

## THE NEW HERMENEUTIC (Part 1)

Dr Eryl Davies

In case this title appears unduly technical and remote to some readers, I want to begin by underlining the importance and relevance of the subject for ourselves. Since 1950 there has been an 'explosion of interest in hermeneutics'<sup>1</sup> and scholars like A.C. Thiselton<sup>2</sup> and W.C.Kaiser<sup>3</sup> rightly speak of "the hermeneutical debate". The debate was initiated by German scholars with ensuing American discussion by men like James M.Robinson, John Dillenger, Robert Funk and John Cobb. Evangelicals have not really been involved in this debate but the time is 'long past', warns an American Evangelical, Walter Kaiser, "for our entry into this field once again".<sup>4</sup> James Packer makes a similar point and speaks of Evangelicals as remaining "on the edge of the modern Protestant debate about Holy Scripture".<sup>5</sup> This on-going hermeneutical debate centering on the nature of language and the fusion of word and hearer presents an enormous challenge to us as Evangelicals.

A second reason for discussing the subject here is the fact that the New Hermeneutic is "the most serious rival"<sup>6</sup> today to our own grammatico-historical method for interpreting the Bible. While our own method carefully exegetes the text and establishes its meaning in the light of the writer's original intention, the New Hermeneutic has very different goals and threatens to eclipse our method even amongst Evangelicals. We must be alert to what is happening in contemporary theology in order at the same time to improve our own hermeneutics.

Another reason for studying the subject is the re-orientation of much contemporary theology in the direction of the New Hermeneutic. Ebeling, for example, claims that "the question of hermeneutic forms the focal point of the theological problems of today".<sup>7</sup> For Old and New Testament studies, church history, systematic and practical theology as well as missiology 'the hermeneutical problem', he adds, "proves to be of fundamental significance".<sup>8</sup> James Robinson is right in affirming that "the New Hermeneutic is a new theology ..."<sup>9</sup>

Fundamental issues then are at stake and we need to be aware of these issues while refusing, in D.A.Carson's words, to "worship

at their shrine".<sup>10</sup>

## ORIGINS OF THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

In this contemporary debate the term 'hermeneutics' is being used and defined in many different ways and "appears to exhibit elastic properties"<sup>11</sup> and is "skidding around on an increasingly broad semantic field".<sup>12</sup> For Ebeling the words 'hermeneutics' and 'interpretation' are interchangeable<sup>13</sup> and the etymology of the Greek noun 'hermeneia' supports Ebeling's definition of the term. "The etymological origin of hermeneuein and its derivatives is contested", adds Ebeling, "but it points in the direction of roots with the meaning 'speak', 'say' ..."<sup>14</sup> As we shall see later, this conclusion is useful in confirming Ebeling and Fuchs in their distinctive view of language as 'event'. They both understand hermeneutics as an account of the way in which God's Word becomes an event time and time again in the realm of our human language; in other words, a fresh linguistic occurrence of the word takes place, particularly in the sermon.

Before we describe this position in greater detail, it will be helpful to trace briefly the background and development of this New Hermeneutic.

The leading exponents of this school are Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling but the roots of the New Hermeneutic go back to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) whose 'Copernican' revolution altered radically the direction of philosophy and theology by removing, for example, Christian doctrines from the spheres of history and philosophy and unleashing and popularising philosophies such as scepticism, subjectivism and nihilism. Under strong Kantian influence, the work of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) "constitutes a turning point in the history of hermeneutics"<sup>15</sup> with his crucial distinction between the linguistic and psychological aspects of interpreting the biblical text. Ebeling and Fuchs accept as a major premise Schleiermacher's principle that a pre-condition for the proper understanding of a biblical or secular text is the recognition of the 'historicality' (a term we'll explain more fully later) both of the original author and the contemporary interpreter. Bultmann also incorporated this principle into his account of Vorverstandnis.

Another major influence on the New Hermeneutic has been Wilhelm

Dilthey (1833-1911) and his account of historical understanding in which he denied the possibility of a 'scientific', 'objective' understanding of history. For Dilthey, man in the totality of his being, including the emotions and volition as well as mind, forms the subject-matter of history. There is a close affinity of thought between Dilthey and Bultmann. Both are heavily influenced by Kant and are primarily concerned with 'life' and the present significance of history. This is significant if only for the reason that Bultmann leaned heavily on Heidegger's philosophy so that Dilthey's account of historical understanding must be regarded as another major turning point in the history of hermeneutics. Heidegger, too, described by John Macquarrie as "among the greatest and most creative philosophers of the twentieth century"<sup>16</sup> has had a profound influence upon the development of the New Hermeneutic. Rudolph Bultmann, for example, acknowledges that "Heidegger's analysis of existence has become for me fruitful for hermeneutics"<sup>17</sup> while Heidegger's category of 'worldhood' is basic to Fuchs' description of hermeneutics.

A.C. Thiselton in his valuable work entitled, 'The Two Horizons'<sup>18</sup> justifiably claims that Hans-Georg Gadamer "stands as a key figure in the area of hermeneutics". Gadamer's four volume work on the subject has been described by one critic as "the most substantial treatise on hermeneutic theory that has come from Germany this century".<sup>19</sup> Gadamer accepts some basic ideas from Heidegger but expresses them more clearly and orderly. Formerly a pupil of both Heidegger and Bultmann, Gadamer goes beyond his teachers and even Dilthey by grounding hermeneutics more firmly in language rather than in existentialism or subjectivism. He argues that language and understanding are inseparable and that hermeneutics, consequently, is concerned with the relationship between thought and language. It is important to remember that the New Hermeneutic of Fuchs and Ebeling rests on a theory of language advocated by Gadamer and, earlier, by Heidegger.

One final stage in the development of the New Hermeneutic must now be mentioned, namely, the theology of the German New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, who in turn was greatly influenced by neo-Kantian thought and the philosophy of Heidegger as well as by the history of religious school, liberal and then the dialectical theology of Karl Barth. While, with reservations, Fuchs and Ebeling accept the validity of Bultmann's historical-critical method as

one pre-condition of interpreting the New Testament, they nevertheless disagree radically with Bultmann whose aim throughout is to reach beyond the mythological language to the authentic understanding which lies beyond the language. For Fuchs and Eberling the most important question in hermeneutics is, how do I come to understand? Their answer is that there can be no understanding or reality for us outside of our language, for "language ... makes Being into an event".<sup>20</sup> We will now try to describe this view in relation to hermeneutics.

## FEATURES OF THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

"For the student brought up on traditional hermeneutics", writes D.A. Carson, "the 'new hermeneutic' is an extremely difficult subject to get hold of. The writings of Gadamer, Fuchs, Eberling and others are not easy, even in English translation; and many of their essays have not been translated".<sup>21</sup> With this warning in view, I intend to simplify the teaching of the New Hermeneutic in as competent a way as possible and avoid undue technicalities.

According to the New Hermeneutic, the problem of hermeneutics extends beyond the text to the interpreter. For this reason it is claimed that the traditional approach is unbalanced and superficial. While we live in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the New Testament writers, we are reminded, lived and wrote in the first century. There exists, therefore, a temporal and cultural distance between the text and the interpreter which has to be overcome before the text can speak afresh to us. How, according to the New Hermeneutic, should we proceed to bridge the gap of 'historical distance'? This is the question we will now seek to answer as we describe the main features of the New Hermeneutic.

### A. One necessary preparation is the critical analysis of the text

Confirming Bultmann's approach, Ernst Fuchs declares, "there is no objection to the historical method" for it "may establish what things were once like".<sup>22</sup> Gerhard Eberling sees it as "the foundation of the Church's exposition of Scripture"<sup>23</sup> while, Walter Wink, another exponent of the New Hermeneutic, views the critical method as a 'key function' in obtaining an adequate level of objectivity in hermeneutics. Wink, however, is also critical of this method. First of all he complains that the critical method has "reduced the Bible to a dead letter"<sup>24</sup> and, secondly, it fails to help people

with their real, everyday problems.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, scholars using the method tend to ask the wrong questions of the text; the correct approach, Wink argues, is to ask those questions which the text demands.<sup>26</sup> Finally, they tend to forget that their critical, textual work is only the first step towards an understanding of the text. Ebeling emphasises that the text must 'live' for us rather than remain a dead relic of the past. Another reason for the more limited role of the historical critical method within the New Hermeneutic arises from the philosophies of Gadamer and Heidegger, namely, that the text should never become a mere object of analysis in which the interpreter interrogates the text. Fuchs, for example, writes, "the truth has us ourselves as its object .... the texts must translate us before we can translate them".<sup>27</sup>

Fuchs, Ebeling and others within the New Hermeneutic are not Evangelicals! They embrace the assumptions and aims of the historical, critical method yet rightly seeing its bankruptcy and failure to make the biblical text 'live' for ordinary people. Nevertheless this method remains for them a useful and necessary preparation for understanding the text.

If this is only a beginning, what, according to the New Hermeneutic, is the next stage in the process of understanding the New Testament text?

B. Without 'common ground' between the text and the interpreter no understanding of the text is possible

Bultmann describes this as 'pre-understanding' (Vorverständnis) and Fuchs calls it Einverständnis ('agreement' or 'common understanding'). Without this, claims Fuchs, the understanding of a text is impossible. He illustrates it by reference to a close family unit where the parents and the children have basic experiences, attitudes and assumptions in common. The family shares a common language in which even a gesture such as a smile or frown or the shrug of a shoulder can communicate effectively. Gadamer uses the illustration of children and lovers who have "their language by which they communicate with each other in a world that belongs to them alone. This is ... because a linguistic habit has grown up between them. A common world ... is always the presupposition of language".<sup>28</sup>

An even better example is the parabolic method as used by our Lord.

The success of our Lord's parables, according to Fuchs, was due to the fact that he created and entered a 'world' which he shared with his hearers. He insists that it was not the purpose of the parables to convey an idea or truth but rather to challenge and disturb the interpreter by the creative word. For example, in reference to the parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20:1-16, he writes: "we too share the inevitable reaction of the first. The first see that the last receive a whole day's wage, and naturally they hope for a higher rate for themselves". However a shock awaits them: "in fact they receive the same ... It seems to them that the Lord's action is unjust". In his challenge to these workers, Jesus "singles out the individual and grasps him deep down" and in this way they have been brought into an event or engagement with Jesus which in turn "effects and demands our decision".<sup>29</sup> Here is a creative language event.

We must now mention a related technical term, the hermeneutical circle. While it has been described as "an unfortunate"<sup>30</sup> term it is used in at least two ways to refer either to the process of questioning the text or to the principle that understanding a group of words depends on understanding its individual words and vice versa. Here the term is used in the first sense of questioning the text. As the interpreter puts questions to the text, questions which are conditioned by his own historical, cultural and psychological characteristics, he is himself affected and changed in his approach by the text's answers. Consequently his next set of questions will be different as will be the answers and questions provided by the text. Here, then, is the 'hermeneutical circle'. Accordingly the interpreter acknowledges there is a 'distance' between himself and the text and he tries to reach a fusion of worlds or a 'merging of horizons'; this merging or fusion of worlds solves the problem of historical distance and ought to be the main hermeneutical goal.

What are the implications of the circularity for hermeneutics?

1. According to the New Hermeneutic, one never arrives at a final, complete understanding of a text for interpretation is a process which continues indefinitely. No objective meaning is available in the text so that interpretation is always an on-going, open-ended process characterised by repeated language-events between text and interpreter in which the meaning 'occurs'.

2. The principle of the hermeneutical circle also stresses man's 'historicality', that is, man's place in history. While Gadamer speaks of the interpreter standing within an historical tradition which provides him with assumptions and value-judgements, Heidegger insists that we see objects from our own ego-centric perspective.<sup>31</sup>

3. Again, for the New Hermeneutic the meaning of any historical text cannot be restricted to the intended meaning of the original writer.

C. The next step in understanding the New Testament, according to Fuchs, is listening in "receptive silence and openness to the text" <sup>32</sup>

After "active critical scrutiny" of the text, writes Fuchs, the interpreter "must wait for God or Being to speak in the tranquility of faith where noise is reduced to silence, a VOICE is heard ..."<sup>33</sup>

This is a notion Fuchs borrowed from Heidegger who taught that there must be an alert openness to Being and even a whole lifetime of waiting when we interpret a text. Is this attitude of silence and openness an expression of submission to God and His Word? No, for it has to do rather with Heidegger's pre-occupation with language. But why is language so important for Heidegger, Gadamer, Fuchs and Ebeling? Heidegger tells us that language is the 'house' or 'custodian' of Being so the interpreter's job is to find the "place where Being can come to speech for us".<sup>34</sup> Similarly for Fuchs and Ebeling language has primarily a performative role rather than a means of conveying information. "We do not get at the nature of words by asking what they contain", writes Ebeling, "but by asking what they effect, what they set going ..."<sup>35</sup> Gadamer gives his now famous illustration of interpreting legal texts.<sup>36</sup> Obviously the lawyer must be familiar with the original legal text which bears upon his case but his appeal to the text has the aim of making the text 'speak' to the particular law-case in court. In this way there is an interaction in which eventually the texts bring their verdicts upon the court case. "Understanding the text", affirms Gadamer, "is always already applying it".<sup>37</sup> Such application is essential to the experience of understanding a text, for understanding and meaning always operate at the level of interaction and practical concern.

D. After these preliminary steps there occurs between the text

and interpreter a 'merging of horizons'

Fuchs prefers to call this merging a 'language-event' which is equivalent to Ebeling's 'word-event'. What is meant by this? As the respective horizons of the text and interpreter are gradually shared, a common understanding emerges and a deep interaction occurs between them affecting the interpreter's thinking and questioning in a disturbing and unexpected manner. It is in this way that the words of the text become a language-event and the interpreter is thus challenged in relation to 'authentic human existence'. This is the ultimate aim of hermeneutics and it is at this moment that the 'meaning' of the text 'occurs'.

In the next article we will consider the weaknesses and challenge of the New Hermeneutic.

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