

lion & lamb

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Content

Hermeneutics

Reading the bible is possibly the most subversive activity that one can engage in, for it proclaims a different reality to the 'normality' of the world around us. Its central story is one of redemption and the new kind of humanity proclaimed in the person of Jesus Christ. Engagement with this alternative story is highly subversive and counter-cultural. It makes you a dissident, a non-conformist, an outsider, for it has the potential to make you a real person – truly human and truly alive. Bible study is an indispensable means of grace if we are to respond to the radical invitation of the Apostle Paul: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Rom.12:2).

However, bible reading has other possibilities, not least our ability to subvert the text. When we reduce the message of the bible to abstract formulas and therapeutic piety we undermine its vitality, its prophetic character and its unique witness to the Word of God in history. Or when we harness the bible to cultural and political ideologies we make its message subservient to our fears and prejudices. Both the privatisation and enculturation of the bible result in the domestication of the text - the Word made word, the Word made safe.

The challenge for those of us who ascribe scripture with authority is to let the bible speak for itself. However, as Brendan Devitt suggests (*What is Hermeneutics?*) that this is not as 'simple' as it sounds. It requires discipline and an understanding of the reading methods we bring to the text. Without a hermeneutical awareness we will impose on the bible a host of 'sacred' assumptions, which as David Bruce reminds us in his tale of two preachers (*Hear the Word of the Lord*), will distort the way we interpret and publicly proclaim the meaning of scripture. Equally important to reading and listening with integrity is our intention to obey. Knowledge and discipleship, argues Walter Klassen in *Anabaptist Hermeneutics*, are synonymous. Our readiness to obey God's word is prerequisite to our understanding.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Lion & Lamb* and that it contributes to your understanding of the bible and the radical call of Jesus Christ it proclaims.

Derek Poole (Editor)

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Lion & Lamb is a publication of **ECONI: Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland**. Editor; Derek Poole Assistant Editor; Ruth Hutchinson. All correspondence should be sent to the address below. Permission to reprint any original article in Lion & Lamb should be sought from the Editor.

We welcome the submission of unsolicited articles, but we do not guarantee publication, and manuscripts cannot be returned. Opinions expressed in this magazine are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of **ECONI**.

ECONI is a charitable trust registered with the Inland Revenue- Number XR8080. A member of the Evangelical

Cover design: Spring Graphics, 116 Lisburn Road, Saintfield.
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The Heart of Hermeneutics is the Heart

How is your Flemish? A strange question you may think in the light of the topic - hermeneutics. One word, which our English Language has adopted from the Flemish language, is the word 'apartheid'. The word was the legal term used when referring to a law, documented as an act, encouraging separation by the coding of class, origin, colour of skin, religion or cultural background. From 1948 until its collapse in the early nineties apartheid caused untold suffering and oppression for the majority of coloured people in South Africa.

However, one of the saddest things about apartheid is its roots. Apartheid was originally propagated by the Dutch Reformed Church, who believed that the body of Christ, though one family, should be ministered to in different churches. These reformed, evangelical Christians based their practice of apartheid on a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the word of God. Some people have a statistical approach to the bible. They can make it say what they want it to say, and like the early Afrikaaners, can even find justification for sectarian prejudice and tribal hatred.

Most of us who are reading this article would be quick to condemn apartheid and all it stands for. We would never misuse the word of God in such a way. Yet, if the truth was really known, we often apply the same principles of interpretation used by the early Dutch reformers, and still used by many modern cults. We often take verses out of context. We

tend to ignore large portions of scriptures, and apply the text in ways the author never intended it to be applied.

Often our misuse of the bible has shattered the mirror of God's word, and we end up with a disfigured view of both ourselves and God.

By
Alan Wilson

Sometimes we treat the bible like a portion of fairy dust; we grasp some obscure promise and claim it, hoping it will make all our pain go away. But our pain does not go away, and we become confused and faithless.

The most important requirement for healthy hermeneutics is having the right heart. My problem with understanding and rightly applying it to my life is never an intellectual problem. Of course there are many things I do not understand, and there will be many times when my mind will be stretched. However, the real issue is what is in my heart. The early Dutch reformers came to the bible with a heart full of pride and superiority, thus making it easy for them to do spiritual and intellectual somersaults and find justification for condoning apartheid.

The attitude of our hearts is the filter through which we process the word of God and its claim upon our lives. If we have hearts that are full of anger, pride, envy, selfishness, or any other sinful attitude, then we are going to interpret and apply it in the light of those attitudes. This will eventually lead us to use the word of God to control, damage and destroy others, and before we know it we will have developed our own mini apartheid system. We become exclusive, we withdraw from one another, we foster a self-righteous superiority, we judge people solely on external evidence. The heart of hermeneutics is the heart. We need to read the word of God with broken, contrite, submissive hearts, with no hidden agenda; the alternatives are too scary to imagine.

Alan Wilson is a member of Milltown Baptist Church, Belfast. He has recently returned from a two-year spell with a Baptist Missions outreach team in Donegal.

From the Director

It is appropriate that this issue of lion & lamb takes up the theme of hermeneutics. After ten years this still remains the core task at the heart of all that ECONI seeks to do – the application of biblical principles to the situation in Northern Ireland. Hermeneutics is simply the way we go about understanding what the bible has to say and bringing that to bear on our experience of life and the world in which we live. It is the task of both interpreting the bible and making that interpretation real in our lives and community.

Of course how we go about that task is influenced by the presuppositions we bring, those ideas that we take for granted, about how the bible should be interpreted and how the world around us functions. Consequently, like many things in the Christian life, there is difference and dispute among Christians on this whole topic. Yet the bible remains for us the Word of God, the final authority on matters of faith and practice. As John Stott has commented our problem is not our commitment to the authority of the bible but an authoritative hermeneutic or method by which we learn to interpret it.

What we can agree is that the text records for us the action of God in history. Intervening in the lives of communities, nations and individuals those who encountered God in this way reflected on their experience and began to record in story and song, drama and ritual, history and prophecy, their Spirit inspired understanding of what God was doing. Over the centuries that record has been written down and collated into a text that Christians acknowledge as inspired, a revelation of God.

The problem is, at its closest point, the culture and setting of these stories is now at least two thousand years away from our contemporary setting. While, despite such divergence, much is direct and plain in its meaning, much equally remains obscure and distant to the experience of human beings today. All of us need background information and

The current problems with the peace process in Northern Ireland are, at one level, a problem of hermeneutics

explanation that is not normally part of our everyday lives to be fully aware of the significance of the stories we read.

This problem of dealing with a text is not of course unique to Christianity. The current problems with the peace process in Northern Ireland are, at one level, a problem of hermeneutics. Since 1995 the political parties have had the experience of encounter with one another in the talks. Of course this for some was but the latest round of such engagement over the last thirty years, so much baggage was brought to the process. Some of it helped in understanding what was happening, some of it was a hindrance as new relationships and understandings needed to

happen.

In the autumn of 1997 that encounter was broadened and the process intensified with the aim to get a broad consensus on an agreement to put to the people concerning the future governance of Northern Ireland. After months of debate and negotiation a text was finally agreed and in a highly charged political atmosphere a substantial majority accepted it as the basis for a new start. Yet it was hardly off the negotiating table in May 1998 before the debate began on its nature and the meaning of its content.

Now, barely nine months on from that fragile point of consensus, the text has become a focus of dispute and not agreement, conveying blinding clarity to some and studied ambiguity to others. Is its constitutional bias nationalist or unionist? Does it set out specific conditions for setting up the new dispensation of devolved government? Do certain things need to happen and when? Is a required standard of behaviour to be part of the new arrangement?

The impasse focuses on questions of decommissioning, cross border bodies and executive seats. Yet the details of textual interpretation should not allow us to ignore the clear imperatives that the agreement contains. There is logic in the text that is both moral and political. At its heart is a vision of an inclusive democracy and a process that helps us leave

Is it possible that the only way to bring about republican repentance is through the unionist embrace?

behind the violence and domination of the past. During its short history of nine months this purpose has been put to the test, whether at Drumcree, Ballymoney or Omagh. Those with a mindset cast by the certainties of the past have sought to erode the fragile matrix of trust that made agreement possible in the first place. It is important to remember that the agreement still belongs to us all and not just the politicians. It is as a community concerned to find a reasonable way out of the cycle of violence of our past that we must together act as guarantors of the spirit that informed the agreement. Even if aspects of it prove difficult to work we must insist that our leaders honour its underlying dynamic and find a way to address the fundamental clash of perspective.

The imperative towards democracy and the need to ensure that societal change is brought about solely through the democratic process requires the decommissioning of illegally held arms. In a context where the use of violence to bring about political change remains morally legitimate in the eyes of some, it is regrettably inevitable that they will first seek to ensure that the political potential really does exist to bring about necessary change in the conditions that gave rise to their violence.

The commitment to inclusiveness and the need to ensure that all have ownership and a sense of belonging in their own place requires the sharing of power. Our history has been one of an in-built majority, guarding and even abusing its power. It is no surprise that some are as concerned to resist a power sharing executive as they are to block cross border bodies, especially an executive that involves those whose agenda for change goes beyond what they consider reasonable expectations. It is in this context, and not the highly charged corridors in which it was forged, that the text of the agreement now needs to be interpreted and made to live. It is a context where neither trusts the other enough to make the first move, where one observer has commented that the unionists have their domination and the provos their guns. Of course the reality is that the experience of unionists over the last three decades is not that of domination but of terrorist onslaught, and many do not see how simply stopping what you had no moral right to inflict can be sufficient basis for trusting any new found democratic credentials.

However it is true that many in the unionist community have yet to fully understand the depth of alienation and resentment that gave rise to the anger that fired both the peaceful march of constitutional nationalists and the dark engine of IRA terror. Is it possible that the only way to bring about republican repentance is through the unionist embrace – and it will be unionist magnanimity that nurtures the republican journey beyond their long war of attrition? The irony is that the same embrace and magnanimity is what republicans need to find within themselves if they are to see their enemies undergo a parallel journey of repentance.

At the heart of the hermeneutical question is not the text but the community. It is about relationship and the lack of trust that festers in a divided society, and may yet make it impossible for us to work together. The role of the Christian community is crucial in all of this. Ultimately our God did not simply leave us with a text but a person; not only a book but also a spirit filled community; not primarily an interpretation but a living embodiment of the truth. And significantly it was God's embrace and magnanimity, the fullness of his grace in the incarnate Word, Jesus, that ignited the repentance of people like you and me, former enemies of God.

David Porter

What is

The word 'hermeneutics' is derived from the Greek word *hermeneia*, which means 'interpretation' or 'translation'. In Greek mythology Hermes mediated divine messages to human beings. Implicit in myths about his 'messenger' role are two things: firstly, that the gods are remote, and secondly, that men and women require assistance in understanding divine communications. In so far as hermeneutics relates to the scriptures it has been defined as the science or art of biblical interpretation. As a 'science' or 'art' hermeneutics involves the careful and creative use of various reading strategies aimed at bridging the gulf between ancient scriptural texts and the modern reader. This is required because the bible is thousands of years old, is written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, is the product of cultural, political and religious milieux remote from those of our own day, and is steeped in literary genres and conceptual worlds which are alien to most readers.

As its ultimate objective biblical interpretation has the goal of making it possible for God's people to hear God's word afresh, in idioms which contemporary men and women understand, but which are also faithful to the biblical witness. To this extent there is an overlap between hermeneutics and the more familiar practice of 'exegesis', with the latter's emphasis on scriptural exposition.

However, there is a crucial difference between the two. Whereas exegesis is almost entirely 'text' centred, hermeneutics goes a stage further by focusing attention on the role of the reader in the process of bible interpretation. In this instance critical reflection is brought to bear on the nature and impact of 'presuppositions' and 'context' on bible reading. Christians, it is argued, do not read the word of God with beatific vision nor in a vacuum. Rather, each individual or faith community comes to scripture laden with all kinds of personal or denominational 'baggage', which in turn is shaped by the various social, cultural-political and economic backgrounds of the readers. Opinions, biases and presuppositions deriving from these multifaceted influences determine, often subtly, the ways in which scripture is read and interpreted.

An urgent task confronting the Church, therefore, is the need to reflect on 'methodology' in bible reading. This will mean, amongst other things, identifying and evaluating the various sources, influences and models, which inform its understanding of God's word. It will mean asking probing questions such as: what kind of things take place as we move from 'text' to 'understanding'? A simple answer might be 'reading'. But this is not all that takes place. Nobody comes to the bible with a blank mind,

hermeneutics?

nor absorbs its contents like a sponge. We bring ideas, notions and beliefs of various kinds to the scriptures, which in turn shape and mould what we get out of bible reading. As one writer says, “The questions we ask about a text are rarely if ever generated by the text itself; indeed, before we read the first page, we are enmeshed in a web of preconceptions and preconditions from which our questions emerge”.

The expectations and presuppositions which we bring to scripture, therefore, need to be examined carefully. We read God’s word neither ‘plainly’ nor ‘simply’. Moreover, if as Christians we acknowledge that sin has tainted every facet of our being we should not assume that the way in which we read the bible will somehow be immune from the baneful influence of our fallen nature. Not all the presuppositions or expectations that control our reading will be bad, of course. Nor is the suggestion that our ‘presuppositions’ and ‘biases’ are so pervasive and distortive that we can never accurately perceive or grasp what a text was originally about, or how it ought to be applied today. Nevertheless, the possibilities of misreading or misapplying scripture are real and need to be guarded against. We do not simply see things ‘as they are’ when we read the bible. Often we see things as we would wish them to be, in order to reflect or bolster our personal, denominational or even sectarian

interests. A ‘hermeneutically aware’ Christian, however, will want to bring his or her presuppositions out into the open for prayerful and critical consideration. Accountability in this instance will be seen as the touchstone of faithful bible interpretation, but also the context in which the Spirit of God can renew his work among the people of God.

A key function, then, of being hermeneutically aware is to be alert to some of the more ‘invisible’ factors at work in bible interpretation. At times this will entail raising uncomfortable questions about the way we read scripture. Might there be, for example, such a thing as a ‘middle class’ way of reading the bible which we need to be aware of in this part of the world? Why, for instance, as a teenager was I perennially warned about the dangers of studying ‘theology’ or of entering ‘politics’, but never of making money as a businessman?

By
Brendan W.
Devitt

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hy, moreover, has there been such hefty criticism of buying lottery tickets but not of speculating on the stock exchange? Why do we hear more about morality in our pulpits than we do about materialism? Might there also be a 'pietistic' way of reading scripture which we need to call to bar? Why, for instance, are passages in the prophets which deal with social and economic issues 'spiritualised' in sermons so that they are taken to refer to the inner, private realm of the heart, rather than suburbia? Do we also need to start talking about 'docetic' ways of reading the bible? For example, is there any significance in the fact that churches which place considerable emphasis on 'end time' events are generally those which are least socially, politically or intellectually engaged in the world in which God has placed us? Ought the charge of docetism (see note) also to be levelled against biblical emphases which focus exclusively on 'victorious' or 'supernatural' Christian living to the neglect of passages which treat our 'weakness' and 'vulnerability' as servants of Christ? These are the kind of questions that hermeneutically aware Christians might raise, depending on the context or situation in which they find themselves.

Bible reading, then, is not as simple and straightforward as we sometimes make it out to be. Our various personal or denominational agendas may darken counsel in some instances. At other times, however, it can simply be difficult texts, or familiar ones which we are struggling to 'actualise' in an ever changing world, which can create problems for us. But we are in illustrious company. Daniel owned up to the complexities involved in trying to understand prophecies in Jeremiah (Dan 9:2), the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 confessed to problems he had with Isaiah 53, and Peter credited aspects of Paul's letters with being 'hard to understand' (2 Pet 3:16). Our response, then, should be one of tremendous humility when we come to read

and study God's word. The possibilities of misinterpreting, or at least of inadequately understanding sacred scripture, are real.

Moreover, these dangers are not mitigated by the fact that a Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and full of good intent, however paradoxical this may sound. Some of the crassest travesties of the gospel of Christ have been born in the hearts of humble, 'Spirit-filled', bible believers. The petrol pump attendant in Alabama, for instance, who denies that black people have souls, the bestselling author who proclaims that God's eschatological wrath will be especially unleashed on the papacy, marxists, the Arab world and countries not aligned with NATO, and the suave teacher who travels the globe assuring huge audiences that God's desire for them is that they be well-off and free from ill-health, are all individuals who bow reverently before the opened word each day, diligently seeking the Spirit's guidance and illumination.

Yet if all of this sounds negative, or like an obsessive type of navel-gazing, we also need to be reminded that under the Spirit's guidance hermeneutical reflection can become an instrument or a means both of personal and communal transformation. For whatever limitations we bring to our reading and understanding of scripture, the word of God is still active and living. Even when we have fossilised or become overly familiar with the contents of scripture and are quite sure that we have perfectly understood and applied its message over the years, prophetic re-readings of scripture can rattle our 'security'. This is what happened in the first century. The early church's experience of God in Christ sparked-off the most traumatic hermeneutical revolution in world history. Hard thinking, careful listening, assiduous spiritual reflection, an openness to change, the adoption of new reading strategies, renewed critical dialogue with scripture, and a willingness to own up to where they may have got it wrong in the past, are all hallmarks of the earliest Christian re-readings of the Hebrew scriptures. The Spirit led hermeneutical revolution thus became the source of their transformed understanding of what God was all about.

The message for us is simple: can we afford to be any less open to how God might wish to transform our understanding of himself through his word? I do not mean of course that we can ever go back to the scriptures and initiate the kind of theological revolution that the first Christians, or an Isaiah or Jeremiah, set in motion. The 'big bang' has already happened, so to speak. I am speaking rather of the way in which the first Christians approached and engaged scripture. I am particularly thinking of their 'shocking' willingness to accept that even traditional and cherished ways of reading God's word could become obsolete, outlive their usefulness, or even be just plain wrong. Are we prepared to accept that the unfettered word of God is even capable of subverting our grasp and understanding of it? This is not to suggest that there is no such thing as 'stable meaning' or 'enduring truth', by the way. It is to suggest, however, that for the early church (and for Jesus and the prophets) the interpretation of scripture, the hermeneutical discipline if you will, was an on-going process of spiritual and theological engagement - of listening, of dialoguing, of critical reflection and re-application of the living, vital, word of God. Is this something we are open to?

It is telling in this connection that the most implacable opposition that Jesus, the prophets and the early church encountered, was from the spiritual guardians and 'interpreters' of divine revelation in Jerusalem. The hermeneutical road is a costly one to go down, for it will always bring into uncomfortable relief the multiplicity of ways in which self-interest (personal, denominational, cultural-political) has been woven into the very fabric of our spiritual lives. It would scarcely be an exaggeration or irreverent to say that Jesus was crucified by the religious authorities for hermeneutical reasons (his Messianic claims, his commensality with gentiles and sinners, his flaunting of purity regulations, his redefined notion of who 'insiders' and 'outsiders' were in God's eyes, in short, for his dangerously unconventional way of reading sacred scripture).

"Whatever limitations we bring to our reading of scripture, the word of God is still active and living"

Brendan Devitt is presently completing a doctorate at Trinity College Dublin, researching the impact of Roman rule on first century Galilee.

Saints & Scriptures

The Bible and the Church

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox... In like manner do these persons endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.

So wrote Irenaeus - the second century bishop of the church in the city of Lyons - of his opponents. His church had already suffered the arrest, torture and death of some of its members in persecutions. Now, false teachers were attempting to entice the survivors away, claiming special knowledge unknown to the church and special wisdom in interpreting the Bible.

Both Irenaeus and his opponents claimed to be following the teaching of the gospel and both claimed to be faithful to the Bible. How could people know which was true and which was false?

Irenaeus responded by laying down some basic rules. First, he stressed the unity of the Bible. Despite the variety of style, genre and language, despite the long stretches of time covered, despite the huge cast of characters, the Bible told the one story. At its heart was the God of Israel who was also the God and Father of Jesus Christ. In contrast, his opponents treated the Bible like a diamond mine. From it they quarried texts. These were treated as raw material which then needed to be cut and polished.

However, the question remained, Why should people listen to Irenaeus' account of

Irenaeus of Lyons 2nd C.

This teaching in turn was handed on to the next generation of Christians. In particular, Irenaeus emphasised the role of the leaders of the church who were anointed by the Spirit for their task of proclaiming and handing on the gospel.

This apostolic testimony could be summarised in a few brief sentences, a summary which came to be known

as the rule of faith. It provided the framework for reading the Bible. If anyone claimed that the Bible taught anything that was incompatible with the 'rule of faith' it was to be rejected as error.

Meanwhile, around the same time in North Africa, another early Christian writer, Tertullian, was taking a similar line. However, he went one stage further. Not only did he stress that authority to read and understand the Bible lay with the church, but he argued that since the Bible was the church's book those who were outside the church had no right to it - it was not theirs to read or interpret.

Irenaeus and Tertullian created a powerful weapon in the battle against false teaching, based on the assertion of a close relationship between authority, tradition and Scripture. If Christ was the hermeneutical principle for interpreting Scripture, the church - Christ's body - was the place where the Scriptures were truly read and interpreted.

This is the first of four short articles by Alwyn Thomson exploring how the early Church read and understood the Bible. Alwyn is the Research Officer with ECONI.

Hear the Word of the Lord

"Hear the Word of the Lord" thundered Fiery
Fleury
"Hear the Word of the Lord" intoned Dr Pue

A soul saved with joy.
A prayerful parade with banners.
A Lord who hears to his people.

Pastor Fleury McRoberts scratched his red beard thoughtfully. His well-thumbed Bible lay open on the desk before him, alongside a pristine sheet of white paper. This was the part of the week he enjoyed most of all. What was it to be this Sunday? Fiery Fleury (as he was known to his friends and many admirers) was a substantial man. He occupied the pulpit (to use the word 'filled' might be more accurate) of Grace Memorial Church (Independent, Christ Centred, Spirit Filled) where his preaching was renowned. He was uncompromising on the infallibility of Scripture, hot against the ecumenical conspiracy and direct on the necessity of the new birth. Fiery by name, fiery by nature, Fleury knew he could rely upon the support of the good working class people of the city to fill his church week by week. He knew his congregation well, and shared their expectations of what true preaching should be.

They had a happy relationship, and Fleury was well pleased with the course of his life and ministry. "Truly", he often said to Hilda, his loyal wife of thirty years,

"the lines hath fallen to me in pleasant places".

Fleury decided to preach on Psalm 20 this Sunday, and in particular on verse 5. 'We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners: the Lord fulfil all thy petitions'. It was the first Sunday in July, and he knew that his people would be looking for something strong as the big day approached. Already he could feel the structure of the sermon taking shape. Three points:

"Hmm," thought Fleury, "it might take a little work, but I can see it - I can see it!" Exhaling slowly, and with great concentration, he bent towards his white sheet of paper, and began to write.

Six miles across the city from the McRoberts study, Rev Dr Walter TW Pue was engaged in precisely the same activity. Dr Pue was a Anglican Priest long before city congregations began the shortsighted policy (in his view) of selling off their old rectories to buy what he considered to be little more than suburban rabbit hutches. He often wrote to the Church of Ireland Gazette about this, and sometimes even the Belfast Telegraph, in which paper he had been published no less than seven times. He shivered involuntarily in the vast space which was his study (bedroom number six) and wrapped his old cardigan a little tighter

around his bony shoulders as he stared at his Smith-Corona model 342 and wondered what to type. He looked up the lectionary for the week

and registered that Psalm 20 was the passage for the Sunday coming. "Psalm 20 it is then," he sighed, and pulled out his old Bible, ready to begin. To one side of his desk, a large pile of official looking papers lay, bound with tape and bearing the stamp of the Church architects. The news was not good. The roof on the north transept was in need of immediate replacement, and evidence of wood boring insect activity had been found in the timbers surrounding the choir area. Dry rot was confirmed in several locations.

David Bruce

If St Hugo's was to continue, almost half a million pounds would be required, and that was just for phase one. "Verse 1 seems appropriate," thought Dr Pue to himself. "The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble; the name of the God of Jacob defend thee, send thee help from the sanctuary, and strengthen thee out of Zion. Hmm!" thought the Rector of St Hugo's, "it might take a little work, but I can see it – I can see it!" Stretching his long delicate fingers to the keys, he began to type.

The result of Fleury McRobert's labour was rather different from Dr Pue's. Both had chosen the same Psalm to preach from on the same Sunday, but there were several factors which would come together to determine the final outcome in the pulpit on Sunday morning. It is the mastering of these factors which we call hermeneutics - the business of interpreting. Some people say the most important factor is ourselves. Who are we? Where have we come from? What is our background? What is our story so far? Fleury's story is well known because he has told it often in mission halls and meetings all over the country. His conversion to Jesus Christ occurred at a mission in Ballycoogan Orange Hall in 1968. He was eighteen at the time, and on the fringe of trouble with the police. The flute band he played in was a mixed crowd with a few lads who enjoyed a fight at the weekends, and Fleury used to tag along to jeer at local Catholics as they left the pubs on their way home. After a couple of members of the band were arrested and charged he got a job and settled down a bit, but felt the Lord's hand was on him, telling him to be a preacher. So he left his work, took his wife and young baby and went to Bible College in England, returning in 1974 to start his work at the Grace Memorial Church where he had been ever since. He identifies completely with the local Protestant population, and sees the attempts to restrict Orange parades as a fundamental denial of a God-given right that Protestant people should be permitted to worship where and when they want, without hindrance from rebels and Romanists. When Fleury looks at a Bible passage, he sees a confirmation of this position. The thought that the Bible might have an alternative view to put has not occurred to him because his story affirms that he is on God's path, and the Bible is God's book. They

will not diverge. His life-story authenticates the Bible.

Dr Pue's story is quite different. He too came from a working class background in East Belfast, but was always looking for a way to escape. His most vivid memory in life is sitting under the table in the working kitchen in April 1941 and hearing the bombs explode all over the city as the Germans tried to destroy the docks. He thought he was going to die, and as a ten-year-old he vowed that if he survived that night, he would serve God for the rest of his life. He had heard all about Jesus at Sunday School, and in a childlike way had followed him always. His father was killed during the war, but his mother remained in the same house until she died in 1981. She was so proud that her son had got a scholarship, and gone to Trinity College in Dublin. When he was ordained, she cried all through the service. Dr Pue continued his studies after ordination, and was awarded a PhD for his work researching the effect upon church life of Protestant population shifts away from the city to North Down and Antrim. Now aged 67 he was planning to retire, but felt he couldn't leave the enormous burden of building debts to his successor. He was often heard to mutter to himself as he walked Erasmus his pet spaniel around the district "We can't let them destroy us. We have to keep things as they are. We must keep going." The institution of the Church was one way of ensuring that the norms of life remained in place. Its soaring columns and spires and buildings and structures were a bulwark against change. The Bible sat easily here as the ancient text of ancient texts, and expressed an appropriate sense of mystery in a world gone quite mad. Some say the most important factor in interpreting the Bible is our own setting today. Where are we now? What forces are being brought to bear upon us? What is our struggle? Liberation theologians earlier this century developed a whole new way of looking at the Bible by taking this as the first concern.

In many ways, Fiery Fleury is following liberation theology in his approach, but his conclusions are quite different. It's all a matter of identifying the enemy. Liberationists saw the enemy as the unjust

What they do on Sundays is not really preaching at all, because they have not taken the time to read the Bible on its own terms

and most films. But just as with liberation theology, Fleury suffers from selective vision. Some things that 'the world' gets up to with apparent alacrity are not condemned in the same way by him. Gluttony for example is a sin well practised at Grace Memorial gatherings and special fellowship events, as the Pastor's considerable girth will testify. But there is more. If 'the world' is the enemy, then his secret weapon is 'compromise', and on this Fleury is rock solid. There will be no compromise with ecumenists (who have compromised their Protestant birthright) or with Rome (which is the vehicle of all anti-Christ activity on earth and the great Lie above all lies). Fleury is utterly convinced about this. He sees the essential teaching of the Bible as serving these twin purposes of drawing people away from 'the world' and stiffening their backs against 'compromise'. *'Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord'* is the great clarion call to faithfulness which he doles out with passionate enthusiasm week by week. He believes this to be the essential teaching of the Bible for Christians everywhere. We are facing an evil assault. The world as we know it is doomed. The Church is God's ark by which we may escape. In the meantime we must fight the unrighteous and 'touch not the unclean thing'.

Dr Pue's setting is totally different. He too has identified the enemy, but it is not 'the world' or 'the state'. Dr Pue identifies the enemy as 'change' about which he is deeply suspicious. He will oppose it at every turn by his innate conservatism. He is nervous about 'progress', which he sees as a threat to his beloved Church which he perceives as standing alone in face of the relentless onward march of informality and unwarranted chumminess. The thought that one of his parishioners might hug him and call him Walter would cause him to tremble with offended indignation, and quite possibly run from the room. It seems to Dr Pue that the Bible confirms this view of the world, and texts are chosen to bolster what is clearly God's plan for the good people of St Hugo's as they await the future. But what does the future hold? Dr Pue does not know, except that he is against it. So we must preserve the status quo, whether this is political, ecclesial or societal. After all, Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Some say that the most important factor in coming to the Bible is the text itself. What is it that we are

reading today? A story told by someone? If so, to whom, and when? Is it perhaps a poem or a song? Is it a vision of the future or a reflection on the past? Where does it come in the big picture painted from Genesis to Revelation? What did the people who first heard or read this think of it?

Neither Fleury or Dr Pue has taken time to ask these questions, so keen are they to tell their people what they think they need to hear. In fact their approach to the Bible will disable them both as preachers. They will be handicapped by their inability to step back from their own stories and their own settings to ask, "What does the Bible actually say?" Of course this is difficult, but if the basic work is not done, then both Fleury and Dr Pue are in grave danger of misleading their congregations. Indeed they will perpetuate the twin catastrophes facing modern pulpit ministry of an irresponsible handling of the text and an inexcusable imposition of their own opinions upon their people. What they do on Sundays is not really preaching at all, because they have not taken the time to read the Bible on its own terms.

After two hours there was a knock on Fleury's door. "Humph?" he grunted, looking up to address the interruption. "Cup of tea dear?" said Hilda, "and I've brought you a cream doughnut... I know you can't resist them." "Hmm" said Fleury gratefully, turning back to his work, munching greedily between mouthfuls of hot liquid, as a few crumbs and a little spot of jam fell to join his scribbled notes on the desk.

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P *atience*

When our English bibles use the word patience, they are usually translating one of the loveliest words in Greek - *makrothumia*. It means patience with people.

The Case of the Clawless Cat

I once knew a large family with plenty of little children. They had a big grey cat - and it suffered. It was thrown around, it's tail pulled. It was stepped on and played with in ways cats are not meant to be played with. Of course, like other cats, it had sharp claws, but it never used them on the children. That's *makrothumia*, not that you can't hurt, but you don't. You are patient with people.

***Graham
Cheesman***

It is a good description of God's way with men and women. Paul says he was the recipient of God's 'unlimited patience' and so are we. *Three Mile an*

Hour God is a book by Kosuke Koyama. Three miles an hour is the speed of a buffalo cart not a modern car. God is not the God of McDonalds and instant fixes. He is the one who was patient with Moses for forty years in the desert before he used

an attribute of love

The Need for the Clawless Christian

him, and has been patient with me for over forty years so far. In all our sin, imperfection, misunderstanding and lack of faith, we owe a lot to the patience of God.

Patience is needed in bucketfuls at the moment by Christians. Why?

The normal Christian experience is a journey not an arrival

Our churches are full of 'frozen' Christians, who have stopped moving on because they think they have arrived, as if to change one's opinions or practices is a sin. But only God doesn't change, and for a very good reason; only his opinions and practices are perfect. You are not there yet, so journey on. And people are all at different stages in the journey. Perhaps you are ahead of them. Perhaps you think you are, but you are mistaken and it is they who are ahead of you. Be patient.

People do not change quickly

Frustration with other people's sin or error is not bad but is often counter-productive. We are rarely dealing with something which can be switched on or off like a light bulb. Opinions are deeply ingrained and supported by a lifetime in a society or church

which has told them, "This is the way it is and all else is of the devil". Sins ride into people's lives on the back of weaknesses that are often psychological and deeply rooted. Time is needed, so patience is mandatory.

People need to be loved before they change

Patience is an act of love to sinners before they are perfect. It is an act of love to people who have got it wrong before they get it all right. Only the perfect don't need God's patience and only the perfect don't need yours. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, "Be patient, bearing with one another in love". This patience of grace is needed equally today for enemies and brethren.

A three mile an hour peace process is not alien to a three mile an hour God. A loving patience with our brethren who disagree with us is a reflection of the character of the one who made all the colours of the rainbow and rules over a varied and diverse church.

"Be patient as I am patient," says the Lord.

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Saints & Scriptures

The Bible and Christ

The early church read the Scriptures as spiritual writings. Ultimately, God was their author. Consequently, for the spiritual reader, the Scriptures offered up spiritual treasures beyond the surface meaning of the text. Often these first Christians used allegory as a way of finding this spiritual meaning. However, allegory could lead to interpretations that seem strange or absurd to us. Worse still, allegory sometimes became a way of avoiding some of the difficult historical and moral issues raised by a more literal reading.

However, even those like the great fourth century preacher John Chrysostom who recognised the dangers of too great a reliance on allegory still held that there was more to the Bible than the literal interpretation. So, in his *Homilies on Genesis* John, having preached on the story of Joseph, says: "All this, however, happened as a type of the cross."

And this was the key. For despite differences over the extent to which it was appropriate to use allegory, all believed that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was the heart of the Scriptures. Moreover, Christ was believed to be at the centre of the Old Testament just as much as the New, and Christ was seen as the key to understanding the relationship between Old and New Testaments.

Of course there was nothing new in this approach. The church's first preachers and theologians were simply following the teaching of the New Testament writings themselves. It was these writings which repeatedly read and interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures in the light of Christ.

Sometimes this Christ centred interpretation was used in disputes with Jews.

spoke of Jesus, even when the biblical writers did not themselves realise it. Works from the second century writers Justin and Tertullian take this approach.

However, for the most part Christ centred reading and preaching of the Scriptures was simply part and parcel of the church's proclamation of the gospel, its instruction of new believers and its preaching to the faithful. So Gregory of Nazianzus (4th C) in his *Second Paschal Oration*

Gregory of Nazianzus 4th C.

could sum up the purpose of Scripture in these words:

"Thus then and for this cause the written law came in, gathering us into Christ."

As his Oration continues Gregory draws on the description of the Passover meal and explains its typological significance in relation to the eucharistic meal. And having done so he encourages his congregation so:

Such is the feast thou art keeping today; and in this manner I would have thee celebrate both the birthday and the burial of him who was born for thee and suffered for thee. Such is the mystery of the Passover; such are the mysteries sketched by the Law and fulfilled by Christ, the abolisher of the letter, the perfecter of the Spirit, who by his passion taught us how to suffer, and by his glorification grants us to be glorified with him.

These first Christians had a holy inability to read the Bible without finding Christ in it. This was their first and most fundamental principle of biblical interpretation.

Alwyn Thomson

Understanding Scripture

Issues of Gender

We come to the Bible seeking to understand its meaning and relevance for our lives today. The specific concerns we bring with us however often differ depending on the different circumstances of our lives: our sex, our race, our economic status, our sexuality, our dis/ability and so forth. It is often those adversely affected by their circumstances who begin to ask questions relevant to their situation, for example: “What does the bible have to say about the suffering and injustice of racial prejudice, economic exploitation and sex discrimination?”

Whatever the initial concerns that we bring to the Bible, as Christians seeking to engage meaningfully with our world we need to consider what other insights we might gain from scripture if the questions we were addressing were different. Do these different questions confirm or challenge our views? On what basis and why?

Having such different starting points is not about optional ‘special interest’ choices. In other words, biblical interpretation that arises from an awareness of race, disability and gender should not be a concern *only* for people of colour, the disabled, and women. For however strange or difficult it may be to think about somebody else’s life situation, it is essential that we do in order to understand the meaning and relevance of scripture for our world today. This article concerns how we might begin to think about the question of gender. I suggest three things that having an awareness of gender initially involves when reading the Bible.

An awareness of gender is a recognition that humanity is both female and male

In the same way that an awareness of race is a recognition that humanity is not just white, and an awareness of disability is a recognition that humanity is not just able-bodied, an awareness of gender is a recognition that humanity is not just male. It sounds obvious! But the awareness that humanity consists of both female and male counteracts a general tendency to prioritise maleness in our thinking about humanity. In other words, it reminds us not to think ‘male’ when we think ‘human being’. Biblical women, with the exception of Jesus’ mother Mary, are rarely put forward as ‘role models’ for men as well as women. Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, are held up to Christians as examples of followers of God from whom all of us, women and men, can learn. Sarah, Hagar, Deborah, and Ruth are usually reserved

for all-female groups. Why? The assumption is that male characters have something of relevance to say to all of humanity, both women and men, but female characters only

*By
Fran
Porter*

have something to say for women. In practice this endorses the view that lessons learned from male biblical characters are normative for men and women, whereas lessons learned from female characters are generally only applicable to women.

The need to raise awareness that humanity is both female and male is one reason why it is so important to use inclusive rather than generic language, using both female and male terms (*women and men, sisters and brothers, she and he*) to speak of people rather than only male terms (*men, brothers, he*) to refer to both. Using inclusive language counteracts an unsaid equation between humanity and maleness rather than with humanity being both female and male. This unsaid equation can be illustrated in the following sentences. Man is the only primate that commits rape. Man being a mammal breast-feeds his young. Man has difficulties giving birth.¹ The strangeness or otherwise of these sentences depends on how we picture the generic term 'man'. If the latter two sentences seem odd or funny it is because when we use generic terms we think of males rather than of both females and males. One way we can change this kind of thinking is to use gender inclusive language.

A more conscious awareness that humanity includes both women and men affects what we see in the Bible. Because we are so used to not noticing them, a useful question to ask of any biblical text is "Where are the women?" For example, we generally think of Jesus travelling around Palestine with the twelve apostles. However, Luke 8:2 tells us that he was also accompanied by many women, three of whom are named (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza and Susanna). The women provided for them out of their own resources (see also Mark 15:40-41). These verses, which have always been in the gospel record, contribute to the picture of what the life and ministry of Jesus was like, but it is not generally the one we envisage when we think about Jesus travelling around teaching and healing. They also provide us with a possible clue to the identity of the seventy sent out by Jesus in Luke 10:1. Further they severely affect any notion that Jesus' teaching and ministry was for an exclusive male circle to observe and participate, and any implications taken today from that about women and men in the church.

There are norms of behaviour and attitudes taken for granted by us about how women and men think and behave and these norms have social, historical, cultural, and/or religious roots.

Gender concerns what we view as normative behaviour and attitudes for women and men.

They may change between generations. For example, 'boys don't cry' is still a common view of what it means to be a boy. Boys *can* cry physically. But 'boys don't cry' concerns what our society expects of male children in their reaction to being hurt or upset.

We also have gendered spheres of life and gendered professions. Nursing is a profession with a majority of women. It is seen as a woman's profession and a nurse is assumed to be female, therefore a man in that job is the exception. Hence we talk about nurses and *male* nurses. In a similar way, we talk of police constables (who are men) and *women* police constables. These examples illustrate how gender is built into our language. We assume that 'nurse' is *female* and 'police constable' is *male*. In the same way we actually think *male* when we say 'humanity'.

Assumed norms of gendered behaviour is why we have given women in the bible attention mainly in terms of them as wives and mothers, or perhaps more negatively as sexual partners, rather than, for example, as disciples. Luke 11:27-28 tells us of a woman who called out to Jesus: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you." In response to this emulation of motherhood as the *sole* virtue that Jesus' mother and by implication other women had to offer, Jesus said "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

When we come to read and understand biblical text, we bring our ideas about gender identity and role with us. For example, in Genesis 2:23 when Adam sees Eve for the first time he exclaims: "This at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." Does this response indicate Adam identifies or contrasts himself with Eve? What are the implications of your answer?

In Luke 15, in response to the Pharisees objecting to him spending time with sinners, Jesus tells three parables about God's attitude and activity to those who are lost. In these God is depicted as a shepherd looking for his lost sheep, a woman looking for a missing coin, and a father looking for a runaway son. Why are we more familiar (and/or more comfortable) with God

pictured as a shepherd and a father than we are with God pictured as a woman?

In Philippians 4:2-3 we read of Euodia and Syntyche. We know very little about either, but their so-called bickering has been used to present them as stereotypical of silly women. The text itself presents a different picture. They were co-workers with Paul (as were Silas, Barnabas, Timothy and Peter). All the text tells us is that they were not of the same mind, about what we don't know. Was it doctrinal, ecclesial, personal, pastoral? Paul does not admonish these women, but rather gives them encouragement and support for their work with him in the church. The suggestion is that their disagreement was significant for the church because of their leadership positions within it. Our assumptions about why people are doing what they are doing, come because of our preconceived notions about gender.

An awareness of gender alerts us to the different values we place on women and on men

The gendered assumptions about what is normal behaviour and characteristics for men and women often goes hand in hand with a value system that prizes male attributes more than female attributes. In other words, what do we see as significant in the biblical text. What and who is worthy of our attention? Why, for example, have we made Abraham more important than Sarah in biblical history? We talk about God's covenant with Abraham as if Sarah was not included. In Genesis 17 we are told that the Lord appeared to Abraham and declared his covenant with him. The text makes it clear that Sarah is fully included in the covenant God initiates. The same promises made to Abraham in the first half of the chapter (verses 1-8) are mirrored in covenant promises made to Sarah in the second part of the chapter (verses 15-22). There is a change of name (Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah) and promise of being the ancestor of multitudes of people from whom kings will come. Further there is the specific promise of a child of whom both Sarah and Abraham would be the parents. Sarah is indispensable in this covenant God makes with

When we come to read and understand the biblical text, we bring our ideas about gender identity and role with us

them - after all Isaac was not Abraham's only child, let alone his first born - but he was Sarah's.

In Mark 14:3-9 we read of the woman who anointed Jesus in anticipation of his death and subsequent burial. While others object to what they see as waste, Jesus defends her and her anticipation of what lies ahead of him with the words: "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she had done will be told in remembrance of her." (v9) It is not that Jesus says the story will be told 'in remembrance of me' but 'in remembrance of her'. Regardless of what may have happened in the early years of the church, when today this story is told, is there an emphasis on the memory of this woman? If not, why not? If she had been a male character (like Paul or Peter or James or Andrew) would things be different? If we are aware of gender we will begin to notice the kind of value we attach to male and female characters. If we value women we will give them due consideration.

In conclusion, an awareness of gender is important, because issues of visibility and inclusion, gendered ways of being or thinking, and the values we attach to women and men in the Bible influence our interpretation of biblical texts and their application in our lives. While gender does not occur in a vacuum, or is separate from concerns of economic status, race, dis/ability, an awareness of gender (as with these other life situations) gives us an opportunity to see what we have not seen before in the biblical text and to begin to ask different questions. In so doing we explore more of the riches of the Bible and its relevance for contemporary living.

Notes: 1. These examples are taken from a discussion in Dale Spender (1990) *Man Made Language* second edition, London, Pandora pp 151-157.

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Saints & Scriptures

The Bible and Christian Life

How many of us would expect a great theologian to make a great preacher? I suspect most of us tend to think of the two roles as quite distinct - perhaps even incompatible.

Yet the great theologians of the early church were usually pastors as well, preaching week by week - and sometimes day by day - to the ordinary Christians of their towns and cities. They preached to bring men and women to salvation, they preached to comfort and strengthen Christians under pressure, they preached to confront and challenge Christian sinfulness, they preached to instruct Christians in holy living. And at the heart of their preaching was the Bible.

So Basil of Caesarea, in the first sermon of his *Hexaemeron* - a series of sermons on the creation story - began by reminding his listeners of the nature and purpose of the Bible. "Let us listen then to these words of truth written without the help of the 'enticing words of man's wisdom' by the dictation of the Holy Spirit; words destined to produce not the applause of those who hear them, but the salvation of those who are instructed by them."

Many hundreds of sermons from these early centuries survive. In them we repeatedly hear the great theologians of the early church faithfully proclaiming Scripture to the Christian community for their salvation and instruction. For Basil and others the Bible was not a sourcebook for theological dispute, but a gift from God through the Spirit to church. So, to take another example, Gregory the Great, in a sermon on Ezekiel wrote: "By these words of

Scripture God makes us alive, because through them he demonstrates to us the spiritual life, and even pours it into our minds by the inspiration of the Spirit, because daily through the gift of grace it has its effect in the minds of the elect."

Even the deepest and most complex theological disputes had at their heart a pastoral concern. "He

Basil of Caesarea 330-379 AD

became human that we might become divine; he revealed himself in a body that we might understand the unseen Father; he endured insults that we might inherit immortality," said Athanasius. "What is not assumed, is not healed," wrote Gregory of Nazianzus. The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ's two natures were crucial because they concerned how humans could know God and find salvation. The early church's theology - no matter how difficult, complex and obscure it might seem to us - was, in fact, the proclamation of salvation and an act of worship.

Let us hear Basil once more, concluding his second sermon on the creation story:

May the Father of the true light, Who has adorned day with celestial light, Who has made the fire to shine which illuminates us during the night, Who reserves for us in the peace of a future age a spiritual and everlasting light, enlighten your hearts in the knowledge of truth, keep you from stumbling, and grant that "you may walk honestly as in the day". Thus shall you shine as the sun in the midst of the glory of the saints, and I shall glory in you in the day of Christ, to Whom belong all glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

Alwyn Thomson

Take me to the theatre

Take me to the theatre
I keep getting it wrong
Can't seem to put it right
I find I'm oh so selfish
That all I want to do is fight
A husband who needs more love
A father who needs more patience
I seem to be running on the spot
In this quagmire of my confessions.

Take me to the theatre
And lay me on the table
Take up that knife and cut me
Till my life is much more able.

Never too early to love
But it's often too late
I'm too often too judgmental
When the jury's my own heart's hate
An enemy who needs more forgiveness
A friend who needs more sacrifice
Take up that knife and cut me
Till I'm ready to pay the price.

And my soul is so frightened
As you lay me down
My mind it thinks the worst
Of what might be found
But my soul is full of hope
Of when I rise again
That all of my crippling ills
Will be something way back then.

Steve Stockman

'Take me to the Theatre' is from Steve Stockman's forthcoming collection of poetry 'Gifts, Rifts and Paradigm Shifts' available in early 1999.

Anabaptist *hermeneutics*

1. The Function of Scripture

It is assumed by Anabaptists that not only does the bible contain the good news of salvation through Christ, but it also contains specific directions for the individual and the corporate life of those who respond to the good news. The bible gives specific guidelines for the shape of discipleship, for the form of the church and for the relationship of the church to the world. The basic models of the believer's relationship to Christ (discipleship) and of the church as the binding and loosing community are to be found in Scripture and are to be followed and obeyed because they represent the mind of Christ.

The Reformed theologians approached the bible in the same way but came to different conclusions because of their view of the relationship of Old and New Testaments. They appropriated models from the Old Testament as well, whereas Anabaptists insisted on the primacy of the New for the church.

2. Word and Spirit

Most Anabaptists identified the bible as God's Word. If one comes to the bible with an honest and searching heart, the Spirit of God will illumine the mind and remove hindrances to understanding. Thus only one who comes with the right disposition, which is mainly humility and a readiness to be instructed, will truly understand the Word. No scholarship is of any avail if the humble spirit is lacking. Only the Spirit provides true discernment as human natural gifts are strengthened by God's own presence.

3. Understanding and Obedience

There is also a close connection in Anabaptism between understanding the bible and obedience to what it demands, between knowledge and discipleship. Some Anabaptists like Hans Denck and Hans Hut never tired of saying that true knowledge of God and his will cannot be achieved simply from reading the bible. Hans Denck was pointing to this in the oft-quoted sentence: *'No man can know Christ unless he follows after him in life.'* Similarly Hans

readiness to obey Christ's words is prerequisite to understanding them. Thus all the sophistication of interpretative methodology will be of no avail if the reader and interpreter of Scripture is not ready to obey Christ's words in his life.

4. The Bible and the Word of God

Many Anabaptists believed that the Word of God was broader than the bible, although the bible is always viewed as the chief medium for the sharing of God's Word with man. The Word of God can also come directly to the believer in the heart, i.e. that God uses no immediate medium for transmitting it. The Word of God can also come through the spoken word of others, particularly preaching and admonition. Although there is not total agreement among Anabaptists on these points, these views do represent a part of the tradition. Hans Denck refused to call the bible the Word of God lest it cut a person off from hearing the Word of God directly in the present.

Hermeneutical Principles of Anabaptism

1. Christocentrism

For all Anabaptists Christ was the centre of scripture. All scripture must be seen and evaluated through the spectacles of Christ and his apostles. This principle expressed itself in the movement in several ways.

a. Pilgram Marpeck.

The centrality of Jesus, the man of flesh and blood, the physical man, most strongly emerges in the works of Marpeck. God reveals himself in material ways. Only through the earthly, physical Jesus can one penetrate through to the heavenly Christ. In Jesus God has imposed

Walter Klassen

physical limitations on his revelation. This Jesus now becomes the clue to understanding the scriptures. It is not the same as Luther's *'Was Christum treibet'* (Whatever promotes Christ) for then Luther began to look for Christ everywhere and found him everywhere, especially in the Old Testament. The emphasis on the human physical Jesus places historical limitations on the interpretation of scripture.

b. Swiss Brethren and Menno

Among the Swiss and in Menno Simons we find a somewhat broader and more general articulation of the principle of Christocentrism. Here we hear about 'the life and doctrine of Christ and the apostles'. The main principle of interpretation then is the life and teaching of Jesus and its interpretation in the rest of the New Testament. It became especially a means of handling the Old Testament. It provided a way of discriminating about what in the Old Testament could be appealed to in the age of grace. Although somewhat broader, this view still places historical limits on interpreting the bible and virtually shuts the door on all forms of allegorical interpretation.

c. Legacy of Hans Hut

Still others emphasised especially the cross of Christ, like Hans Hut and his followers. The suffering of the innocent one becomes the clue to understanding the bible. There is much talk about the lamb that was slain from the beginning of the world, which meant not merely the suffering of Jesus but the suffering of the creation and Christ's suffering in his disciples. The cross as the symbol of suffering thus becomes the key to the understanding the whole of Scripture.

This is essentially a mystic view and also moves closer again to Luther's *'Was Christum treibet'*. It enables a greater and wider use of the Old Testament as is natural, since the point of view came from Thomas Muntzer.

In sum then, the chief hermeneutical principle is Jesus, his life, words, and death. Whatever is in conflict with this is not God's Word for the church.

2. Relation of Old & New Testaments

Most Anabaptists took a historical-development view of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New. Jesus stood at the centre. He was a hinge, a watershed. Before him had been one kind of historical reality; after him, another kind. Before Jesus everything was in the nature of promise of things to come; in Jesus everything was fulfilment. The Old Testament was a shadow; in Jesus came the true reality. The law was the mark of a servile covenant; in Jesus Christ grace is the mark of a covenant of free sonship. These relationships emphasise the centrality of Jesus.

What was before Jesus was real enough. To the real people of Israel God revealed real divine revelation, but it was incomplete, unfinished, suitable not to make sons but patiently to deal with servants. Where the Old Testament is superseded by the New it is no longer authoritative for Christians. It was authoritative for God's people once, but now no longer. It does retain a certain authority 'outside the perfection of Christ'. Thus even for the Old Testament Jesus became the interpretative principle. Whatever agreed with him was and remained God's Word; whatever contradicted him was not God's Word for the new covenant.

3. The Bible Illuminates Itself

Many passages in the bible are obscure or even contradictory. When this is the case, that is, when the bible is unintelligible at one point, some other part will come to the rescue and explain it. That is to say, the bible interprets itself. This principle developed among Anabaptists out of dissatisfaction with scholastic methods of interpretation. By using this principle one did not need to resort to methods which supplied a meaning, for example, from tradition. Introducing meaning from external sources meant distorting the meaning of the text. Sufficient help for interpretation was found in the bible itself if one searched diligently. And since the bible was by one

author, the Holy Spirit, it was proper to use one text to illumine another. The point that the bible is basically simple and clear occurs frequently.

4. Letter and Spirit

Anabaptists were accused of both literalism and spiritualism, of a wooden insistence upon a literal following of Jesus' words on the one hand, and of abandoning Scripture by flight into complete subjectivism, on the other hand. There is some truth to both, but it is obvious that both cannot be true of the same people at the same time.

There is no question that the letter was important to Anabaptists, for they could not afford to have the authority of the bible undermined again by a disregarding of its obvious demands. The charge of literalism came especially in their insistence against infant baptism, the oath, bearing of arms, and usury. Those cannot be said to be unimportant issues. Anabaptists readily recognised that in some cases one had to appeal to the general drift or intention of a larger passage in preference to the literal wording of an individual text, but they challenged the way in which it was used against them by the Reformers in a generalised appeal to faith and love. For faith and love in the Anabaptist understanding had specific, not general content. By obeying Jesus literally on not bearing arms, one was being loving and faithful.

The Spirit was appealed to by Anabaptists, but not, except in a few isolated cases, as a source of new revelation. They felt driven by the Spirit to be baptised, to preach, read the bible to others, or go to one place or another. But the Spirit they appealed to was the Spirit who was also the author of the bible and who did not contradict what he had said in his main witness.

The problem is most acutely visible in Pilgram Marpeck and there most creatively articulated and resolved. To quote William Klassen: *"The letter was important but not as a dead standard by which to live; rather it was the vehicle used by the Spirit to communicate its message to him, a vehicle that would be necessary as long as man lives on the stage of history. The letter had been infused with the Spirit and had become 'a living letter in his heart'."* (Covenant and Community [Eerdmans 1968] p 98).

Anabaptist Hermeneutics in Practice

That this section needs to be added is indication of how closely hermeneutics was integrated with life. It was not an abstract methodology but a part of the total being of the disciple.

The Community Interprets

"It is a basic novelty in the discussion of hermeneutics to say that the text is best understood in a congregation" (JH Yoder). That is true both for today as well as for the sixteenth century. The Anabaptist insistence on community interpretation was a declaration that the academic tools of literary analysis were not enough. The text can be properly understood only when disciples are gathered together to discover what the Word has to say to their needs and

The readiness to obey Christ's words is prerequisite to understanding them

concerns. For each member of the church has something to contribute out of his own experience. It is therefore not the hierarchy as in Roman Catholicism, nor the scholar-teacher as in Protestantism who decides what the Word means in any given instance, but the gathered community under the guidance of the Spirit.

In this setting the scholar has a place in that s/he brings to the discussion knowledge of the languages and what others have said about the text. But s/he is not exempt from the congregational process of searching and finding. This process is designed to save Christians from the tyranny of the specialised knowledge and equipment of the scholar, as well as from the tyranny of individualist interpretation and of the visionary.

Epilogue

I am not sure what function such a statement might serve in a twentieth century setting. The problems and methods of hermeneutics have changed so radically since the introduction of historical and literary criticism in the nineteenth century that there is hardly any resemblance between their way and the sixteenth century way of biblical interpretation. Both take the bible seriously and that is about where the resemblance ends.

Can an essay like this be more than just a reverent nod to the ancestors, as Yoder says? Is it only the acknowledgement and articulation of an ideal we no longer attempt to practice? While the principles of Anabaptist hermeneutics may not adequately serve us today, the way in which they worked at the task may. Three points strike me as having special relevance for today:

1. **The view that it is the congregation that interprets Scripture.**
2. **The view that the scholar is subject to the congregational process of interpretation.**
3. **The relationship between discipleship and epistemology.**

Taken with permission from 'Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives.' Ed. Willard Swartley, Institute of Mennonite Studies, Elkhart 1984.

Saints & Scriptures

Reading the Bible Then and Now

The Bible and the Church

Many Protestants are uncomfortable with an emphasis on tradition or church authority. However, all of us come to the Bible through some tradition. It might be the creeds and confessions of our particular denomination. Or it might be that unspoken and unwritten traditions govern how we read and understand the Bible. Perhaps it is worth asking what tradition has shaped how you read and interpret the Bible.

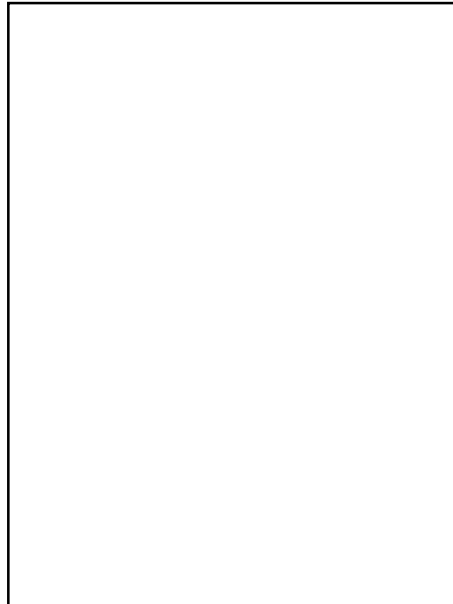
Of course there are dangers with tradition. Tradition can take on a life of its own, adding to Scripture or blinding us to the new things God may want to say. But the other danger is that our unwritten and unconscious traditions can do exactly the same.

That the tradition is preserved, proclaimed and passed on in the Christian community is also important. Evangelical Protestantism has produced too many frauds, thieves and heretics because it has assumed that individuals have a right to interpret Scripture apart from the teaching of the Christian community through two millennia.

In contrast, tradition, as Irenaeus understood it, provided a clear framework for the truthful and faithful interpretation of Scripture. Perhaps both Protestants and Catholics have more to learn about Scripture, tradition and authority than they think.

The Bible and Christ

The danger of allegory - that we will read more into the Bible than is there - is always present. Many preachers and readers have had little difficulty in finding Christ in the Bible. However, problems arise when this blinds us to other things the Bible might want to say, or when it becomes a means of getting round things in the Bible we may not like or understand. While



Christ the King

but to see how Christ speaks through Scripture to the fullness of human life.

the Bible is a spiritual book, it is not to be spiritualised, for there is a spiritual depth to all of life. All of life is addressed by God in Scripture. All of life is touched by Christ.

Perhaps a greater danger for some is that having been taught techniques of reading and interpreting the Bible that take into account every aspect of Scripture as literature, history and the like, we have lost sight of its spiritual, God-given character. Yet stripped of this what does all our interpretation and preaching amount to?

The challenge to us all is not only to see Scripture with Christological glasses

The Bible and the Christian Life

The centrality of the Bible in the early church cannot be underestimated. But how central is it for us? We are busy people - do we still have time for this book? More than this, so many of those who appear to take the Bible seriously are not the kind of people we are comfortable with. They have turned the Bible into a field of battle. They wield it - with great enthusiasm - like a weapon of war. Is it easier for us to give up and leave it to them, finding our spiritual help for the Christian life elsewhere? Or has the preaching we hear become stale and tasteless?

Yet even if we struggle to find a place for the Bible in our Christian life, we cannot live without it. For Christ has called us into God's new community and given to us the gift of the Bible for our life together. Only through these Scriptures will we discover the amazing grace of God in Christ and, therefore, only in these Scriptures will we find the way of life.

Alwyn Thomson

Cross-Cultural Communication.....

Alan Wilson

Familiar words are dangerous, especially when they forfeit their power and impact. Frequent usage and shallow understanding water them down. In becoming common currency in the evangelical world, many of the sayings of Jesus have been devalued. We have wrenched them out of their inspired context and misapplied them. One in particular is found four times in the synoptic gospels: "Take up the cross and follow me." (Matt 10:38; Matt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23) Christians have no problem quoting these words. Preachers love to preach from these texts. Those involved in discipleship use them as the bedrock for their training. However, I feel we need to take a step back from our customary understanding of these words and view them in the light of the present political and cultural situation of Northern Ireland.

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

One of the basic principles of interpreting scripture is that it should always be interpreted in its context. When we look at the contexts where Jesus said, "Take up the cross and follow me", they have all one thing in common. Jesus only speaks these words in the context of difficult relationships. In Matthew 10:24 he is addressing difficult relationships within the family unit. Moreover, in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23 there is conflict in the relationship between Peter and Jesus. In the mind of Jesus, there was a connection between handling hostile relationships and taking up the cross.

Life can have no reconciling power or redemptive qualities until I take up my cross as Jesus did his. My cross should imitate and resonate with his cross. The message of the cross of Jesus is communicated to this present world through my smaller crosses. Taking up the cross will have profound healing influence on our divided communities. It will display heart attitudes that will confront and confound the entrenched bitterness and sanitised sectarianism that have characterised much of the Northern Ireland Evangelical community.

The kind of person God uses to bring healing to broken relationships and restore crushed

communities is someone who has the heart attitudes and the mindset of cross taker, someone who knows how to carry a cross, like Jesus.

When I speak of the cross we need to carry, I am not referring to some kind of suffering that is inflicted upon us. Anguish and distress have been the hallmarks of life in our province for the last thirty years, yet this has not produced any real peace, nor can it. I am referring to the attitudes that filled the heart of Jesus as he took up his cross. Think of some of the heart attitudes Jesus displayed as he bore his cross.

- Ø He was able to take up his cross because his heart was full of love.
- Ø He did not allow the injustice of his cruel death, to rob him of the freedom to forgive.
- Ø He knew that the pain of forgiving was consistent with the character of God, and how his Father had designed life.
- Ø He knew that to love your enemy invariably brings God glory.
- Ø He knew that to exact vengeance by coming down from his cross would never meet the deep needs of his own loving heart, or the demands of justice.
- Ø He knew that sacrificial expressions of radical love are the only way to reach the world with transforming grace.

Cross-shaped living is the most radical influence our society could ever experience, for in taking up our cross we become the antithesis to all sectarianism and prejudice that has blighted our society and church. Any refusal on our part, to take up our crosses as Jesus commanded will have personal and community consequences. I want to consider both personal and community consequences of lives that are not cross-shaped.

Refusal to take up our cross results in the decommissioning of our lives

When we refuse to take up our crosses, when we do not have the heart attitudes of a cross carrier, when our lives are empty of love, grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness we decommission our lives. A decommissioned life is a life that is out of use, a life that makes no difference, a life with no influence. It is a life whose under-development is reflected in its inability to bring change or hope. A decommissioned life is a tragedy, for it means that we have become casualties of apathy, victims of our own inertia with an addiction to mediocrity, a mediocrity we consider as normality. The commission of Jesus to take up the cross and follow him will ensure that our lives become animated with grace, love and compassion. Taking up the cross will mean we discover life to the full. For the heart attitudes of a cross carrier become compelling motivations for rejecting the status-quo, taking risks, reaching out, embracing our enemies and building relationships. These are things a decommissioned life would never do.

Refusal to take up our cross will result in us becoming prisoners who need to be released

The call of Jesus to take up your cross and follow was also a summons to freedom. Every time Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," he continued by stressing, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will find it". In the mind of Jesus, there is an indissoluble bond between taking up our cross and finding life. We have all heard expressions like 'finding life' or 'looking for life'. Jesus is saying that to find life, to experience authentic freedom, we need to take up our crosses.

What is the association between carrying our cross and experiencing freedom? Our capability to carry our cross is conditional upon what is in our hearts. If we cannot take up our crosses, if we do not have the heart attitudes of a cross carrier, then there must be something wrong in us. When a person is in bondage to attitudes that are antithetic to the cross, it is because they have never experienced freedom. Many people will go through their lives, never taking up their crosses, because they are imprisoned to bitterness, anger, resentment, sectarianism and prejudice. These same people do not have the freedom to show love, mercy, grace or forgiveness. It is only when they have the heart attitudes of a cross carrier, they will be released from such a cruel sentence. Taking up our crosses, loving unconditionally, reaching out to others, embracing the enemy, building a community, is our declaration of freedom.

COMMUNITY CONSEQUENCES

Refusal to take up our crosses will mean that the church will be ghettoised behind the walls of its own security zones.

The Evangelical community of Northern Ireland is increasingly becoming a dying cluster of ghettoised religionists with little if any relevance. Many denominations and congregations have degenerated into security prisons, which exist for crossless people who have decommissioned themselves. They are prisons where freedom has been replaced with indifference and inertia. We cannot take up our crosses and remain entombed in our church building or our smug fellowships.

The natural inclination of a cross carrier is to go beyond the walls, beyond the programmes, beyond the structures, beyond the traditions we have erected to make us feel safe and good about ourselves. As Jesus took up his cross and went beyond the city walls, so must we. In his going beyond the walls, the world saw the glory of holy, God-like vulnerability. Going beyond the walls was nothing new for Jesus, it was something he did all through his life. When he embraced the leper, when he sat and talked with the woman at the well, when he dined and danced with the tax collectors, he was going beyond the walls. All through his life Jesus had the heart of a cross carrier. He went beyond the walls of tradition and respectability. We cannot have the heart attitudes of a cross carrier and remain self contained and uninvolved in the real world. If we take up our crosses, then going beyond the walls will be natural and spontaneous. Reaching out, loving the unlovely, building community, showing forgiveness must characterise the Evangelical Church. This is only possible when we take off the cross.

What a difference there would be both in our land and in the church if we were to take the call of Jesus seriously. If the Church of Jesus Christ were to become cross carriers, because their hearts are full of love, grace, compassion, mercy and forgiveness, healing would come to the church and to the land. If solutions to the problems in Northern Ireland do not come through the church, then there will be no real solutions. Governments, politicians, assemblies, councils and cross border commissions can do their best. However, any solution or proposal they may come up with will be deficient, because it will not be radical enough to meet the real needs of people's hearts. Only people who have the heart attitudes of a cross carrier will have the freedom to go beyond the walls and bring healing of unconditional love to our community. No wonder Jesus spoke about the cross we need to carry.

Alan Wilson is a member of Milltown Baptist Church. He has just completed two years with the Baptist Missions Evangelism Team in Donegal.

NEWS & events

New Resources

A Time to Heal

This new resource pack contains four studies relevant to the complex issues of Peace, Justice and Reconciliation. The material explores the nature of healing and social transformation. It challenges the Church to be faithful to God's redemptive plan for our broken world and offers practical help in addressing the divisions in our community. Each study provides: an introduction to the topic; study notes offering Old & New Testament options; prayers (individual cards available); suggested songs for worship. The material has been laid out so that it can be used as a series of eight group bible studies or as sermon outlines covering one to eight weeks.

Border Crossings

This new series of daily bible readings, based on the book of Luke, is designed to help people reflect biblically on social, political and community issues.

The real White Tent

Following the success of 'For God and Ulster' this latest ECONI publication invites 25 contributors, from the nationalist community, to offer their perspective on the Protestant community and Unionist identity.

Living Towards a vision

Ministry as Peacemaker

David Porter

This is the last in the present series of clergy and leadership forums exploring the nature of Christian ministry in a divided society.

16 February 1999

Grosvenor House Conference Centre

Cost: (including lunch) 5

Bridge Builders

A ten week training course to equip and empower Christians to be bridge builders.

January March

YMCA, 12 Wellington Place, Belfast

7.30 pm – 9.30 pm

30 (concession 15)

Bridge Builders aims to motivate and equip Christians to engage with the hostile and sectarian realities of our divided community. The goal is to resource the participants with skills and insight for an imaginative involvement in peace building and to be a catalyst for others to become similarly involved. The course will include informed perspectives from guest speakers, biblical reflections and group interaction. We anticipate considerable interest - so book your place soon.

For details and a booking form contact Gladys Swanton (01232 325258).

Back to the Future

A Second Look at Protestant Culture

Friday Tuesday July

CNI in association with Derryvolgie PCI

The conference will consist of a four day residential involving Bible reading, workshops and field trips. The programme is designed to help people reflect biblically on themes relating to religion, culture and identity. The event facilitator is Derek Poole (ECONI's Development Officer). A brochure and booking form will be available early in 1999.

Resourcing Christians
for a Biblical
Response



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