'.¹⁷ Is there not a growing rift among us between theology and the church, between sound doctrine and conduct or experience and between church and society? In addition, there is an increasing number of pressing, contemporary problems to which we need to address ourselves if we are to be faithful to the Word of God and also to our people who are sometimes caught up in complex problems as in the area of social and medical ethics. There

is the added challenge, of course, of the effective and arresting proclamation of the Word. In other words, we must do our theology and hermeneutics well and within a pastoral context deeply sensitive to the questions and needs of our people.

The main contribution of the New Hermeneutic concerns their approach to our Lord's parables - the way in which Jesus creates and uses pictures as a means of identifying his message with the world of his hearers as well as the sense of shock and challenge provided in the application of the parable. Concerning the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector in Luke 18:9-14, for example, Walter Wink claims: 'the scholar, having finished his work (of exegesis) lays down his pen, oblivious to the way in which he has FALSIFIED THE TEXT in accordance with unconscious tendencies; so much so that he has maimed its original intent until it has actually turned into its opposite'.¹⁸ Wink continues: 'Any MODERN reader at all familiar with the text knows that (1) "Pharisees" are hypocrites and (2) Jesus praises the publican. The unreflective tendency of every reader is to identify with the more positive figures in an account. Consequently, modern readers will almost invariably identify with the publican. By that inversion of identification, the paradox of the justification of the ungodly is lost ... The story is then deformed ... All this because the exegete hid behind his descriptive task without examining the recoil of the parable upon contemporary self-understanding.'¹⁹ There is truth in what Wink says here and the challenge of his remarks is two-fold: first of all, we must be thorough in our use of the grammatico-historical method and avoid the mistake which Wink exposes. Secondly, we must try to present the challenge of the Word as powerfully and convincingly as possible.

A third challenge is the importance of applying the text. Gadamer argued that application is essential to the whole experience of understanding a text and he refers to legal hermeneutics to illustrate the point. 'Understanding', he writes, 'is always application'²⁰ and Fuchs and Ebeling agree with him. Clearly we must not, like the New Hermeneutic, reduce hermeneutics to application because the groundwork of application must always be exegesis and synthesis. But what we learn from them is that our work is not complete when we have established the text's meaning. In his commentary on Romans, Karl Barth pays this compliment to Calvin: 'How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent. Paul speaks and the man of the

sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible.' 21 We must avoid at least two errors here. The error of ignoring the original, intended meaning of the text and applying only a random, pious thought and the other error of doing no more than exegeting a text. Application, although it means hard work, is a necessity not a luxury or option.

Again, Ebeling's warning that it is possible to understand all the individual words of a text without understanding its message is a salutary warning to us. 22 While detailed exegesis of individual words is important we must at the same time be familiar with the thrust of the whole passage and the message of the book itself, indeed, of the whole Bible.

Do we need the New Hermeneutic to remind us of the need for the interpreter and preacher of the Scripture to be gripped, moved and challenged deeply by the Word he is studying and preaching? Hermeneutics must never become a mere intellectual exercise.

Without questioning the crucial distinction and relationship between Word and Spirit, the New Hermeneutic also reminds us that there are 'existential' factors which affect our interpretation of Scripture. In other words, while the Bible itself is infallible, our own interpretation of the Bible is notoriously fallible. Certainly as children of our age we are predisposed and conditioned in more ways than we imagine. Tradition, family upbringing, education, the prevailing philosophy, temperament and sin, etc. all play a part in the way we come to the sacred text. On the other hand, we need genuine 'mystical' elements in our approach to the text. We are not advocating Heidegger's openness or silence but rather more prayer, the seeking of God Himself as well as a deeper experience of the Word.

It would be a mistake for readers to imagine that they can ignore the New Hermeneutic in their churches. Some of our young people pursuing studies in theology and religious studies may already have been introduced to this teaching and may feel confused. Are we able to help them? Furthermore, we need to appreciate the fact that the influence of the New Hermeneutic is extensive in contemporary theological writings. While discussing recently the extent of the influence of the New Hermeneutic with a reputable publishing company, I was told that 'most of our books take in or acknowledge the New Hermeneutic'. The whole area of Christian

ethics, too, is being affected by this school which contributes to a depreciation of law and objective, biblical standards. Just as serious is the attempt more recently by one of its leading proponents, Walter Wink, to adapt the New Hermeneutic to personal/group bible-study.²³ The approach is revolutionary and far-reaching in its implications. Concerned over the 'split' between the academic study of the Scriptures and the problems of life, Professor Wink in this book marries the principles of the New Hermeneutic to Jungian psychology and the questioning method convinced that the 'split' between an intellectual approach to the Bible and life 'is virtually mirrored in the way the two hemispheres of the brain are specialized.'²⁴ A review of this book will appear later but, in conclusion, allow me to make two comments. Many ordinary people are reading the book and are imbibing both the principles of the New Hermeneutic and Jungian psychology in the confidence that these are indispensable keys to the interpretation of the Bible. Secondly, the book is destructive of orthodox, biblical teaching. Can we afford to ignore the challenge of the New Hermeneutic?

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OLD TESTAMENT HELPS

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The last two years has seen some exciting development in the field of Old Testament publications. In particular there has been the beginning of several major new series of Old Testament commentaries and the progression of some earlier series into areas which are rarely commented upon in the Old Testament literature.

Under the former category comes the series of commentaries entitled 'The Bible Student's Commentary'^{1,2,3,4}. This is a highly promising series with a projected sixty-two volumes on the Old and New Testament. The volumes are a translation of the 'Korte Verklaring Der Heilige Schrift' which was originally published in Dutch between 1930 and 1960. The various contributors take a conservative evangelical stand and the publishers have been willing to comment upon statements made in the Leviticus and Numbers volumes which reflect the unorthodox viewpoint of the original author. This is very helpful and might usefully be adopted by other publishers of commentaries. The series is exegetically very thorough and it majors on exegesis, explanation and background. In these areas the commentaries are invaluable even if they are slightly dated and somewhat pedestrian. Little attention is give to hermeneutics although the volume by Gispen in particular makes use of a controlled typology which seems to reflect the Dutch Biblical Theology Movement. The commentaries take a very strong apologetic slant and this is especially true in the Aalders volume where the documentary hypothesis is brilliantly debunked. Aalders essay on the Pentateuch is of particular value to the student. The style of these volumes makes them very readable, with few footnotes and the standard of translation is consistently high.

In comparison with other commentaries the Aalders volume will now probably rank above that of Leopold. Gispen's work is the best conservative commentary currently available in an area little commented upon by evan-