
BEC Conference Report: Hermeneutics

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Someone recently described hermeneutics as “*The epicentre of current theological conflict*”. What has become the evangelical issue at the end of the 20th Century was tackled at the **1998 Theological Studies Conference of the British Evangelical Council** at High Leigh Conference Centre in February. Fifty four men, the majority pastors, and one woman gathered for two days to consider the subject of Biblical interpretation. The importance of this topic also attracted men from outside the immediate ambit of the BEC.

The papers were circulated in advance, and were only introduced by the speakers at the conference, giving maximum time for discussion. The papers and the discussion were technical in places, but Mark Johnston in the chair saw to it that preachers’ needs were seen as central to the conference. One weakness was that some speakers had engaged with the leaders of modern thought through other writers, rather than directly, leading to some misrepresentation of their views.

The overall programme

Each day was begun with a time of ministry and prayer. Alistair Wilson (Highland Theological Institute) outlined the development of Biblical interpretation from first century Jewish writers to the nineteenth century. Paul Brown (Dunstable) dealt with 20th Century developments. In order to help churches evaluate versions, Nick Needham spoke on the role of interpretation in translating the Bible. The relationship within the “Interpretative Triangle” of author, text and reader was examined by Ian Hamilton (Loudoun Church of Scotland), who added God as the Primary Author, making the triangle into a quadrilateral. In the fifth paper, Eryl Davies (Evangelical Theological College of Wales), tackled the relationship between theology and hermeneutics, and finally, Edward Donnelly (Reformed Theological College, Belfast) summarised the papers and the discussion quite helpfully.

Within these papers, the issues of Justification, Feminism, Homosexuality and Missiology were discussed, these being areas where conservative evangelicals see some other evangelicals going astray because of wrong hermeneutic principles.

Attitudes to modern theories

In the general academic world, emphasis is not on the author, but on the text and the reader. What is important, then, is not the author’s conscious intention, but on what the reader finds in the text. The text’s meaning becomes multi-layered and may contain hidden attitudes to race, women, etc. Meaning does not, indeed cannot, relate to the real world outside the text.

The Conference as a whole rejected the main theses of modern theory as being harmful to Biblical interpretation. It considered that the evangelical “grammatico-historical method” has been left undamaged by recent developments. However, modern

theory does remind us of what we should have known, but have forgotten, and it is nevertheless right to interact with the New Hermeneutic at different levels. It was also considered essential to support evangelical scholars who are in the thick of the debate.

The Bible as human and divine

As divine, the Bible interprets itself, speaks to our time, and is the very voice of God. It also places meaning outside of the text. As human, the Bible is subject to analyses of form and language. The intention of the human author is important, but his text might have applications beyond his understanding, e.g. in prophecy. Overstress on the divine leads to wild allegory; overstress on the human leads to barren historicism. Also, the Holy Spirit's work in the interpreter is essential for a proper understanding of Scripture.

The place of presuppositions

Relating to the Bible. It is generally agreed today that it is impossible to come to texts without presuppositions. Eryl Davies listed those we should have as Scripture's, namely, 1. divine inspiration and truthfulness; 2. historical particularity, i.e., it contains diversity as well as unity; 3. unity and coherence; 4. organic nature, allowing a development of revelation; and 5. canonical closure.

Relating to the Reader. Our experiences, interests, culture, previous knowledge, ecclesiastical heritage, all affect the way we read the Bible. Such presuppositions are not always utterly wrong, but they need to be constantly challenged by Scripture. Sometimes our presuppositions lead to blindness to issues, such as materialism.

The text and theology

The sovereignty of the text. The text should be allowed to speak for itself. Systematic theology should not be allowed to obscure the plain meaning of the text, nor should preachers find in the text what they want to say. Many preachers today do not work hard enough at a critical analysis of the text.

The place of theology. Systematic and Biblical theology puts individual texts into the context of the whole Bible. This theology should be a tool to help understanding, not to impose meaning on the text. Such theology, therefore, needs constant challenging and amending by Scripture. Using theology does not mean that we should read the Old Testament as if it were the New, but rather that we should trace the development of a teaching through the entire Bible.

Christological Interpretation. Christ is central to the whole Bible, but this does not necessarily mean we should read Christ into the Old Testament narrative, but rather that we should see how the narrative develops throughout Scripture to Christ. For example, Genesis 22 relates God's testing of Abraham's love, not primarily the cross, but within the total scheme of Scripture, the sacrificial love of a father points to Calvary.

The meaning of meaning

Some wanted to restrict Biblical texts to a single meaning, but with different applications. Others were happier with seeing a text as having more than one meaning. Single meaning supporters wanted to prevent interpreters from reading what they want

into the text; liberation theology and “odd” evangelical exegesis were cited, also the over-allegorising of texts. To some degree, differences were probably a matter of semantics, but the subject needed closer attention than could be given at this conference.

The Bible as literature

Genre. The conference was against a flat view of Scripture which treated all texts as essentially the same. Poetry, parable, history, etc. should be read in accordance with the rules of its genre. This means that exegesis and preaching should bring out imagination and feeling as well as propositional thought.

Words. Exegetes must try to understand the power of words as well as their meaning. Also, the meaning of a word is governed by its use in the context, not what it meant hundreds of years before in Classical Greek etc.

New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament

A model for today? Some evangelicals suggest that we should accept NT writers’ use of the OT as the inspired word of God, but not necessarily follow their methods. At the conference, it was suggested that where problems arise in the NT use of the OT, the texts are simply being cited, being used as illustrations, or are a “vehicle of expression” rather than being interpreted.

Types. There was disagreement over whether we should only use as OT types those that are recognised as such in the NT. Some expressed concern over the over-allegorisation of Scripture.

Translations and interpretation

Verbal or dynamic equivalence? Full verbal equivalence is not feasible, as languages contain idiom, different grammatical structures, and their words have different ranges of meaning. Full dynamic equivalence obscures the theological meaning of Scripture. Others preferred a version with more dynamic equivalence, but Nick Needham preferred a point nearer the verbal equivalence end, especially for Bible Study, with the church helping its members to understand technical expressions. He added that for liturgy something less stilted is required.

The inescapability of interpretation. Translation of necessity includes a measure of interpretation, but this should avoid conformity to a prior theology. The interpretative element is stronger in those versions closer to the dynamic equivalence end.

General conclusion

Some of the matters discussed need closer study, not least the problem of meaning. In general, the conference dealt with the subject helpfully and all preachers and churches would benefit if they were able to take note of its findings. Discussions are taking place with an evangelical publisher and it is hoped that the papers, supplemented in the light of the conference, will become the basis for a much-needed book on this highly relevant issue.

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