

19. THE HERMENEUTICS OF CHRIST

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Summary

We have now surveyed the subject of hermeneutics from several points of view. We began by seeking to understand the need for a distinct discipline of evangelical hermeneutics and what it sets out to achieve. Essentially we are concerned with understanding the Bible as the word of God, and we have considered the major factors which distance us from the original Author, his secondary authors and their texts. While it would perhaps be an exaggeration to suggest that hermeneutics takes in the whole of Christian knowledge, it is not too much to say that no Christian knowledge is arrived at apart from the application of the principles of interpretation. Because it is now generally recognized that all investigation or reading is done from a position of pre-understanding or by engaging a range of presuppositions, we have examined the need for a frank recognition of the presuppositions of biblical theism. At the heart of this is the focus of the New Testament on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is set forth as the Word of God, the truth, and the final interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. This has required us to work towards a gospel-centred hermeneutic.

After attempting to delineate our task in hermeneutics, I have looked briefly at selected aspects of the history of biblical interpretation. It was also necessary to investigate the biblical-theological basis for hermeneutics as the background

to a critical assessment of the history of interpretation. The aim in this book was to try to understand first of all something of the hermeneutics of the apostolic period, and then the subsequent developments which betray a shift away from biblical norms of hermeneutics. I have traced briefly the course of interpretation through the ages in order to illustrate the increasing influence of various philosophies on hermeneutics, particularly in the handling of the Bible. The unavoidable conclusion is that many non-Christian philosophical influences have contributed to the corruption of the hermeneutic process.

The Reformation represented a largely successful attempt to eradicate the foreign philosophical influences that had shaped Catholicism. Then the Cartesian and Kantian revolutions in philosophy and the subsequent Enlightenment led to theological liberalism which, as we saw, involved the same kind of humanistic starting point or presuppositions as Catholicism. At the same time, the heirs of the Reformation struggled to maintain the presuppositions of Reformed Christian theism, which sought to establish its philosophical position from revelation in the Bible.

As we traced the development of Enlightenment hermeneutics we noted the shift to philosophical hermeneutics, so that what began as a practical issue of understanding difficult biblical texts became a matter of a general philosophy of understanding. The historical-critical method and subsequent developments marked a trend in hermeneutics that would go on reflecting current philosophical trends. A philosophy of understanding is not a bad thing in itself, but our concern is whether or not such developments are focused on the centrality and supremacy of Christ as the Word.

Evangelical interpreters are thus faced with two tasks. First, it is perhaps inevitable that we will never be able to anticipate all the new developments in hermeneutic theory. We will therefore find new and unexpected challenges coming from the academic world. These require us to consider our response to them, while trying to ascertain how much we can take advantage of such scholarship that proceeds from non-biblical presuppositions. Second, we should be constantly seeking to develop contemporary expressions of Christian theism in ways that remain consistent with the truth as it is in Jesus. It is this struggle to formulate a coherent Christian epistemology and metaphysics which will always be a part of an authentic evangelical hermeneutics.

The hermeneutics of the person of Christ

It is common in systematic theology to distinguish between the person of Christ and his work. But to distinguish is not to separate. The person and work

of Christ may never be separated, since they are interdependent. We may, however, ask questions about some of the implications of each in turn. To begin with, what are the hermeneutical implications of the person of Jesus Christ, the God/Man? I have considered a number of these in the course of this study, but it would be useful now to try to crystallize them.

The person of Jesus of Nazareth was an immediate hermeneutical challenge to all of his contemporaries, including those who followed him. He showed himself as fully human, and yet made claims of a unique relationship to God the Father. The result was a variety of responses, ranging from charges of blasphemy deserving of death to submission and worship as is due to the one true God. Of course, the formal Christian doctrine of the incarnation, of the God/Man, of the two natures and their relationship, took some time in coming, but the reality of God come in the flesh is what is clearly presented in the New Testament.

I have expressed my conviction that the later formulation of the Council of Chalcedon (451) served to provide a sound doctrinal expression of the implications of the biblical data. I am quite unconvinced by those who relegate the formula of Chalcedon to some kind of Hellenistic intrusion. Its understanding of the relationship of the one to the many is reflective of the thoroughly Hebraic view of unity and distinction. Chalcedon simply gives us a way of speaking about the relationship of the divinity of Jesus to his humanity. This is the basis for a distinctly Christian view of every relationship in all of reality, beginning with the Trinity and the incarnate Son of God.

The formula of Chalcedon does not attempt to solve the mystery of the God/Man, but it sets the bounds for thinking and speaking about the nature of Christ without falling into heresy. In summary, it states that Jesus is true God; Jesus is true human; there is unity without fusion; there is distinction without separation. Thus Jesus is the *God/Man* and the relationship between the two natures is *unity/distinction*. It is important to note that unity/distinction is a relational thing. The ontological question about those things relating in this way must be answered as well. The unity/distinction in Jesus now helps us come to terms with the relationship of Jesus to the One he addressed as Father. The Creed of Athanasius defines the Catholic faith as the worship of one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity. As W. H. Griffith Thomas pointed out, the doctrine of the Trinity is required by the gospel.¹ In coming to terms with the fact that Jesus is God, Christians had to learn to speak about God in

1. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1951), p. 22.

a way that could accommodate that truth. That is why the Creed of Athanasius gives the same kind of treatment to the Trinity as it does to the two natures of Christ. God is unity/distinction of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The difficulty of providing an adequate expression of both doctrines can be seen in the way the creed must constantly alternate between describing the sameness and the difference in these relationships.

The history of Christological thinking shows that a number of representative heretical answers to the question about the person of Christ share a common error. Thus we have the following false solutions to the relationship of Jesus' divinity to his humanity.

- Ebionism assesses Jesus Christ as *humanity without divinity* (special, but (kY"-L. '"" still only human).
- Docetism sees Jesus as *divinity without humanity* (he only appeared to be human).
- Apollinarianism asserts that *divinity diminishes humanity* (the divine Spirit replaces the human spirit).
- Nestorianism has *divinity plus humanity* (two persons, two natures, moral unity only).

Heresies show us how people, even Christian people, have misunderstood the truth of God's word. A heresy usually exalts one truth above other aspects of truth, so that the proper perspective is lost and the truth becomes distorted. Because they address the same kind of relationship, heresies about God are usually attempts to solve the mystery of the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in terms of fusion or separation. These match the heresies concerning Christ: Ebionism, Docetism, Apollinarianism and Modalism all express the primacy of the one over the many. Nestorianism and Tritheism express the primacy of the many over the one. But trinitarian Christianity in its Christology and theology maintains the equal ultimacy of both the one and the many. What, then, are the hermeneutical implications of this unity/distinction of the two natures of Christ? A number of these have already been discussed in this study, and it will suffice to give some examples here.

First, as I have already asserted in several contexts, the relationship of Jesus' humanity to his divinity points to his role of mediator and to his being the representative manifestation of the whole of reality in perfectly ordered relationships. Because I have dealt with this in chapter 16, I will only reiterate that it affects our view of the relationship of the divine word to the human word in Scripture. This has been too often dismissed as irrelevant to the question of the reliability of Scripture. No one is claiming that the human authors

of the biblical books were, like Jesus, without sin. Rather it is being claimed that the Holy Spirit oversaw the process, so that what the human authors said is what God says. Since they are human authors, the incarnation also demands that we do not create for ourselves a docetic Bible by ignoring the human dimensions, including the historical and cultural contexts. In chapter 5 I referred to the failure of the allegorists at this point, because they misunderstood the nature of the unity of the Testaments by not allowing for their proper distinction.

Second, the unity/distinction perspective that we derive from the Trinity and the incarnation enables us to deal with the biblical ideas of the one who represents the many. The whole salvation process in the Old Testament anticipates the role of Christ in the key offices or ministries in which one person represents the whole community. This perspective is made explicit in later reflections on the significance of Adam's fall. His role as the federal head representing the whole human race is implied by the history of humanity from Genesis 4 onwards. But passages such as Romans 3:10-18, which quotes a number of Old Testament texts, Romans 3:23, 5:12-19 and I Corinthians 15:21-22, 4:5-49 show that Adam is the representative one for the many who are accounted sinners. In the same way Jesus Christ is the representative one for the many who are accounted righteous. The antecedents to this ministry of Christ include the representative priests, prophets and kings of the Old Testament. The principle of the one representing the many, and the relationships between them as unity/distinction, cannot be removed from the Bible without completely undermining its essential message.

Third, the unity/distinction perspective provides the means of reconciling antinomies or apparent contradictions in emphasis. The obvious example here is the relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.³ Some speak of human freedom, which is acceptable if all they mean is that we are conscious of making choices and decisions. It is better to speak of responsibility rather than freedom, since true freedom has been lost because of sin. Then the question becomes one of the relationship of such decision-making to our bondage to sin and death on the one hand, and to the sovereign will of God on the other. It seems to me that any Christian who accepts that Jesus is both God and Man, in whom indeed there is both divine sovereignty and true human freedom, and these without any conflict, ought to be able to accept the

z. A good Old Testament example is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In the narrative it is said sometimes that he hardened his own heart, and on other occasions that God hardened it.

reality of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This is not to understand it, but to accept its mystery.

Fourth, the incarnational unity/distinction perspective requires the reader to allow for his or her real humanity. The new hermeneutic and reader-response criticism have emphasized this, but often at the expense of the reality of God speaking through his word. We avoid both a docetic Bible and a docetic reader. This is not to ignore the divine inspiration of the word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in authorship, transmission and in the believer's reading, but it is to take full account of the humanity of the Bible and of the reader. To avoid an Ebionite Bible and an Ebionite reader, we recognize the Holy Spirit's gentle and generous ministry at all stages of the word of God coming to us and being received with understanding. The incarnational imperative to account for our own humanity is the basis of the hermeneutical spiral.³ What a blessing that the original disciples and apostles were not all theologians of the calibre of Paul. The incarnational presence of God was initially to the humble and the 'ordinary' folk. God made himself known through Jesus to the non-erudite. God's hermeneutic was the humble son of Mary and Joseph. Hermeneutical theories which forget that simple fact are in danger of isolating the word of God in the heady, and often unsavoury, ivory towers of those who, like the Athenians, love to spend their time 'in nothing except telling or hearing something new' (Acts 17:21).

Fifth, the unity/distinction perspective is important in doctrinal formulation, so that the truly biblical perspective is maintained in doctrines. In a broad sense it applies to the relationship of signs and symbols to the things they signify. The hermeneutics of the sacraments is a case in point. 'This is my body' has meant different things to different groups. The question to be resolved is the relationship of the symbols of bread and wine to the things signified: the body and blood of Jesus. By the time of the Reformation, Rome had long since hardened its view in which the two became fused: the bread became the actual body; the wine became the blood. This is unity without distinction. At the Reformation some Protestants seemed to have over-reacted to the doctrine of transubstantiation and to have reduced the relationship to one of bare memorial; distinction with very little unity. The Calvinists, whose

3. A point made by Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). He emphasizes, as I have done, the significance of Calvin's understanding of the relationship of our knowledge of God and our knowledge of ourselves. Calvin's epistemology thus stated is in fact an early assertion of the hermeneutical circle.

sacramental theology is represented now in the Anglican Articles as well as the Westminster formulas, expressed much more of a unity and distinction viewpoint. In taking the bread and wine, we can truly feed on Christ in our hearts by faith.

A more contemporary dispute involves the question of human sexuality. Pro-homosexual arguments often try to discredit the force of biblical texts that specifically target homosexual practices. What they seem to fail to recognize is that these are expressive of a more basic issue of the creation of Man as male and female. The relationship of the sexes is unity/distinction. When a man cleaves to his wife and they become 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:2-4), they are still distinct persons of different gender. Both homosexuality and 'unisex' represent unbiblical attempts to fuse so that there is unity without distinction.⁴

Sixth, the unity/distinction perspective underlines the reality of non-literal interpretation and typology. Symbols, images and metaphors need this perspective at one level, but there is also the level where things described, without imagery or metaphor, as historical fact may also function symbolically of some greater reality yet to be revealed. The validity of promise/fulfilment and of typology as ways of understanding the structure of biblical revelation depends upon the unity and the distinction between the various stages of salvation history. Literalism in interpreting prophecy is an exercise in unity without distinction.

Seventh, it is worth pointing out that one of the implications of Jesus as representative reality is that every thing or fact in reality has some point of unity with, and some point of distinction from, every other thing or fact in reality. To put it another way the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, creation and the distinction between God and the creation establish the unity/distinction of all things.

The hermeneutics of the work of Christ

The hermeneutics of the work of Christ stem from the salvation-historical aspect of the gospel. There is coinherence with the hermeneutics of the person of Christ. But here we enquire into the doings of the God/Man. What was it that Jesus achieved for us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension

4. Every relationship of a man to a woman involves some kind of unity and some kind of distinction. The nature of the unity/distinction is determined by the specifics. Thus a man's relationship to his wife, his mother, his daughter and the check-out lady are all unity/distinction, but all different.

that affects the way we understand the biblical text and, by implication, the whole of reality? I have dealt with this in various ways in the course of this study, and it will suffice here simply to draw together some of the main points. We are concerned with what the gospel, seen from the point of view of the actions of God through his Son, implies for the way we understand the Bible.

First, the overall promissory structure of the Old Testament, which anticipates the coming of the Saviour, makes it imperative that we see the whole of the Old Testament as interpreted by the person and work of Christ. The dynamics of salvation history in the Old Testament point towards, and find fulfilment in, the dynamics of the gospel. Because we are dealing here not with mere ideas, but with the actions of God in space and time, it is not only what the God/Man is, but what he does in space and time that provide the ultimate meaning of all that happens in space and time. The ministry of Jesus the fulfiller has immense hermeneutic significance, since it draws together all the variety of themes and events in the Old Testament that foreshadow the fullness of God's purposes.

Second, the fact of the incarnation as God's action has multiple implications; we might mention first of all the pre-existence of Christ, the second Person of the Trinity. He is God from all eternity and the Creator of all things. That this eternal Creator-Word becomes flesh and dwells among us sums up the action of God in Christ. Again it is not an idea, but the real coming of the Christ to his own people. Who better to interpret all things than the One who is the Creator and sustainer of all things? Paul's discourses about the cosmic Christ, the one in whom God is summing up all things, stem from his understanding of the gospel event.⁵ Because reality includes humanity as the pinnacle of creation, the restoration of reality must involve the representative human, the last Adam, as a person who lives and acts in space and time.

Third, the incarnation points to the divinity of God's revealing and redeeming Word, coming amongst us to lead us into the truth, as he also redeems us from truth-denying sin and death. What Jesus did in his ministry here on earth is, of course, an expression of his person as the God/Man, and we cannot speak of his action apart from his being. But the redemptive work of Jesus guarantees that the people of God have been put into a positive relationship to the word of God. We have already considered the roles of Christ as the God who speaks, as the spoken Word, and as the true compliant receiver who responds perfectly to God's word. In terms of Christian life and practice, it means that we can read the Bible and know that, in Christ, we have

5. I have referred to this in some detail in ch. 16, in the section on Jesus and reality.

become true sons because his Sonship is attributed to us. Though we go on in some degree corrupting the word and its meaning, our imperfect interpretations of the word are justified by Christ. As Vern Poythress indicates, 'Christ is our redeemer with respect to interpretive sinfulness.'⁶ Incarnation and atonement are inseparable. The hermeneutics of the cross are the hermeneutics of repentance and submission to the crucified Lord. Any attempt to reduce the message of the Bible to morality and the mere imitation of Jesus ignores the centrality of the cross. Yet this moralizing is where so much evangelical application of Old Testament texts leads us. The work of Christ should be the magnet that draws our interpretative applications of all texts to the gospel.

Fourth, the doing of Christ demands that the humanity of God's word be treated carefully and understood for what it is. The work of the incarnate Christ includes the living of a perfect human life in relation to God the Father. It shows that God has not finished with humanity, but rather is restoring it. All critical study of the Bible reflects the fact that God has created our humanity in his image. The critic who ignores the creative-redemptive implications of the biblical message demonstrates a perverse willingness to engage in a critical activity that depends for its integrity on the very thing the critic seeks to deny. Using one's critical and intellectual faculties to deny that God has come in the flesh to save us is a corruption of the very processes demanded by the presence of this God in Christ. On the other side, the evangelical who is so wary of critical process that the critical demands of the incarnate Word and his in-scripturated word are neglected is suffering a severe loss of gospel-based perspective.

Fifth, the hermeneutics of the doing of Christ the fulfiller demand that we read carefully the Old Testament as a testimony to what he achieves in his life, death and resurrection. The gospel is so dependent on its Old Testament antecedents that we can easily overlook some of its dimensions and texture if we do not examine carefully what it is that he fulfils. The Old Testament perspective on eschatology, with all the rich variety of its expectations of restoration, finds its resolution in the work of Christ. This includes the promises concerning the people, the place of God's kingdom, the temple and redemption from sin. It also includes the promises of a new creation. Thus the hermeneutics of the cross of Christ must go beyond the forgiveness of sin to the new creation. Jesus on the cross was putting the universe back together; he was restoring the true order of creation.

6. Vern Poythress, 'Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation', IFTJ5o (1988), p. 306.

The hermeneutics of the glorification of Christ

Although I have dealt briefly with the significance of the resurrection in chapter 3, I must now refer to it again in this summary of gospel-centred hermeneutics. The resurrection, ascension and glorification of Christ are summed up in his session and intercession: the fact that he sits with the Father in glory and intercedes for his people. The glorification of Christ is the glorification of the God/Man. Jesus lived bodily, died bodily, rose bodily and ascended to the Father bodily. Any attempt to diminish the bodily resurrection and ascension is docetic. It undermines the whole integrity of God's plan for the created order. It destroys the meaning of the saving life of Christ and of our justification. It produces a diminished gospel of the salvation of the soul without the body. It is the paganizing Gnostic heresy all over again. What, then, are the hermeneutical implications of Christ's exaltation?

First, the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus demonstrate the absolute acceptance by the Father of the work of his incarnate Son. The resurrection shows that Jesus is the one true human who has merited life with the Father. The fact that Jesus is God demands the resurrection, but the resurrection is not primarily a demonstration of that fact. The New Testament stresses that the resurrection of Christ is the paradigm for our own resurrection on the day of Christ's return. The unity/distinction between the Christ who died and the Christ who appeared after his resurrection is the demonstration of our destiny in the resurrection of the body.

Second, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus show that the coming of the kingdom is not a literalistic fulfilment of Old Testament promise.⁷ The New Testament provides a clarification of the structure of the end times that is not explicit in the Old Testament. The disciples' question in Acts 1:6 evokes an answer that asserts the coming of the kingdom of God in the world through the preaching of the gospel. Whereas the Old Testament predicts one coming of the Day of the Lord, the gospel shows that in fact the Day of the Lord and the coming of the end happens in three ways: in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth; in the gospel age between Pentecost and the second coming; and in the consummation when Christ returns. This has immense implications for the way we read the Bible, as it indicates that Christ in his gospel is the definitive hermeneutic key to all Scripture and all reality.

7. See my discussion of evangelical literalism (Zionism) in ch. 12.

Third, the ascension is the signal that the kingdom of God demands the missionary role of the church. John's vision of the saved of Israel and the nations gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev. 7) does not imply that these gatherings happen by themselves. This is the result of the gospel going into all the world, a gospel that is to the Jew first but also to the Gentile. Such a mission would be empty of meaning if the Spirit of Christ who sends his people into the world with the word of life does not also guarantee that this same word will be translated and communicated with understanding. The New Testament's exposition of the Christian life, of the nature of the church and its place in the world, is what it is because of the resurrection and ascension.

Fourth, the ascension of the resurrected Christ demands a hermeneutic of the lordship of Christ. It reminds us that Christ rules now in this world through the gospel as it is preached. We should be encouraged greatly by the fact that the power that is restoring the glories of God's kingdom in the entire creation is the word entrusted to us. On the one hand, we should tremble at our responsibility to be faithful. On the other hand, we should remain confident that our weak efforts are justified in Christ, that our hermeneutical stumblings are redeemed and that, in the final analysis, it is the Lord himself who is the evangelistic speaker of his powerful and saving word. The same Lord commissions his servants to relay his gospel as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. We use all our hermeneutic skills within the framework of the authority of God and his word in order to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5).

The hermeneutics of the Spirit of Christ

The Enlightenment was anthropocentric and thus lost sight of any role for God, or indeed need for his existence. Christian theism accepts that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the divine act of communication. If it is the role of God the Father to be the communicator, and the role of God the Son to be the communication, the divine Word, what is the role of God the Holy Spirit?⁸ The Spirit was given at Pentecost because of the merits of Christ. He is known as the Spirit of Christ.

First, the Holy Spirit is necessary for the word to be a demonstration of the Spirit and power (1 Cor. 2:4-5). Calvin spoke of the internal witness of the Spirit in bringing us to salvation and enabling us to understand God's Word.'

8. Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), pp. 34off.

Fred Klooster points out that 'Paul repeatedly prayed that the believers might grow in understanding and knowledge through the illumination of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:2• 2 Cor. 4:4-15; Eph. 1:17-19; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-13),^{io} The Spirit enables us to overcome the effects of sin on the rational process. He makes it possible for the reader to use every faculty to discern the word of God and apply it. He makes it possible for us to overcome our God-denying pre-understanding in order to discern the meaning of the word, but he does not guarantee that we will do so. There is an aspect of our wills being inclined to receive such guidance. Moreover, the Bible does not say that the unbeliever cannot intellectually interpret it quite accurately. Larkin says that Paul locates the barrier in the area of evaluation rather than cognition.¹¹ The Holy Spirit deals with the inability of the unbeliever to accept the implications of the text. However, we cannot ignore the fact that submission to the text in faith brings its own rewards of cognition.

Second, the doctrine of inspiration reminds us that it was the role of the Holy Spirit to guarantee that what was written down by human authors was what God intended to be written down. Chalcedon is useful here to remind us that there is unity of Spirit and human word, but no fusion. Another implication of the doctrine of inspiration is that if we can speak of authorial intent, we must take into account the intent of both the divine and the human authors. But we cannot separate these, as some would do, by constructing a divine canon within the total human canon. The distinction between the divine intention and the Spirit-inspired human author's intention is, of course, vital (to the recognition of typology or *sensus plenior*). Thus the human authors of the Old Testament spoke of things whose full significance was not revealed until the coming of Christ. Then the promise that the Spirit would lead the apostles into all truth speaks to both the writing of the apostolic witness in the New Testament and to the people of God who are put into contact with Jesus, who is the truth.

Third, it is the Spirit who regenerates and brings the believer to faith in the saving work of Christ. The Spirit's regenerating work is a sovereign act of

9. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.7.4-5; 9.1-3.

io. E. H. Klooster, 'The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutic Process: the Relationship of the Spirit's Illumination to Biblical Interpretation', in E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 451-472.

it. William Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 289.

grace, yet it issues in our conscious act of faith and trust. This is the radical hermeneutic realignment whereby we start to view all things in the light of the revelation in Christ. The Spirit's continuing work in the believer is not done apart from our conscious effort; he works through our minds and wills. Hence the function of the many exhortations and commands of Scripture is to be the instruments of the Spirit's working in us. Many aspects of Christian behaviour we learn and perform with little reflection. Others require dedicated effort and the application of will. So with hermeneutics: the Spirit's work in us renews our minds. Conversion results in a reorientation of thinking, so that we see the world as God's world. Facts that once were thought to be watertight arguments against the reality of God and his saving work in Christ now are interpreted as eloquent testimonies of these. Every fact becomes a fact related to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One such 'fact' is the Bible. The renewing of our minds means that we begin to view the Bible in a new way. What was once perhaps regarded as a pack of fairy stories and impossible propositions is now gladly accepted as the word of life, the very oracles of God. This represents a massive paradigm shift in interpretation that affects every text of the Bible, and it is a gift of the Spirit.

Christians and their Bible: hands-on hermeneutics

I would certainly not want to imply by a study such as this that only the hermeneutically literate specialist can make a go of reading the Bible with understanding. As the Reformers rejected Erasmus's idea of erudition, so we must reject the notion that only an educated specialist can understand Scripture. The whole Protestant ethos of the Bible for the people, along with the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, would make nonsense if this were to be so. Yet there is clearly a place for teachers in the biblical view of the communal life of believers, a communal life that has important ramifications for one's private or family life. We acknowledge this by providing quite rigorous training for those who aspire to be teachers, preachers, pastors and evangelists in our churches.

One of the functions of the teaching office is to engender confidence in the Scriptures and to teach the laity to read the Bible intelligently. Of course, the notion of a devotional life that usually involves Bible reading and prayer is not restricted to evangelicals. Evangelicals, however, usually do place great emphasis on personal spiritual exercises in the home, individually and in family groups. Yet sometimes the aids that are employed, and the habits learned, foster techniques and strategies that can be more of a hindrance than a help to understanding the Bible. Bible-reading 'devotional' programmes do not

always promote the understanding of the principles inherent in good understanding of the word of God that I have been discussing. For example, less than helpful approaches would include the following.

- Bible-reading programmes consisting of unrelated snippets drawn from all parts of Scripture with no obvious connection other than perhaps some loose thematic relationship.
- Programmes without any perspective on the 'big picture' of the history of redemption (salvation history).
- Strategies that aim at extracting a devotional thought for the day rather than allowing the text to dictate the outcome.
- Lack of any real hermeneutical guide for the application of texts, especially Old Testament passages.
- Asking the wrong questions of the text: usually something like, 'What does this teach me about myself?' before asking, 'How does this passage testify to Christ?'

It should also be clear from this study that there is no one, simple, right strategy for reading and understanding the Bible. This is the implication of the hermeneutical spiral and the fact that the various dimensions we have discussed are inter-related in such a way that it is impossible to say which has absolute priority. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish the various elements of the whole process and to suggest a tentative logical order. The Bible reader needs to understand that all of us develop or adopt strategies and practices that become second nature to us. Preachers and teachers will be motivated by different situations and aims in the selection of passages and series of passages in their programmes. The same could be said of the private or family practices of Bible reading. Most evangelicals in these situations would, I believe, favour some kind of planning of reading and preaching programmes. The idea of the worried preacher in his study late on a Saturday evening, pen in hand and a blank sheet of paper in front of him, being asked by his concerned wife, 'Still nothing, dear?' is almost ludicrous.

In the light of the matters I have discussed, and by way of summary, I want now to suggest some basic practical concerns in the application of evangelical, gospel-centred hermeneutics. Some, perhaps most, of these matters become second nature to the maturing Christian and to the experienced teacher or preacher. It is right, however, that we should from time to time examine our practices and consider in what way we can improve them. The hermeneutical spiral implies successive stages of reassessment and adjustment as we improve and move towards maturity and conformity to the gospel. Thus

what follows is not a daily or weekly checklist, but a proposed list of some important ingredients in understanding the Bible.

Preparation

1. We should aim at a programme that is meaningfully motivated. This may be a short- or long-term programme. For example, a pastor should, I believe, major on expository preaching which focuses on larger portions, even whole books of the Bible. At regular intervals he may pause to give some variety in topic and focus.¹ One's private Bible reading can follow a similar approach. In my own Bible reading I have recently completed a programme of reading through the Esv from Genesis to Revelation. My usual programme is to read through whole books. One should aim both to understand better the unity of the Bible, and to get close to the distinct parts of the text.
2. We should understand our presuppositions and motives for coming to the text. It takes some self-discipline to address these matters. It may be helpful occasionally to list the assumptions one makes about the Bible that motivate the study of it. An even more arduous exercise would be to try occasionally to understand and to write down the reasons for holding such assumptions and how one could defend them.
3. Christian theistic presuppositions will imply the need to pray as part of the process of reading and understanding the Bible. It is not just another book we are dealing with, but the word of God written under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. We are dependent on the Spirit's help. Humble submission to the word will be prayerful submission.
4. We should aim to improve our understanding of the overall narrative structure, the 'big picture' of salvation history. The better our grasp of this, the better our understanding will become of who and what Jesus is.

Making contact with the text

5. We begin reading by making initial contact with our chosen text, bearing in mind that a text may involve taking in a much larger portion of Scripture than the usually designated few verses of devotional readings. As we get a feel for this text we should prayerfully sit under it, letting it

1 a. But let the preacher beware. Most congregations would find it intolerably tedious to have to sit through an uninterrupted series of thirty or forty sermons on Leviticus or Judges. Programmes should be intelligently crafted with a mind to the capabilities of the congregation, not to mention their life expectancy!

speak in its own way to us. I have usually found it useful to write my own précis of the passage. Such a tentative summary may need adjusting in the light of further reading.

6. The trained teacher or preacher might make contact with the text in the original languages, and perhaps make a translation which can then be compared with the English text that is being used. Every preacher who has done some study in Hebrew and Greek should at least be able to check up on points of translation as the need arises, even if the ability to make a full translation is lacking. Those who have no Hebrew or Greek can gain by reading the passage in at least two different standard versions."
7. Consider the extent and nature of the literary unit. This is important for a general understanding of the context of the passage. The immediate limits of the unit will be the discourse or prophetic oracle, the narrative or the poetic unit, and so on, of which the chosen text may be a part. The wider context is, of course, the whole book in which the text is found. Finally there is the canonical context of the whole Bible.

Close reading of the text

8. Begin the task of a close and analytical reading of the text. How close one goes depends on one's training and the purpose of the reading. Teachers and preachers in preparation of texts will, of course, need to go into this process in more detail than others. But close reading is not restricted to the linguistically and theologically trained. Even children can begin to understand such issues as:
 - the historical and cultural context of biblical texts;
 - different kinds of literature in the Bible (genre identification);
 - how stories work (narrative analysis, history of redemption);
 - how God is active in the message of the text (biblical theology).
 The teacher or preacher will need to be more attentive to the linguistic, literary, historical and theological matters referred to in this study. It may not need to be said that sermons should not be filled with background information.
9. A close reading will include the placing of the text in its context. The tentative setting of bounds and contexts, as indicated in point 7 above, is an ongoing process that is part of the hermeneutical spiral in close

13. For the reasons given in ch. 18, I stress standard versions rather than simple English versions or one-person translations.

reading. The function of the text in the wider discourse and in the book in which it occurs raises, in turn, questions of how the book functions in the whole canon of Scripture.

10. The main hermeneutical goal is the relating of the text to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This necessitates consideration of all the dimensions of the biblical revelation, and especially biblical theology. I cannot stress too much how important biblical theology is to the process of understanding and applying the Bible. It should be taught to children at home and in Sunday schools, It belongs in adult Bible groups, and it should be intentionally preached from the pulpits. Above all, it should be a required course in every theological seminary and Bible college. Biblical theology provides the link between any part of the Bible and its centre in Christ. This is an essential perspective for valid application of ancient texts to modern readers and hearers. Even those texts, especially in the New Testament, that are written specifically as direction to Christians, are derivative of the place of Jesus Christ in the scheme of things.¹⁴

The last stage in the function of hermeneutics is the determination of what kind of application the text's teaching can have to the Christian. Its application to the original hearers/readers will be relevant, but should not be the final stage. In each situation it is the present hearers' relationship to Christ that is important. The general application to modern Christians must be redirected to the specifics of the actual person or group to whom it is being addressed.

The use of study helps

Any Christian can employ helps in the form of a Bible dictionary, an introductory work on biblical theology and a basic book on doctrine. Teachers exercise their ministry to the wider church in many ways. One method that has a venerable pedigree is the writing of commentaries. While the practice of writing textual notes or glosses goes back into the early church, the Reformation undoubtedly gave a great impetus to the development of the modern genre of Bible commentary. In the light of everything I have said in this book about the eclipse of the gospel, it is clear that commentaries are written from a whole range of presuppositional stances. Not only that, but even if we concentrate on commentaries by evangelical authors, they will have

14. I have dealt with this in more detail in my book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: IVP, 2000).

different aims. The common denominator of all commentaries is the exegesis of the text, but the emphases may differ markedly. Hence there is great need for discernment in the purchase and use of commentaries. It should not be necessary to say that recourse to commentaries and other helps is best left until later rather than sooner in the process of dealing with a text. For the Christian lay person, priority should be given to finding and using a good one-volume commentary on the whole Bible written from an evangelical point of view. Most informed lay people will go beyond this basic minimum and acquire commentaries on individual books. Trained theologians can be expected to use with discernment a wider range of helps from a variety of theological stances.

Other helps that can be used in assisting us in the practicalities of reading and understanding the Bible include works about the background history and culture and a good Bible dictionary. In my opinion, every Bible reader should read a basic book on biblical theology in order to keep the big picture in mind. Furthermore, every Christian parent, again in my view, should aim to help their children to understand the 'big picture' as a preamble to biblical theology.¹⁵ It is sad that so much telling of Bible stories to children ends up as exercises in moralizing and even legalism. The evangelical pastor will find great joy in discovering that there are members of the congregation whose Christian reading has advanced beyond flimsy devotionals or self-help and self-improvement books. Lay people can develop a taste, even a passion, for good theology and doctrine. Although it is true that all expository preaching is doctrinal, the systematic study of doctrine needs to be encouraged.

5. There is a revived interest in biblical theology for children although, as yet, good published works are few and far between. One recent addition is the excellent book by David Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible*, with illustrations by Gail Schoonmaker (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).