

# U The Bible with UNDERSTANDING G

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National Assembly of the Uniting Church Australia

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## THE BIBLE WITH UNDERSTANDING

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# Foreword

There are sharp differences of viewpoint in the church on matters of both theology and ethics. This is not new. There has always been controversy in the church. Some people represent these differences as arising from the fact that their opponents do not recognise the authority of Scripture. In my experience this is seldom the case. Few Christians reject the authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine and ethics. Mostly the differences arise from the interpretation of Scripture. Too often the authority of a particular interpretation is confused with the authority of Scripture itself.

There is nothing wrong with controversy to a point. If debate is carried on in a spirit of acceptance and love it can be stimulating and enriching. Too often it becomes bitter and divisive. When that happens the church's mission suffers. Energy which should be devoted to the service of the gospel is expended on internal conflict. Also, when too many issues become matters of controversy within a particular church, and when the same people tend to line up on the same side of each controversy, that church tends to become paralysed. For this reason it is important to keep differences within manageable bounds. This in turn means that we need some agreed rules for the interpretation of Scripture. This book is an attempt to move in that direction.

The Bible is the product of many people's work. The names of some of them have survived but only God knows the identity of many. No one knows who was the author of the book of Job, or the letter to the Hebrews, or who were the editors of the first five books of the Bible or books such as Kings and Chronicles. The names of the authors of many of the psalms are lost forever. No one knows who made the collection of the sayings of Jesus on which Matthew's and Luke's Gospels have drawn. These people were content to work anonymously and to give God the glory.

In this one small detail this book is like the Bible. One name appears on the cover as its author, but many people unnamed have had a hand in producing it. Even the author is unaware of the source of all its ideas. In fact there is little that is original about the book. The aim of the author was not to be original but to make available in a handy form a range of material, which may be helpful to serious students of the Bible. The sources of some of the ideas are listed in the endnotes, but many other people have contributed to its formation, and I gladly acknowledge their help and express my gratitude.

Firstly my wife, Ruth, with her greater knowledge of Greek, has been a constant consultant and has contributed so much that it is almost as much her book as mine. Dr. Howard Wallace, my former colleague on the Faculty of United Theological College, read the first draft and made many corrections and helpful suggestions. My students at United Theological College and Sydney University taught me a lot and some of their wisdom has found its way into the book. A sabbatical leave gave me the space to do the writing and I am grateful to the Council of United Theological College for this provision. The opportunity for a new edition has enabled me to make some corrections and to update some of the material.

I offer this book to readers with the prayer that it may deepen their understanding of the Bible and assist them to use it sensitively in theology and ethics. My earnest hope is that the life and wisdom of Christ's people, nourished constantly through Holy Scripture, will bring glory to God throughout the land. To God be glory and praise forever.

16<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

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## Chapter I

# Using the Bible

One of my earliest memories as a child is of my mother reading to me stories from the Bible. At first they were from a child's book of Bible stories; later they were from Arthur Mee's *The Children's Bible*. The stories of the patriarchs of Genesis, the deeds of Moses and the wanderings in the wilderness, the courageous acts of the judges, the stories of David, the miracles and pronouncements of the prophets Elijah and Elisha and the stories of Jesus all helped to shape who I was as a child and what I became as I grew. My mother also read other stories to me from a treasury of children's stories, fables, fairy stories, tales of Robin Hood and the like. Even as a small child I knew these were quite different. They were just stories and no more. The Bible stories were more than just stories. They gave me an orientation to this world and at the same time opened up to me the unseen world of the Spirit. Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, Moses and Joshua, Gideon and Ruth, David and Jonathan, Elijah and Elisha, Mary and Jesus became as much my ancestors and part of my history as the strange people with beards and in funny dress whose pictures hung on our walls.

When I was twelve I began to read the Bible for myself with the help of the Scripture Union card to prescribe what to read each day. In time I read through the whole of the Bible, filling in all the bits between the stories that are suitable for children, and broadening the foundation laid by my mother. None of this required of me very much knowledge or skill. Since I could read English I could read the Bible. There must have been a lot I did not understand. I can remember once, when I was staying with an uncle and aunt while my parents were away, reading the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. I was puzzled about what a eunuch was and innocently asked my aunt when she came in to say good-night. I was surprised that even she did not know. When eventually I found out I suspected that she preferred to feign ignorance rather than try to explain it all to a thirteen year old boy. There must have been many other things also that puzzled me, but in spite of that I have no doubt that the regular and ordered reading of the Bible over those years was of great significance to me.

Very different is the story of Arthur Bolkas as told in *On Being* magazine. In December 1977 he was put into Pentridge Prison in Victoria to serve a sentence for armed robbery. He describes in vivid terms the dehumanising impact of prison life and then goes on to say: 'Were it not for the transformation which occurred in my own life through meeting our Lord and Saviour at the four year mark of my sentence, I don't doubt that today I would be either another prison statistic, hopelessly addicted to drugs, or dead'.<sup>1</sup> That transformation occurred after Arthur began to read a *Good News Bible* New Testament, which had been given to him by a friend who used to bring his parents to visit him and which, for a time, he had put away amongst his things and forgotten about. Once he began to read it a real fascination for the man Jesus took hold of him. When he reached Luke 11:9 'Ask, and you will receive;

seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you,' something quite dramatic happened to him. For the first time in his life he felt compelled to pray. He told God that he needed help and that he wanted God to change his life. God answered his prayer and Arthur's life took a totally new direction. Arthur had received a religious upbringing in the Greek Orthodox Church but he attended church only to please his mother. He had no background in reading the Scripture yet that first meeting with it transformed his life.

### The many uses of the Bible

Many thousands of people throughout Australia meet in groups each week to study the Bible together. Many more read the Bible daily on their own or with other members of the family. Numerous Bible-reading plans help to give direction to their reading. Other people turn to the Bible spasmodically when they feel the need for it. Some Bibles have on the flap of the dust cover a list of verses appropriate for the various crises of life. For some people those may be the only times when they turn to the Bible and a few appropriate verses may be all the help they need. For others the Bible on their shelves may function as nothing more than a reference book to look up the few prominent passages that have become part of our cultural heritage whatever our religion may be.

Some uses of the Bible are relatively trivial. It may be just the place where the family records of births, deaths and marriages are kept or where flowers are pressed. Sometimes the Bible functions as a religious object, for example when we are asked to 'swear on the Bible', to make an oath holding the Bible, or again when servicemen carry a Bible into battle in their breast pocket to protect them. Some people use the Bible as a means of divination, to find out what the facts are in a magical way or to try to discover what is going to happen in the future. In Timor I discovered that when

the people were still animists they used to catch chickens, kill them and inspect their entrails. By this means, it was believed, trained shamans could discover the cause of an illness and the prospects for recovery. When they were converted they gave up reading chicken entrails and instead they would hold a Bible in their hands, let it flop open where it would, drop a coin between the pages and where the coin rested would be the answer to their enquiry. The fact that they used a Bible instead of a dead chicken did not make the practice any more Christian or any more accurate, as far as I could see.

There are a hundred and one uses for a Bible. Some are appropriate and some are not. Some require a lot of understanding; some require little or none. Some could be regarded as genuine Christian uses while others amount to no more than superstition.

In addition to the uses already mentioned, the Bible is used amongst Christians and within the fellowship we call 'the church' to develop our theology and determine our ethics. By 'theology' I mean simply our understanding of the faith we hold and by 'ethics' what we hold to be right and wrong, good and bad and how we are to act as Christian people. Since Christians hold Scripture to be authoritative for their faith and life, they are bound to turn to the Bible as their primary resource in these matters.

### Using the Bible in theology and ethics

It is essential that we act here with great care and understanding. Theology and ethics are rarely purely private matters. They affect other people. If we give a person a Bible we are not responsible for what goes on between the Bible, the person and the Holy Spirit, but if we lay our theology or ethics on other people we certainly must take responsibility. So we had better get it right, or as right as we can. To do that we will need to pray and invoke the aid of the Holy Spirit, but also we will need to use all the care, skill and scholarship

available. Certainly we cannot assume that our study and care will protect us from error, but neither can we assume that because we have called upon the Holy Spirit anything we come up with will be right.

There is another reason why this use of the Bible calls for skill and understanding. On many issues it is not easy to determine what the definitive teaching of the Bible is. Let us take for example the matter of divorce. We know from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and other places that in the Old Testament a man was permitted to divorce his wife by giving her a certificate of divorce. In Mark 10: 5 Jesus says, 'For your hardness of heart he (Moses) wrote you this commandment' and goes on to make it clear that in the will of God there is no allowance for divorce. Whoever divorces and marries again commits adultery. According to Matthew 5:32, however, Jesus made an exception in the case where adultery had already been committed by the spouse. Ezra 10:3 calls on the people to divorce their foreign wives and send them and their children away. On the other hand Paul, in I Corinthians 7:12-13, advises Christians not to divorce their unbelieving spouses, yet he permits divorce in such circumstances if the unbelieving partner desires it. If we take all this, together with some other references not mentioned, what shall we say is the biblical teaching on divorce? And what does the Bible have to say to a couple who are experiencing marital difficulties today? There is no quick and easy answer to either of these questions. To answer them we will need to do some scholarly study and arrive at some principles we can refer to when we try to move from the Bible to present day ethics or theology.

### The purpose of this book

No Christian would want to use the Bible falsely or irresponsibly. We want to know what the Bible says and what it really means for

us today, not what we think it means or would like it to mean. We want to be faithful and competent interpreters of Scripture. But how are we to do that? Are we to do it instinctively? Can we just rely on what we pick up over the years in the pew? Will a preliminary prayer for the Holy Spirit ensure that we get it right? Or are there some things we should learn and some skills we can develop? In this book I want to begin to answer such questions.

The interpretation of the Bible is a massive undertaking. It is not going to be possible to mention, let alone impart, all the knowledge and skills required by means of this book, but we can make a start. In this case I am convinced that even a little knowledge is far better than none. As we set out two observations need to be made; one is somewhat discouraging but the other should encourage us.

Firstly, it hardly needs to be said that even the scholars, for all their enormous and devoted study, do not agree. So we might ask: 'What hope is there for us?' The fact is that the interpretation of any book is not an easy matter. People argue endlessly, for example, about how the novels of Patrick White are to be understood, and they were written in our language and in our time! How much more difficult it is to be certain that we correctly understand documents written in other languages two to three thousand years ago. Interpretation is by no means an exact science. It is not like mathematics. There is a mathematical formula for calculating what our chances are of picking the right numbers in Lotto. If we use the formula and do our sums correctly we will get the right answer and every other careful mathematician will agree with us. That is not the way it is when it comes to interpreting ancient writings like the books of the prophets or the letters of St. Paul. Here there is every likelihood of disagreement and it is very unwise to be dogmatic about a particular interpretation.

Secondly, we may be encouraged by the fact that whether they admit it or not, the scholars need people who are not scholars and who have only a few skills. Often they can see things that the scholars miss. In a famous essay C. S. Lewis complains that biblical scholars claim they can see fern seed when they can't even see an elephant ten yards away in the clear light of day.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we may say a little more kindly that when you are engrossed in looking for fern seed you can very easily overlook the presence of something much more obvious to which an ordinary bystander may be able to alert you. Lewis goes on to say that when he was a young man the philosophical scene in England was dominated by the idealist philosophy of men like Green, Bosanquet and Bradley. Even as a young man untrained in philosophy Lewis felt various difficulties and objections which he never dared to express. They seemed to him to be so obvious that he felt sure they must be misunderstandings. He was sure the great men could not have made such elementary mistakes. Later the same objections made by others, though no doubt more sharply than Lewis could have made them, caused the downfall of that whole philosophical system.

I have come across a very good example of this sort of thing. In his commentary on John's Gospel John Marsh is puzzled by the words of the Samaritan woman at the well: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain.' Marsh comments that the mountain referred to must be Gerizim, yet the dialogue was not taking place there, so how could it be referred to as 'this mountain'? So he concludes that the use of these words indicates the highly symbolical nature of what John reports as a historical occasion.<sup>3</sup> In fact it does nothing of the sort. Anyone who has ever been to the well at Sychar knows that Mount Gerizim towers up beside you like an elephant ten yards away. It would be the most natural thing in the world for the woman

to speak of Gerizim as this mountain. Any layperson that had been to Sychar could tell John Marsh that to build some great conclusion on those words is quite ridiculous. Sometimes the scholars need ordinary people to say that to them, or at least to point out politely the obvious things, which they are overlooking.

In any case the interpretation of Scripture is too important to be left to the experts alone. However it is also too important for us to barge into it without care and without observance of the elementary rules of understanding. That is why this book is being written: to help you approach the interpretation of Scripture with care, aware of the issues that even an informed lay person should have in mind in approaching the Bible.

### **Exercises**

(To get the most out of this book, it is important to do the exercises at the end of each chapter.)

1 List the different ways in which you use the Bible. How effective do you believe your use of the Bible is? What would make it more effective?

2 Ask your friends how they use the Bible. Do any of them use it in ways you have not thought of?

3 Was there anything in this chapter you did not understand? How might you go about clarifying the matter? (Use a dictionary? Come back to it after reading more of the book? Discuss it with a friend? Consider other alternatives.)

4 Was there anything in the chapter you do not agree with? (That is O.K. You may be right and I may be wrong. Or you may misunderstand what I am saying and we may in fact agree.) What do you normally do when you disagree with something someone else has said?



**For further reading**

D. K. McKim (ed). *The Authoritative Word*, Eerdmans, 1983.  
Especially chapter 7.

***Endnotes***

1 On Being, Vol. 11 No. 6, July 1984, p. 9.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants and other Essays on Christianity*, Collins Fount, 1975, p. 111.

3 J. Marsh, *Saint John*, Pelican Books, 1968, p. 220.



## Chapter 2

# Which translation?

The Tuesday night Bible study group of the Stansham Uniting Church was meeting at the home of its leader, Arthur Baker. For months they had been putting it off, but at last they were into the study of Paul's letter to the Romans. It was not easy going. Thelma Thompson was not happy. She didn't like Paul. She was convinced he was a loudmouth who liked telling everyone else what to do. What is more, she was convinced that he did not like women. Flo Brown agreed. 'I have nothing against Paul, mind you, but he is just too hard to understand. Give me the gospels. I love the gospels - and of course the Psalms' Flo added.

Syd Churchill strongly disagreed. 'Romans contains the gospel' he argued. 'Think of all the great renewals in the church and how many of them began with people reading Romans.'

After a quarter of an hour's side track on the merits and demerits of Paul and the letter to the Romans they got back to the passage they had set for the night. As the evening wore on Agnes Sheppard suddenly burst out, 'For goodness sake, isn't it hard enough to study Romans without every one of us having a different translation of the Bible?'

Flo Brown, the oldest member of the group was the first to

respond. 'I always thought it was a pity when they started bringing out all these new translations. Once everyone had the good old **Authorised Version** and you knew ....'

She was cut off in mid sentence by loud groans. 'But the language is so difficult with all the 'thee's, 'thy's' and 'thou's', Don Clark protested, 'and some of the English words it uses have changed their meaning over the years. You need a dictionary of ancient English terms to understand it now. That is why I like the **Living Bible**. It is so simple even a child can understand it. We read it every day for our daily devotions.'

'Yes it is simple,' Arthur joined in, 'but often I think it is a long way from the original. It is more like a paraphrase than a real translation. That is why I stick to the **Revised Standard Version**. Its language is more up-to-date than the **Authorised Version** but it is a tried and proven translation.'

Syd Churchill disagreed. 'Even the R.S.V. is out of date and is certainly not for the ordinary person in the pew. The Good News Bible is the Bible of the common man ('And woman,' Agnes interjected.) and it has the backing of the Bible Society. What more could you ask? I think we should standardise as a group on the **Good News Bible**.'

The trouble with the **Good News Bible** is that it lacks style. 'It was

Sue Sherry speaking. Everyone acknowledged her as the literary member of the group. 'It just does not sound stately and melodious when you read it aloud. I prefer the **New International Version** because it combines careful modern scholarship with style.

'What's wrong with **The New English Bible**?' Thelma Thompson demanded.

'It is just so British and all that' Maureen answered. 'It even uses British money terms and words like miscreant, ministrant and midge. I prefer The **Jerusalem Bible** myself.'

'Maureen, you always go for way-out things' Don chided her.

And isn't The Jerusalem Bible a Roman Catholic version?

So the argument continued. They all knew each other well enough for it to be done in a friendly spirit, but they could not reach a consensus. Flo would not give up her **Authorised Version** under any circumstances and Arthur was convinced that as leader he should stick to his **Revised Standard Version**. It was Agnes who made the constructive suggestion the group decided to act on in the end. 'Let's invite someone who knows about Bible translations to come to the group one evening and explain why there are so many and which are the best. We all have our favourites but none of us really knows why we prefer them and whether they are good translations or not.' So it was done and Agnes was given the job of arranging it all.



The Stansham Bible study group had a real problem and it is one that many Bible study groups have experienced to some degree. What can be done about it?

If we were really very serious about study of the Bible we might overcome the problem by learning Hebrew and Greek and reading the Bible in the languages in which it was written. That would be an enormous undertaking and realistically speaking not many people are going to be able to do it. All the same, even a little familiarity with the original biblical languages can be helpful. It can help people make use of interlinear Bibles where the English equivalent is written word for word under the original language with one of the standard English translations in a column at the side.

Even a little experience of translating a foreign language can help us also to appreciate how difficult it is and why translations can differ as much as they do and it can help us to realise how much translation already involves interpretation.

Still another problem from which we are largely shielded if we read only an English translation is that of finding our way through the many variant readings of the text in the original language, especially the New Testament. Since this is a very important matter it needs further explanation.

### Variant readings

None of the original manuscripts, or 'autographs' as they are called, of the biblical books have been preserved - not even second or third-hand copies. All we have are copies of copies of copies many times removed from the originals. Some portions of manuscripts of the Old Testament have survived from the third century B.C. but for the most part we are dependent on manuscripts of the Old Testament made by the group of Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes between the sixth and ninth centuries after Christ. The earliest copies of New Testament writings surviving are tiny fragments of individual books. The earliest manuscripts containing all or most of the New Testament, which have so far been discovered, come from the fourth century A.D. There were undoubtedly numerous copies between their production in the fourth century and the original manuscripts written in the second part of the first century.

While the major early manuscripts of the New Testament are few, the total number of copies of some or all of the New Testament runs into thousands. When these manuscripts are compared with each other they are seen to differ from one another in many points. These differences are referred to as 'variant readings.' The number of these variant readings for the whole of the New Testament is upward of 150,000. The great majority of these are not very significant. Some, however, are quite important amounting to the

omission or insertion of whole verses or the change of a key word in the text which significantly alters the sense of the passage. For example, some early manuscripts do not contain the verses Luke 22:43-44. Did some scribe at one stage accidentally omit them or did some scribe compose them and insert them in the copy of Luke which he was making? An example of a significant word change is to be found in 1 Corinthians 11:10, where some English versions have the word 'veil' but where the best Greek manuscripts have the word 'authority'. None of the variants is sufficient to undermine a major doctrine. After all, doctrines are mostly not built on a single verse of Scripture. Some variants, however, do significantly alter the interpretation of Scripture at that point and hence may either increase or decrease scriptural support for a doctrine.

It is not difficult to understand how these differences arose. Anyone who has ever copied out a piece of written material knows how easily a mistake can be made. It may be difficult to decipher the handwriting or a word may be accidentally left out. In my book, **Faith With Understanding**, a whole line was omitted from the Athanasian Creed, so that it no longer makes sense at that point. The proofreader did not even pick it up, so the book was published with the line missing. It is easy to see how the typesetter made the mistake. One line ended with the words another of the Holy Ghost. Then came the missing line: but the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Thus there were two consecutive lines ending with the words Holy Ghost. When the typesetter finished the first line he or she looked back to the text, saw the second line ending with Holy Ghost and went on from there, omitting one whole line. Similar errors occurred in copying the Scriptures.

Other variant readings were, it would seem, the result of deliberate decisions by the copyists. They would come across something that offended their theological sense. Assuming that it must be an

error they would 'correct' the text to what they thought it ought to be. In due course other scribes would copy this manuscript and a 'family' of manuscripts would develop incorporating this change. Still other variant readings developed because comments added to the margins of a manuscript became incorporated in the text itself when next it was copied.

Because of all these variants it is no easy task now to work out what the author or editor of a particular biblical book originally wrote. No one can say with absolute certainty that he or she has recovered the exact wording of the original. Nevertheless, with a few tried and tested rules and a great deal of sleuthing it is possible for textual scholars to detect and eliminate a great many errors. With regard to the New Testament a considerable degree of consensus has been reached. This consensus is represented by the third edition of the **Greek New Testament** published by the United Bible Societies in 1976 and the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland **Greek New Testament**. Agreement is not total, however, and even the Bible Society's own translation, the **Good News Bible**, departs from that consensus text in a few instances.

### Years of copying

Just as there are different versions of the New Testament, so there are of the Old Testament. Most English translations base their Old Testament on what is known as the Masoretic Text, that is a Hebrew text with vowels added, prepared and passed on between the sixth and ninth centuries A.D. by a group of Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes. The oldest complete manuscript of the Masoretic Text dates from the tenth century and the manuscript underlying most English translations comes from the beginning of the eleventh century. Thus there is a gap of 1,100 to 1,600 years



between this manuscript and the original finished works. That is more than 1,000 years of copying in which changes intentional and unintentional could occur. However there are numerous indicators of what the Old Testament text may have looked like much earlier in history. The Greek translation, known as the Septuagint, dates in part from the third century B.C. While it has also suffered change in transmission, it gives us some clues to a Hebrew text as much as 1,200 years older than the Masoretic Text. Most Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are evidently either quotations from this version or paraphrases of it. (These are conveniently listed in the Good News **Chain Reference Bible**, pp.296f.) In some parts of the Old Testament the Septuagint points to a Hebrew text quite different from the Masoretic Text. Its text of Jeremiah, for example, is about one eighth shorter than that of the Masoretic Text. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has also enabled us to see what parts of the Hebrew text looked like 1,000 years earlier than our copies of the Masoretic Text. The Scrolls make it clear that at that time the Old Testament circulated also in a form different from the one the Masoretes preserved. We also have other versions of the Old Testament, or parts of it, which are very old, such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, Aramaic translations and paraphrases, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and others. Between them all they present us with innumerable textual variations.

When most people pick up an English Bible to read, they are quite unaware of these textual issues. The translators have decided for us which readings they will follow and which they will reject.

Sometimes but not always they alert us by a note in the margin that there are other well attested readings of the text. Nevertheless this matter is important. We should know before we start pronouncing on the interpretation of Scripture that no perfect text exists even in the original languages and we should be particularly cautious

where significant variants occur. We need to recognise also that some of the differences in translations result from the fact that the translators have chosen to follow different variants. Also, one of the criteria we need to use when we judge between translations is how well each translation alerts us in the margin to important variants which exist and which it has not followed.

### Different kinds of translation

Most people read the Bible only in a translation in their native language. English is particularly well supplied with translations. In his book **Bible Translations And How To Choose Between Them**<sup>1</sup> Alan Duthie lists forty-two translations of the Bible from Wyclif to **The New Jerusalem Bible**. Some of these are quite old; others are not readily available in Australia. No more than nine or ten versions are in common use. All of them have some merit and all have some weaknesses. How are we to judge between them?

A great deal depends on the purpose for which the Bible is to be used. The question, 'Which is the best translation?' cannot be answered. We need to ask. Best for whom? Best for what? Best for daily devotions with small children? Best for reading in church? Best for careful study of the Bible? Much depends on how much importance we attach to particular features. Is it important for the English style to be graceful and elegant, or is it more important for it to be easily understood? Is it important for it to be compact or is it more important for the poetry of the Bible to be set out in poetical format? Most likely we would all agree that the most important thing is for the meaning of the original to be conveyed faithfully by the English. Closely associated with that would be the requirement that the English should be readily understandable by ordinary English-speaking people.

Immediately we run into a problem. Translators are not agreed on what is the best way to convey faithfully the meaning of the original. One group believes that a good translation should parallel the original language as closely as possible. They would want the translation to be as literal as possible and not stray too far from the structure of the original. In reading such a translation we would experience a sense of distance. It would certainly not sound like a piece written by an Australian author last year. It would sound as if it had come from another culture and another era and we would be forced to enter, to some extent, into that other time and place.

Another group of translators, reflecting particularly the theory of Eugene Nida and C. R. Taber<sup>2</sup> insist that it is meaning that is important not structure. In fact since, they argue, meaning is conveyed not by single words but by groups of words, it may be necessary to substitute quite a different set of words from those found in the original in order to convey an equivalent meaning in English. The aim of the good translator, they say, should be to produce the same effect in the modern reader that the original produced in its first readers. So it will sound as natural to today's readers as the original sounded in its own time and place. It certainly will not sound like a translation. Because these translators emphasise the importance of 'equivalence' not verbal and structural parallelism this kind of translation is usually called 'dynamic equivalence' translation.

### Some Examples

An example of the difference between the two kinds of translation can be seen by looking at 1 Peter 1.13 in several versions. Here is what we might find.

**King James Version:** Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

**Revised Standard Version:** Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

**The New English Bible:** You must therefore be mentally stripped for action, perfectly self-controlled. Fix your hopes on the gift of grace which is to be yours when Jesus Christ is revealed.

**Good News Bible:** So then, have your minds ready for action. Keep alert and set your hope completely on the blessing which will be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

**The King James Version** is a quite literal, word for word translation, though in very dated English. Even if we put it in modern English it would sound rather strange. For example 'Bind up the waist of your mind' still sounds a bit odd. The Greek uses an idiom or an image that is no longer current today. **The Revised Standard Version** is caught in a bind. The translators recognised that the Greek idiom sounds strange to modern ears, yet they did not want to depart too far from the original, so they decided to leave out the mention of loins or waist and leave us with the command to 'gird up the mind'. But anyone unused to biblical English would have a hard time figuring out what it means to gird up the mind. **The King James Version** and **Revised Standard Version** are both examples of literal translation.

**The New English Bible** boldly abandons the Greek idiom and substitutes a similar English idiom. Whereas in ancient times

people prepared for vigorous action by hitching up their long robes under their belts, to-day people usually strip off all unnecessary clothing. So its readers are commanded to be mentally stripped for action even though the Greek says not a word about stripping. The **Good News Bible** abandons the idiom completely and puts in plain English what the original tried to convey a little more colourfully. 'Have your minds ready for action', it tells us. This is certainly the clearest and simplest though it loses some of the colour of the original. Both **The New English Bible** and the **Good News Bible** are examples of dynamic equivalence translations because they do not try to translate word for word but seek to convey quite freely the meaning or intention of the original.

It is not to be inferred that anything goes in a dynamic equivalence translation. For example, it is not permissible to substitute Sydney for Jerusalem or a car for a donkey. This would distort the historical and cultural context of Scripture. However, it is sometimes difficult to decide what is permissible. Is J. B. Phillips within bounds when he translates 'a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity' in Luke 13: 11 as a woman who 'had been ill from some psychological cause'? That also is a distortion of the cultural context, but sometimes the limits of freedom in translation are very imprecise.

One of the disadvantages of this kind of translation is that if we want to do close study of the text it can be a poor guide to what is actually written in the original. This can lead to incorrect theological conclusions. Take as an example the **Good News Bible** translation of Mark 2:5. 'Seeing how much faith they had, Jesus said to the paralysed man'. There is an important theological question whether Jesus regarded the quantity of a person's faith as significant. Indeed it may be asked whether 'quantity' of faith is something that can ever be determined. Certainly there are texts that suggest that Jesus set no importance on 'how much' faith people had. See for example

Matthew 17:20. If you were to quote this translation of Mark 2:5 in support of the argument that the amount of faith was important you would be quite wrong because 'how much' does not appear in the original at all. The translator has inserted it to make the sense clearer but the question is whether it has not actually altered the sense.

Nevertheless dynamic equivalence translations do have significant advantages over other translations. They sound very natural and are readily understood. This is very important when it comes to getting people outside the church to read a Bible or listen to the words of Scripture. There is no doubt that the church in English speaking countries is greatly assisted by having for its use a translation such as the **Good News Bible** and every Christian seriously engaged in the mission of Christ should have a copy. At the same time, every Christian engaged in serious Bible study should also have a more literal translation.

## Translation and interpretation

Even when using a literal translation it is important to remember that every translation of whatever kind becomes at some points also an interpretation. The nature of language itself requires this to be so. It is widely assumed that translation merely consists of finding a word in language B which has the same meaning as the word before you in language A and writing it down, but in fact the process of translation is much more complicated. Firstly, very rarely do words in one language have exact equivalents in another. What makes translation even more difficult is the fact that meaning is conveyed not just by individual words but by groups of words in a sentence structure. Indeed the precise meaning of a group of words may

depend on an even wider context than the sentence. For example, if I say 'The apple is green' you cannot tell the meaning without a wider context. I may mean simply that this particular apple I am talking about is not red or yellow but is coloured green. On the other hand I may mean that even though it is coloured red it is not yet ripe and ready for eating. Sometimes, as in Paul's letters, where he is answering questions put to him, we do not know the precise context of his statements. Grammar also affects the meaning of words, and every language has its own grammatical peculiarities. Not infrequently there are ambiguities in the biblical language which cannot be reproduced in English. There the translator will have to choose one of the possible meanings and reject the other. In such cases the best the translator can do is to indicate in the margin that another translation is possible.

Roger Omanson, in an article in **The Evangelical Quarterly**,<sup>3</sup> gives a good example that illustrates this point. He points out that the **Revised Standard Version** translates 1 Peter 2:13a as follows. 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution'. In a footnote it indicates that the sentence could be translated: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every institution ordained for men'. The **New International Version** opts for the second way of translating the sentence without indicating that any other translation is possible. It reads: 'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men'. There are two problems in this text. Firstly the word *anthropine* (which incidentally includes both sexes) could be either in the dative or the locative case.<sup>4</sup> If it is taken as the dative case the translation could be 'submit to every human institution'. If it is taken as locative it would mean 'submit to every institution amongst people'. Either is possible but in English we must choose between one or the other. The **Revised Standard Version** has chosen one way; the **New International Version** has chosen the other. But there is yet another difficulty. The word translated as

institution is *ktisei*, which in classical Greek can mean something created or founded by people, but in New Testament Greek, almost always refers to what God has created. If we take it in this way the **New International Version** translation gains support. In fact we could make the meaning more explicit by translating the sentence, 'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every divine institution amongst people'. But there is yet another possibility, and that is that *ktisei* can also mean creature. We could then translate the sentence as 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human creature.' The following verses would then fill this out: the emperor (2:13b-17), slaves to masters (2:18-25), wives to husbands (3:1-6).

Omanson is not arguing for one or other of these translations. The point he is making is that while the Greek leaves all these possibilities open English has to choose between them, and in choosing one translation the translator will close off the others. To that extent the translator is inevitably also an interpreter. The example also shows that translation is not the simple straight forward process which many people take it to be. It illustrates the value of using several translations side by side. Anyone who reads the New International Version alone would never know that the verse might very well be translated in quite another way. Only another translation would make that clear.

### Theological perspectives

Since translation also involves interpretation, theological perspective can influence it significantly. This is very markedly the case with **The Living Bible**, whose translator openly admits his theological bias, but it is also the case with translations that do not admit it. For example, the **New International Version's** choice of 'virgin' in Isaiah 7.14 rather than 'young woman', which is a better



translation of the Hebrew '**almah** can only be explained in terms of its conservative theological commitment.

If the Stansharn Bible study group understands these points they will see that far from being a disadvantage the fact that they have so many different translations between them can be turned to their advantage.

### The qualities of the ideal translation

The perfect translation of the Bible does not exist and probably never will. Fortunately the Holy Spirit seems to manage quite well with imperfect manuscripts and imperfect translations. One reason why there will never be the perfect translation is that we all have different ideas about what the perfect translation should be like. My personal ideal translation would have the following qualities:

1. It would be translated from the original languages and not from some other translation, however old or venerable, because translating from a translation increases the risk that the original meaning will not be faithfully transferred to the English.
2. It should be based on the best recoverable text of the original languages that textual scholarship can provide. Where significant variant readings occur which have considerable support in the manuscripts these variants should be noted in the margin.
3. The translation would be the work of a committee, not an individual. No individual can have at his or her command all the scholarship that is required to make a good translation. The committee would be made up of people who between them represent a wide range of scholarship and diverse backgrounds. Because particular prejudices, preferences and commitments all affect the translation process, they should be men and women from different national, denominational and theological backgrounds.

4. Wherever ambiguities occur in the original language, which could yield differences of translation in English, the ideal translation would always alert its readers to this fact by giving the alternative translations in footnotes.
5. It would be in dignified, universal English (not too American, too British, or too Australian) yet it would be as natural as possible. It would aim to convey the meaning of the original as faithfully as possible and as naturally as possible without taking too much freedom in doing so.
6. It would print the text in appropriate paragraphs without breaking it for verse and chapter divisions, but would contain the verse numbers within the text. It would print Hebrew and Greek poetry in poetical form in English.

## Some modern English versions

### **The Authorised or King James Version**

It is stretching the meaning of 'modern' to include this version in the list, since it was published in 1611, but many older Christians were brought up on it and still prefer it. This was true in my own case and until the mid 1960's I usually read from this version in worship and I always used an **Authorised Version** concordance because that was the language in which my memory of Scripture functioned. Then on one particular day I made the decision that I could no longer use this version because its language was no longer readily understandable by the congregation and was even alienating to young people. In fact the English language has changed so much since this translation was made that even well educated people can be misled by it. But there is another reason why this version should no longer be used for study, and that is because it was based

on inferior manuscripts of the New Testament. All the oldest and best manuscripts were either discovered or became available after this translation was made. Still its language has been hallowed by memory and long use and there may be times when it is fitting to read from it, for example reading the twenty-third Psalm from it to a congregation of elderly people mourning the death of one of their company.

### **The Revised Standard Version and the N.R.S.V.**

This version was prepared by a committee of thirty-two American scholars who also consulted with an advisory board. The New Testament was published in 1946 and the Old and New Testaments together in 1952. The Apocrypha was added in 1957. A second edition of the New Testament was completed in 1971. Many people are not aware that there are different editions of the **Revised Standard Version** and are still using the earliest edition. The translators had before them as they translated, the **American Standard Version**, which was itself a revision of the **King James Version**, however they also worked from the best ancient manuscripts, adopting an eclectic principle, which means that they did not just accept any prepared text and follow it without question but they studied each variant reading and either adopted it or rejected it on its merits.

In 1965 a Roman Catholic edition of the **Revised Standard Version** New Testament, prepared by the Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain, was published and a Roman Catholic edition of the entire Bible including the Apocrypha was published the following year.

**The Revised Standard Version** committee was enlarged in 1969 to include Roman Catholic scholars and again in 1972 by the inclusion of a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. In 1973

this committee published the **Common Bible** including along with the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha a number of books regarded as authoritative by the Greek Orthodox Church. Thus a Bible was produced which was endorsed by all three major branches of the Christian Church.

**The Revised Standard Version** is a fine translation, which has received wide acceptance in spite of strong criticism heaped on it at the time of its publication. Nevertheless it is not perfect and in some respects was beginning to date when in 1980 a committee was established and entrusted with the task of making a thorough revision of the RSV based on the best and most up-to-date texts available. This revision was published in 1989 as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

The Committee was also instructed to be as literal as possible; so it was to be a formal correspondence translation as the RSV had been and not a dynamic equivalence translation like the NEB. It was also to emulate the style of the King James Version, as the RSV had done, with appropriate changes to language where necessary. While keeping this instruction in mind the Committee decided upon a much more radical shift to contemporary English than was evident in the RSV. Just to illustrate this, in John 11:8 where the RSV has 'The Jews were but now seeking to stone you', the NRSV has the much more natural wording, 'The Jews were just trying to stone you!'

The change which is most likely to strike readers is the thoroughgoing but clever shift to inclusive (gender-free) language where the ancient text was clearly referring to both males and females. Many different ways have been used to achieve this and for the most part it has been done without strain or artificiality. No attempt has been made to alter language referring to God. For general use this is an excellent translation.<sup>5</sup>

## **The New English Bible and Revised English Bible**

This version is the result of an ecumenical (mostly Protestant) venture that began in Britain in 1947 as the result of an initiative taken by the Church of Scotland. Three panels of scholars did the translation, one panel each for the Old Testament, New Testament and Apocrypha. The translations were submitted to a fourth panel of literary advisers who checked the English style and made recommendations for changes where they felt the English could be improved. The New Testament was completed in 1961 and the Old Testament was published in 1970. The translators took the opportunity of the publication of the whole Bible to make some alterations to the New Testament. Those who have a pre-1970 New Testament will find that their translation differs at numerous points from the later edition. The standard edition of 1970 could be bought either with or without the Apocrypha.

**The New English Bible** is a meaning for meaning rather than a word for word translation, or, to use the term we used before, a dynamic equivalence translation. Sometimes it offers a very free translation of the original text, as we saw in the case of 1 Peter 1: 13. Another example of its free translation is 2 Corinthians 11: 9, where it reads: 'Then, while I was with you, if I ran short I sponged on no one; anything I needed was fully met by our friends who came from Macedonia.'

It also uses an eclectic Greek text of the New Testament. The translators did not believe that there was any Greek text that could command general agreement and therefore they considered all variant readings on their merits, and after weighing the evidence for themselves, selected for translation the reading that on their

best judgment seemed most likely to be what the author originally wrote. At some points they have made some very daring judgments, which have been the subject of much criticism. In the Old Testament they have generally followed the Masoretic Text but where that text seems to be corrupt and does not yield good sense they have corrected it by using the Septuagint (Greek), Vulgate (Latin), and Syriac versions and other ancient sources. At some points they have used scholarly guesswork to arrive at what they think the original text must have been. At these points they have indicated what they have done by putting 'Prob. rdg.' in the footnotes.

The language of **The New English Bible** is mostly excellent contemporary English of an educated British kind. Some words sound strange to non-British ears, for example.. 'miscreant' (Job 22: 15), 'descry' (Job 23:9), 'contumely' (Proverbs 6:33), 'ministrant' (Hebrews 1: 144), 'servitor' (Hebrews 3: 5) and 'bedizened' (Revelation 18. 17). However for the most part it will be readily understood by people of average education.

One disconcerting practice, which **The New English Bible** translators have followed in a number of places, is that of transposing parts of the text. For example, verse 18 of Genesis 28 is placed between verses 15 and 16. Isaiah 41:6-7 is placed between verses 20 and 21 of chapter 40. Major trans-positions have been made in Zechariah, where 2.13 is followed by 4:1-3 and 13:7-9 is placed immediately after 11:7. This practice makes the use of **The New English Bible** awkward in some situations. It is questionable whether it is a proper activity for translators. Suggestions for textual transposition belong in commentaries, not translations. At the very most such suggestions should be placed in footnotes, not incorporated in the text.

**The New English Bible** is beautifully set out, one column to the

page, with chapter and verse numbers in the outside margins and with poetic sections printed in poetic form.

In 1974, only two years after the final edition appeared, the Joint Committee of the Churches decided to begin the task of doing a major revision. It was decided that the new version would be a dynamic equivalence version just as its predecessor was. So there is a definite family resemblance but there are a multitude of small changes. The Revised English Bible (REB), as it was eventually called, abandoned the use of English equivalents for sums of money and weights. Some colloquial English language was changed. For example, 'I sponged on no one' became 'I did not become a charge on anyone'. Some rather rare words used by the NEB, especially in the Old Testament remain, but the New Testament has tended to drop quaint words for more common equivalents. For example, 'ministrants' has been changed to 'ministering spirits' and 'bedizened with' has been changed to the more familiar 'decked out with'. On the whole the REB comes closer to being a truly international English version.

Like its predecessor, the REB insists of transposing pieces of text in the Old Testament. The stupidity of this is borne out by the fact that the REB transpositions are almost all different from the NEB transpositions. This is very confusing.

Very disappointing is the attempt to deal with gender-exclusive language. The REB preface notes the need for inclusive language and claims that the revisers 'have preferred more inclusive gender reference where that has been possible without compromising scholarly integrity or English style.' In fact change to more inclusive language is haphazard, inconsistent and beyond explanation. From this and other weaknesses it would appear that the final process of editing has been done very poorly.

Professor Throckmorton calls it ‘fresh, vibrant and imaginative’<sup>6</sup> and it clearly is the most dignified and pleasant sounding dynamic equivalence translation in the English language. The pity is that it could easily have been so much better.

## The Living Bible

**The Living Bible** does not call itself a translation, which indeed it is not, but a paraphrase. It was prepared by American businessman, Kenneth Nathaniel Taylor. From reading the **King James Version** to his children in daily devotions, only to find that they did not understand what they were hearing, he became convinced of the need for a new version in everyday English that even children could understand. Because he had to take a train to and from work each day he decided in 1956 to use the travelling time to do a written paraphrase of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Having completed that he decided to do the same for all the New Testament letters. These he published in 1962 under the title **Living Letters**. Then followed **Living Prophecies** in 1965, **Living Gospels** in 1966 and so on until the complete **Living Bible** was published in 1971. Because it is so readable and because it received endorsement from Billy Graham it sold extremely well.

Taylor certainly has a very clear, conversational English style. He is not a biblical scholar and did not pretend that he was translating from the original languages. What he did was to take the very literal **American Standard Version** of 1901 and put it in his own modern style. The style is the **Living Bible’s** one great virtue, though even that has a few American peculiarities. For example, in 1 Samuel 24: 3, which tells the story of Saul’s pursuit of David, we are told that ‘Saul went into a cave to go to the bathroom’!



Over against its virtue must he set a number of serious faults. In the first place, though based on a better New Testament Greek text than the **King James Version**, the **American Standard Version**, which Taylor used, was still based on a text inferior to the best that is available today. Secondly, because Taylor could not work from the originals and did not have a great deal of biblical scholarship behind him he sometimes misunderstood the meaning of the **American Standard Version**. Thirdly he frankly admits a theological bias towards what he calls a rigid evangelical position. That position often leads Taylor to a false rendering of the writer's original intention. It is this that has led people to make the quip. '**The Revised Standard Version** is what God said; the **Good News Bible** is what God meant to say and the **Living Bible** is what God should have said'. One example of where the **Living Bible** can be misleading in study is its consistent replacement of son of man, which was Jesus' favoured designation of himself, by Messiah, a term which Jesus did not find congenial, or by a simple 'I'. Consequently, according to the **Living Bible**, Jesus openly and repeatedly claimed to be the Messiah, which is certainly not the case in the Greek versions of the gospels. To Taylor's credit, he suggests that for study purposes a paraphrase should be checked against what he calls a rigid translation and that advice should certainly be followed in the case of the **Living Bible**.

## The Good News Bible

This version began with the initiative of the American Bible Society. Dr Robert G. Bratcher, the Research Associate of its Translations Department, had produced a new translation of the Gospel of Mark, entitled **The Right Time**. As a result of this the American Bible Society asked him to prepare a new translation of the whole of the New Testament. This translation was published in 1966 illustrated

by the famous stick drawings of Annie Vallotton under the title **Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament Today's English Version**. The translation was an instant success. A second edition was published in October the following year incorporating many changes in style and substance. A third edition with further changes was published in 1971.

Meanwhile, in September 1967 a committee of six biblical scholars began working on a translation of the Old Testament adhering to the same principles on which the translation of the New Testament had been based. In fact Dr. Bratcher was chairman of the committee. Between 1970 and 1975 a number of portions of this translation were made available as separate booklets of which the most well known was **Psalms For Modern Man**. The whole of the Old Testament together with a fourth edition of the New Testament was published in 1976 under the title **Good News Bible**. The American Bible Society has indicated that it wishes to have this version known by this title rather than the earlier designation as **Today's English Version**.

The fourth edition of the New Testament is superior to the earlier editions in a number of points. First of all it adheres with very few exceptions to the Greek text of the United Bible Society's Greek New Testament. Also the fourth edition was the first one to contain footnotes. In addition a number of valuable reader aids, such as an introduction to each book, a short outline of contents, and six appendices of useful information have been added. It is beautifully printed, with the text arranged in paragraphs rather than broken up into verses; the verse numbers are printed in small numerals within the text. Poetry is printed in poetic form.

The Old Testament is based on the Masoretic Text with emendations where required either by conjectural changes to the text based on

scholarly consideration or on comparison with ancient versions in other languages.

As explained earlier, the translation is of the dynamic equivalence kind which seeks to translate meaning for meaning not word for word. It has consistently tried to use common language English; that is, English that is readily understood by people of all levels of education and all sections of society, not only Christians but also people who are not Christians. For example, Centurion becomes 'army officer'; Sanhedrin becomes 'Council'. Measurements of time, volume, distance and money are given in modern equivalents. Many theological terms are replaced by descriptive phrases. For example, 'repent' is sometimes translated as 'turn away from your sins', 'justify' as 'put right with God', 'propitiation' as 'the means by which our sins are forgiven'. One change that has caused some criticism is the translation of 'blood of Christ' by 'death of Christ'. The British edition, which is the one issued in Australia, has replaced many American terms with common British terms and has replaced American spellings with British forms.

Kubo and Specht fittingly sum up this version in the following words: 'The GNB is an honest attempt by skilled translators to clothe the message of the Bible in language that is simple, plain, and meaningful to modern people.'<sup>7</sup>

Because of the numerous changes to successive editions of the New Testament readers should check which edition they are using.

## **New International Version**

This is a completely new translation of the Bible. It had its origin in 1965 when a committee from the Christian Reformed Church in the U.S.A. and the National Association of Evangelicals met at

Palos Heights in Illinois and agreed that there was a need for a new translation of the Bible. The decision was endorsed by a meeting of a large number of leaders from many denominations held in Chicago in 1966. In 1967 the New York International Bible Society undertook the financial sponsorship of the project.

It was translated from the original languages by an international and interdenominational team of scholars. The translation underwent three revisions as it passed through various committees and was also checked at various stages for its English style.

In this project the Translation Committee held to certain goals: accuracy of translation, clarity and literary quality which would make it useful for public and private reading and liturgical use, and also for reading, preaching and memorising. The Committee also sought to preserve some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English.<sup>8</sup>

For the Old Testament the standard Masoretic Hebrew text was used, changes being made according to accepted principles of textual criticism where the Masoretic Text was doubtful. For the New Testament an eclectic Greek text was used, the translators making their choice between variant readings according to the accepted principles of textual criticism of the New Testament.

The New Testament was published in 1973 and the New and Old Testaments together in 1978. With the publication of the whole Bible the opportunity was taken to make some changes to the translation of the New Testament.

The translators have striven for accuracy along with clear, simple, common English that is nevertheless dignified. They have tried to avoid both Americanisms and Anglicisms. Such was their success

in avoiding the former that when the British edition was published few changes in vocabulary were thought necessary and for the most part only spelling changes needed to be made. Kubo and Specht say of it that it has very few awkward expressions but not very many striking ones either. It is a somewhat bland and colourless translation. A conservative theological bias shows in some of its decisions on variant readings and in its interpretations where the original text is ambiguous, but all translations have their biases and that is the bias one would naturally expect in this translation. Also being a very Protestant translation there is no **New International Version** Apocrypha. But with few reservations it is a useful, clear and accurate translation.

## Jerusalem Bible and New Jerusalem Bible

**The Jerusalem Bible** was published in 1966. It was the first complete Roman Catholic Bible to be translated into English from the original languages. Since it is a Catholic Bible it includes the books Protestants refer to as Apocrypha scattered throughout the Old Testament. The aim of the translators was not only to make the Bible available in modern English but also to deepen the readers' understanding and therefore it contains a vast number of explanatory notes. These were translated from the French edition of **Le Bible de Jerusalem**. Numerous other reader aids were also supplied. Because of the bulk of these notes and aids the first edition ran to 2,062 pages. Consequently, in 1971 a paperback edition with abbreviated notes was published.

It is a much freer translation than the **Revised Standard Version** and some of its textual decisions are questionable. Though it has

tried to use modern English it has not tried to translate weights, measures and sums of money into modern equivalents. One of the distinctive features of its Old Testament is its use of the name Yahweh wherever the divine name occurs in the original rather than following the usual practice of using LORD. This has the advantage of indicating that God has a personal name; the disadvantage is that it makes it impossible to use this translation with Jewish people for whom the attempt to pronounce the divine name is offensive.<sup>9</sup> Like **The New English Bible**, **The Jerusalem Bible** also indulges in transposition of texts. This is particularly noticeable in the early chapters of Zechariah.

**The New Jerusalem Bible** was published in 1985. This followed the publication in 1973 of a new edition of **Le Bible de Jerusalem**. This new edition contained not only revisions to the notes, taking into account advances in modern scholarship, but also considerable changes in translation. The biblical text of the first edition had been criticised for being influenced too much by the French translation. The new edition has stuck more closely to the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Bearing in mind the fact that it was intended primarily as a study Bible the translators of the new edition have striven for accuracy of translation with less leaning towards dynamic equivalence. Another feature of this edition is its attempt to use inclusive language wherever possible since, as is pointed out in the preface, the Word of God concerns women and men equally. It has also tried to render key theological terms by the same English word in each case. It is printed in a single column across the page, broken into paragraphs, or stanzas in the poetical sections, with verse numbers in the inside margins. Within the text itself bold full stops raised above the line mark the beginnings of verses.

Notes in Roman Catholic Bibles have often been offensive to Protestants because of a detected bias. That is not true of the

notes in these Bibles. For the most part they are sound, scholarly and helpful. Occasionally they have a peculiarly Roman Catholic flavour or reflect Roman Catholic concerns but on the other hand there are occasions when the notes deny biblical support for a Roman Catholic doctrine where it has traditionally been found. On the whole people of any tradition will find reliable help in the notes. As claimed, **The Jerusalem Bible** and **The New Jerusalem Bible** are primarily study Bibles, for which they are well suited. For use in worship other English versions may be more suitable.

## New King James Version

Made by a group of 130 scholars, editors and leaders, this version was published in 1982. It is more a revision of the original **King James Version** than a new translation. The language has been updated by changing the archaic thee and thou forms to you, dropping the ancient verb endings and by substituting new words where old English words have changed their meaning. Doctrinal and theological terms used in the **King James Version** such as propitiation, justification and sanctification have been retained.

The Greek text used for the New Testament was still the one used for the King James Version in 1611, known as the Textus Receptus. A number of very important manuscripts have either been found or become available since the **King James Version** was published and enormous progress has been made in textual scholarship. Bringing out a new version based on the Textus Receptus is like producing a 2004 model car with an 'A' model Ford motor in it. Fortunately more than 800 notes are included alerting the reader where the modern critical texts of Nestle Aland and the United Bible Society differ from the **Textus Receptus**. Nevertheless this is hard to justify. The preface and some of the notes justifying the procedure, while literally true, and plausible to the ordinary reader, nevertheless do

not adequately represent the truth of the matter.

It is also to be regretted that, like the **King James Version**, this version also prints the verses as separate units of text rather than arranging them in paragraphs.

One can join with the publishers in hoping and praying that God will use this version that many may be blessed as was the case with the **King James Version** while yet believing that this is one English version we really did not need.

Since the first edition of this book was published a totally new version of the Bible has arrived. Bearing the title **The Message**,<sup>10</sup> it is the work of one man, an American pastor, Eugene Peterson, already known for numerous books on the pastoral ministry. On the page preceding the title page it is described as 'a contemporary rendering of the Bible from the original languages, crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events, and ideas in everyday language.' Peterson is competent in both Hebrew and Greek, having begun his working life as a lecturer in both these languages. However we are not told which versions of the Greek and Hebrew texts he used, not that it would matter, because it is such a free dynamic equivalence version you would never be able to tell. There is no indication of variant readings in the ancient texts or possible alternative translations. There are useful introductions to each of the testaments and to each book in the Bible

Peterson happily admits that it is neither a scholar's version nor a study Bible. His one aim was to render the Scriptures in a fresh and readily understandable way. In that aim he has been successful. Many who were put off reading the Bible by starting with one of the older versions will find **The Message** both easy and enjoyable. Many who have been reading the Bible for years and now find it stale or flat because of familiarity will find new freshness and



stimulation in this version.

Peterson indicates what is poetry and what is prose by setting out poetry in a poetic fashion. He indicates chapter beginnings and numbers but does not break the chapters into verses, thus preserving the natural flow of thought and meaning, though of course this makes it difficult to find any particular verse. The 2002 whole Bible is beautifully printed and bound and the publishers are generous in their allowance of reproduction.

Of course, **The Message** is not above criticism. How much freedom one should take with the text in a translation of this kind is difficult to say and all answers will probably be subjective, but my judgment is that Peterson often goes too far. See, for example, his translation of the beatitudes in Matthew 5. Secondly, it is rather uneven in quality. In some places it is brilliant while in other places it misses the mark. For example, the translation of Psalm 100:3 is rather puzzling: 'Know this: God is God, and God, God.' And what is the meaning of 'Don't be flip with the sacred'? (Matthew 7:6) Thirdly, Peterson often uses Americanism, which of course make the translation user friendly for American readers but may be alienating for other English speakers. But if you are tired of the old versions and want something fresh, or if you want to give a Bible to someone who has never opened one before, you might give this version a try.

### **Some examples of translations**

So that readers may get some feeling for the different translations the following three examples are included of some of the versions mentioned above, together with their footnotes where these occur. One example is from the Psalms, or from the Gospels and one from the Epistles.

Psalm 100:3

Know ye that the LORD he is God; It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;\* we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

\*Or and his we are. (K.J.V.)

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;\* we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

\*Another reading is and not we ourselves (N.R.S.V.)

Acknowledge that the LORD is God;  
he made us and we are his,  
his own people, the flock which he shepherds. (REB)

Try to realize what this means – the Lord is God! He made us – we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. (L.B.)

Acknowledge that the LORD is God.  
He made us, and we belong to him;  
we are his people, we are his flock. (GNB)

Know that the LORD is God.  
It is he who made us, and we are his;\*  
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

\*Or and not we ourselves (N.I.V.)

Be sure that Yahweh is God,  
he made us, we belong to him,  
his people, the flock of his sheepfold. (N.J.B.)

Mark 1:4

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (K.J.V.)

John the baptiser appeared\* in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

\*Other ancient authorities read John was baptizing (N.R.S.V.)

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism in token of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins; (R.E.B.)

This messenger was John the Baptist. He lived in the wilderness and taught that all should be baptized as a public announcement of their decision to turn their backs on sin, so that God could forgive them.\*

\*Literally, 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' (L.B.)

So John appeared in the desert, baptizing and preaching.\* 'Turn away from your sins and he baptized,' he told the people, 'and God will forgive your sins.'

\*Some manuscripts have 'John the Baptist appeared in the desert preaching.' (G.N.B.)

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (N.I.V.)

John the Baptist was in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (N.J.B.)

## Romans 1:16-17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. (KJ.V.)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’\*

\*Or The one who is righteous through faith will live (N.R.S.V.)

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith – the Jew first, but the Greek also — because in it the righteousness of God is seen at work, beginning in faith and ending in faith; as scripture says, ‘Whoever is justified through faith shall gain life.’ (R.E.B.)

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is God’s powerful method of bringing all who believe it to heaven. This message was preached first to the Jews alone, but now everyone is invited to come to God in this same way. This Good News tells us that God makes us ready for heaven – makes us right in God’s sight – when we put our faith and trust in Christ to save us. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith.\* As the Scripture says it, ‘The man who finds life will find it through trusting God.’

\*Literally ‘(this) righteousness of God is revealed from

faith to faith.’ (LB)

I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God’s power to save all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles. For the gospel reveals how God puts people right with himself: it is through faith from beginning to end. As the scripture says, ‘The person who is put right with God through faith shall live.’\*

\*Or put right with God shall live through faith. (GNB)

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last\*, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’

\*Or is from faith to faith (NIV)

For I see no reason to be ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s power for the salvation of everyone who has faith – Jews first, but Greeks as well for in it is revealed the saving justice of God: a justice based on faith and addressed to faith. As it says in scripture: Anyone who is upright through faith will live. (NJ.B.)

### Exercises

1. Select one book of the New Testament (not too long, perhaps one of the letters) then go through the book in several translations noting each instance where each translation signals a significant variant reading in the Greek. This will usually be done in the margin or footnotes with phrases such as Other ancient authorities have ...

Compare the translations at these points to see which variants they have followed.

2. Do the same as above but this time noting each instance where the translations signal the possibilities of a significantly different translation. This will usually be done by a note in the margin or a footnote that says: Or ... Compare the translations at these points to see how they agree or disagree on how the phrase should be translated.

3. Compare the following passages in several translations: Genesis 4:8; Exodus 8:23; Psalm 23; Psalm 145:13; Proverbs 12:19; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 5:1-10; Luke 2:14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-6; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:3.

#### For further reading

A. Duthie, *How to Choose Your Bible Wisely*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1995.

S. Kubo & W. F. Specht, *So Many Versions?* Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1988.

Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV – A History and Evaluation*, Baker Bookhouse, Grand Rapids, 1991

#### *Endnotes*

1 Published by Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1985.

2 E. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Brill, Leiden, 1969.

3 R. L. Omanson, 'Translations: Text and Interpretations' in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, vol. 57 No. 7, July 1985.

4 Anthropine is an adjective (anthropinos = human) in the feminine dative singular, agreeing with the noun ktisis (ktisis = creation or creature).

5 For a more thorough review, see Ruth Dicker's review, 'New RSV: the latest Bible on the block' in *Ministry, Journal for Continuing Education*, Vol. 3 No. 1, Spring 1992, for which I am indebted.

6 Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr. 'The NRSV and the REB: A New Testament Critique', in *Theology Today*, October 1990.

7 S. Kubo and W. F. Specht, *So Many Versions?* Zondervan 1984, p. 197.

8 See the New International Version, Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney, 1984, Preface pp. v-vi.

9 A new Jewish version of what Christians call the Old Testament was published by the Jewish Publications Society in 1962, and a second edition, incorporating some corrections and improvements was published in 1969. It is a very readable translation, faithful to the Hebrew of the Masoretic text, and beautifully produced. Christians would find good value in this translation and it is especially commended for use in Jewish-Christian discussion and for worship where Jewish people are present.

10 E. H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, 2002.





## Chapter 3

# Understanding the text

The Bible study group was struggling with Romans 3. For some time they had been wrestling with verses 19 to 26 when Flo Brown raised her voice in protest as she had done almost every session since they began on Romans.

‘I give up,’ she said with a sigh of resignation. ‘I am sure that if the Lord had wanted me to understand all this he would have made it more simple. All this business about law and righteousness and propitiation is beyond me.’

When Flo stopped for breath Sue Sherry came right in ‘But he does want you to understand; that is why he gave you a mind. You’ve got a good mind, Flo, don’t give in. God wouldn’t have had it all written down and preserved in our Bibles if he hadn’t wanted us to understand it.’

‘What is it that troubles you most, Flo?’ The inquiry came from Arthur Baker, the leader of the group. ‘Is it the big words, like propitiation?’

‘Partly that, I suppose’ Flo replied. ‘Perhaps we should look up some of those words, Arthur’ Sue suggested. ‘Have you got a

dictionary handy?’

‘I have’ Arthur replied, ‘but I never find an ordinary dictionary much help when it comes to theological words. I have a Bible dictionary here, which I find more helpful, but it takes some time to study it.’

‘I don’t have propitiation in my Bibles at all’ Thelma Thompson interjected, holding up her two Bibles, one in each hand. ‘in my **Revised Standard Version** I have expiation and in my **New English Bible** I have the means of expiating sin.’

‘What is the difference?’ Flo asked. ‘That is why we should look these things up’ Sue persisted. Arthur moved over to his bookcase to get his Bible dictionary. Syd Churchill took the opportunity to reply to Flo’s original complaint:

‘No wonder it’s so hard for you to understand, Flo, you’re still using the **Authorised Version**. It would be much clearer if you got a modern translation’ he assured her.

‘Well, we’ve been through all that’ Flo replied, ‘and I’m sticking to my old **King James**. Anyway it doesn’t sound much clearer when you read from your **Good News**.’

‘It is clearer, Flo’ Syd assured her, ‘but you need to have it in front of you and see it rather than just hearing it. If you break it up into little bits and take it a bit at a time it is not hard. It makes sense.’

Arthur sat down with the dictionary on his lap. ‘Now which word do you want me to look up, Flo’ he asked, ‘propitiation or expiation?’



Anyone who has been in a Bible study group has experienced a conversation like that. Some parts of Scripture are not easy to understand, especially if we are not used to the kind of language we find there. Yet if we are to do anything with Scripture we have to understand the words and sentences we find in it. A lot of the time we have no difficulty with this especially if, as Syd Churchill

suggested, we use some modern English versions. However, there may also be a lot we do not understand, for any number of reasons. What are we to do then? Sometimes too we think we understand because the texts are so familiar; it is only when we have to explain them in our own words that we discover we don't fully understand them at all. It takes a good deal of honesty and humility to admit that we do not understand.

Sometimes the greatest danger in using Scripture lies not in the parts we do not understand but in the parts we think we understand and know all about. We may well have a false understanding but our confidence prevents us from asking the questions that would lead us to a better grasp of what that Scripture is about, but more of this later.

### Working towards understanding

Understanding the Bible is no different from understanding any other ancient book, or indeed any modern writing for that matter. There is no special code or key we must know and use to unlock the meaning. There is no short cut either. Of course we can pray about it and ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and it is to be expected that Christians would do this. But this does not save us any mental effort or guarantee that the understanding we arrive at will be right. It is possible for us to have quite wrong assumptions about the meaning of a portion of Scripture, just as it is possible to misunderstand a neighbour or a friend.

The process of understanding something written or something someone says to us is really quite complex yet our minds perform the task thousands of times a day. Mostly we don't stop to think about the process. It just happens. Yet in every instance of

understanding many different factors are weighed up together. The process of drawing out the meaning of Scripture is usually given a particular name. It is called exegesis. The fact that it has such a name does not mean that it is completely different from every other process of understanding. Nevertheless understanding the Bible does present difficulties that are not experienced in understanding a letter from a friend or a conversation with a neighbour, or in reading a modern novel. The fact that the Bible was written a long time ago, in historical and cultural situations very different from ours is a difficulty for a start, because we do not carry around in our minds a whole lot of information about the kind of world in which it was written the way we carry about with us a lot of knowledge of the world in which a modern novel or a letter from a friend was written. Nor can we check up on our understanding in the way we could if we were uncertain about something in a letter.

An immense amount of scholarship has gone into understanding the meaning of the books of the Bible – more time and effort than has ever been devoted to any other body of literature of that size. We have learnt some of the processes we need to go through to ensure that we have got the meaning correctly. In spite of that there is sometimes wide disagreement about what any particular portion means, though that should not blind us to the fact that on many portions there is widespread agreement too. It is not our intention to go into all the scholarly disciplines that go to make up good exegesis. It is not our aim to become experts. It will be sufficient if we can grasp some of the processes well enough to make good sense of what we read.

We could, of course, simply go to biblical commentaries and let the experts tell us what it all means, but there are some disadvantages to that. Firstly, most of us want to see for ourselves. We don't want to take it on the say so of the experts. Secondly, sometimes the

experts disagree and then we will have to decide between them for ourselves. When that happens it is not good enough just to pick the one we like best. It is much better if we can apply a few rules, use a few resources and come to an informed decision. In fact unless we know something about the process of understanding ancient texts we will not even be able to understand or weigh up the points of difference between the experts.

### Six determining factors

There are a number of factors that determine the meaning of any written document. I am going to list six of these, indicating the way in which they help to determine meaning and suggest ways in which we can take these factors into account.

#### *Words and their meaning*

Obviously the meaning of any statement is conveyed very largely through the particular words that are used and the meaning of those words. Many of the words we meet in the Bible present no difficulty. It is only unusual words or technical theological words, such as 'propitiation' and 'expiation', which raise a problem. However we should be warned that even with common words, like 'peace', 'righteousness', 'kindness' and 'flesh' there are differences and nuances of meaning in the Bible which we are not aware of from our normal English usage. Therefore we may need to check up on the meaning of key words in a biblical passage even when those words are familiar to us.

When we need to check the meaning of these words an ordinary English dictionary is little help to us. It can only tell us the meaning of the words in normal English usage; it will not tell us how the words are used specifically in biblical contexts. For this we need

different aids. One such aid is the analytical concordance. Though an analytical concordance is based on one particular version of the Bible it makes clear the various Hebrew or Greek words that lie behind any one English word which the version uses. For example, if I look up 'honour' in an analytical concordance of the Revised Standard Version New Testament I find that this word translates six different Greek words which come from three entirely different roots and in addition there are three instances where there is no specific Greek word backing it. Then with the occurrences of the word 'honour' broken up in this way, I can see numerous instances of the way Paul uses the idea of honour. From these contexts I can begin to build up an idea of what this word means for Paul.

Another means of checking the meaning and usage of a word is to consult a Bible dictionary or wordbook. This will tell us the various shades of meaning the word can have in different authors and in different parts of the Bible.

Such aids to Bible study are not cheap but anyone who is serious about the study of the Bible and the use of the Bible in theology and ethics will need to make the outlay. Though these aids are costly people spend more on their hobbies and sports and think nothing of it.

A stern warning needs to be sounded that it is very easy to be mistaken about the meanings of words. Even prominent authors can promote fallacious ideas. It is not possible to list here all the fallacies that commonly occur. Those who are interested can consult D. A. Carson's book *Exegetical Fallacies*.<sup>1</sup> However, two are so common they must be mentioned. They are the 'single meaning fallacy' and 'the root fallacy'.

The single meaning fallacy can take various forms. A reader may pick up a word in one book, say a gospel, link it with the same word in one of the letters and insist that all that is meant in one place is intended in the other. For example, since 2 Peter 3: 8 tells us that ‘with the Lord a day is like a thousand years’ some people take it that when Jesus is reported to have said to the penitent thief on the cross ‘Today you will be with me in paradise’ this can really be understood as meaning at Christ’s return. Though this may be thousands of years later it is still ‘to-day’ in the eyes of the Lord. Just as well the thief had not read 2 Peter 3:8! To take another example, clearly words such as ‘flesh’ and ‘body’ do not have exactly the same meaning every time they are used by Paul let alone by other writers as well. When Paul says in Galatians and Romans that we are justified by faith he does not mean quite the same thing that James is referring to when he says, ‘a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone’ (James 2:24).

Again controversy has raged over the meaning of the words of Jesus: ‘This is my body’. Some have insisted that because he says ‘is’ he really meant that the bread had become identical with his body. But in fact ‘are’ (or the verb to be) functions in many different ways in the Bible as in other forms of literature. So when James writes that ‘the tongue also is a fire’ he does not mean that we all have fires burning in our mouths. He is rather drawing an analogy between the tongue and a fire. He is saying that in some respects the tongue resembles a fire. So we need to be wary of latching onto a single, narrowly defined meaning for a word and insisting that wherever and whenever it occurs it must bear exactly that meaning.

The root fallacy assumes that the meaning of a biblical word can be obtained by discovering its roots and their meaning and putting them all together. This is not a fallacy we are likely to commit unless we know a little Hebrew or Greek or have picked up some

ideas from people who do. However it has become so common that it needs to be mentioned. Louw gives one example of this in his book *Semantics of New Testament Greek*.<sup>2</sup> In I Corinthians 4: 1 Paul refers to himself, Cephas, Apollos and others as servants of Christ and uses the Greek word *huperetas*. Apparently more than a century ago one scholar, R. C. Trench, put forward the view that this word was derived from *eresso* meaning to row and consequently a *huperetas* was originally a rower. Another scholar, J. B. Hoffman went further, arguing that since *eretes* meant rower in Homer (8th century B.C.) and since one meaning of *hupo* is under, a *huperetas* must be an underrower, or perhaps a subordinate rower. William Barclay built on that by suggesting that the word designated a rower on the lower level of a trireme. The implied moral in all this is that Paul was really putting himself and his fellow workers down by describing himself as a servant of a particularly low kind. However the Greek word is never used of a rower in New Testament Greek and the evidence suggests that there is little or any difference in meaning between this word and *diakonos*, the word most commonly used for servant. Sometimes derivation can help us with the meaning of a word, but not always. Louw points out that it would be very difficult to work out what a butterfly is from its parts, butter and fly. So we need to be wary of elaborate theological arguments built on word roots.

### ***Idioms***

Sometimes words have as well as their normal meaning an idiomatic meaning not closely related to their literal meaning. For example, the word 'struck' is used literally in the sentence: 'She struck the thief firmly on the head with her walking stick'. It is used idiomatically in the sentence. 'When I went to buy my suit I struck a most unhelpful shop assistant'. When I used that idiom in the U.S.A. the person I was speaking to was most alarmed to



think that I would strike anybody. Apparently the idiom is not used there. Similarly a modern Australian reader might be hard pressed to guess the meaning of the command, 'Gird up the loins of your mind', because it is an idiom of the first century.

Idioms from the original languages are treated variously by the different English translations. Some translate them as literally as possible (King James Version), others modify them somewhat (NRSV) and some either try to find an appropriate English idiom to put in their place (dynamic equivalence translations). In any case we need to beware of trying to understand idioms literally.

Closely associated with idioms are simile, metaphor and other forms of picture language. When the Psalmist writes, 'The Lord is my shepherd', he is using a metaphor, since God is not literally a tender of sheep. Jesus was using a metaphor when he said to the disciples, 'You are the light of the world'. So was James when he called the tongue a fire. Such figures of speech convey shades of meaning that could not be conveyed in any other way, but obviously they cannot be understood literally. In every day speech few people would be in danger of trying to do that, but sometimes people do try to interpret biblical metaphors and images literally.

### ***Grammar, Syntax and Structure***

Meaning is given not only by words individually and by idioms, but also by the way in which these are built into sentences. Mostly the translators will have taken care of problems arising here. If they have done their job well the English will be unambiguous and the reader will have no problems. Only three observations need to be made. Firstly, beware of people who want to read the English translation in an unnatural way to make a theo-logical point. If it does violence

to the translation (worse still if it goes against several translations) it is probably wrong. Secondly, treat cautiously the arguments of people who want to make a theological point based on some alleged piece of Greek or Hebrew grammar. It may be a valid point but there are plenty of arguments of this kind going around which are baseless. If it does not find support in a reliable translation be wary. Thirdly, it is worth noting that the original languages do often appear more ambiguous than English. It is precisely because of this that we find those footnotes in translations beginning 'Or'. 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ' has a somewhat different meaning from 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' but both are possible renderings of the Greek and that is why the Revised Standard Version notes the first as an alternative reading. In such places it is best not to build too big a theological argument on one rendering rather than the other.

### ***Rhetorical devices***

When my Latin teacher used to say to me, 'Dicker, you're a genius' I never misunderstood him to be paying me a compliment. Rather it was a sure sign that I had put the noun in the accusative when it should have been in the ablative, or some such foolish error. His words were not to be taken at their face value. This was simply a rhetorical device he used to alert his students to their mistakes. Once in Indonesia an Australian friend of mine thought he would amuse a company of people by telling them a funny story. They were meant to laugh at it and forget it, but in fact they took it very seriously and people kept coming up to him individually to tell him that it was a very clever story and they totally agreed with his point of view. They took the story to be a rhetorical device for making a delicate social comment, which it was not. However they were quite right to recognise that there are rhetorical devices and not

all language is to be taken at face value. Scripture contains many rhetorical devices that affect the meaning. Paul's words are not to be taken at face value when he writes to the Corinthians, 'Already you are filled! Already you have become rich!' (1 Corinthians 4:8) or again when he writes, 'Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us – see that you excel in this gracious work also'. (2 Corinthians 8: 7). As we would say, he had his tongue in his cheek.

### ***Context***

We all know from everyday experience how context helps to determine meaning. The word vessel has several quite distinct meanings in English and which one is intended will be made clear by the context. If the word occurs in the sentence, 'This vessel is not seaworthy' you can guess that it refers to a ship. When you read, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels' you take it to refer not to a ship but to a pot or jar. The context that determines the meaning may be outside the sentence in the passage as a whole. For example, many Christian groups close their meetings by saying the Mizpah benediction, so called. But if it is read in context it can hardly be taken as a benediction; it is almost a threat. The context may be historical; it may relate to time and place. For example, if we learn that in ancient Israel it was the custom to shave the head as a sign of mourning, a number of references to baldness in the Old Testament will suddenly become more meaningful to us (e.g. Isaiah 15: 2; Ezekiel 7. 1 8).

We can build up our knowledge of the historical and cultural context of Scripture by studying books of Old Testament and New Testament background. That however may still leave us lacking a crucial bit of information for the interpretation of a particular text.

Here biblical dictionaries can be of help. When I look up 'baldness' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* I find all I need to know for interpreting the texts mentioned above and many more as well. Exegetical commentaries on individual books of the Bible also supply this information.

### ***Literary Genre***

Genre simply means a form or type, but as these words are used in other ways, the term genre is used in this context to avoid misunderstanding.

It is now generally accepted that the Bible has to be read like any other piece of literature. However, there are many different kinds of literature, such as history, novels, essays, poetry and so on. These different kinds of literature are not treated in the same way. We do not treat a fable in the same way we treat history or biography. We do not read poetry in the same way we read prose. If we blur these distinctions our interpretation is bound to be wrong. Now the Bible is not just one kind of literature but many and each kind has its own rules of interpretation. The genres in the Bible include laws, wisdom, history, prophetic oracles, gospels, epistles and apocalyptic. In each case the genre affects the way in which any given passage is to be interpreted.

I once tried an experiment with a special religious education class in primary school. Having discovered from their regular teacher that they had just had the story in class, I asked the children if the story of Helen Keller was true. They voted unanimously that it was. I then asked them if the story of Little Red Ridinghood was true. They all said it was not. I then told them the story of the Emperor's New Clothes and when I finished I asked them if they thought it was true. There were instant cries of 'No!' but before the 'no's' had

died away there were some children saying, 'Yes, it is true in a sort of way, but in a different way from the story of Helen Keller'. I was then able to say to them that some of the stories in the Bible are true in the way the Helen Keller story is while others are true more in the way the story of the Emperor's New Clothes is true. In every day life we have to make decisions all the time about whether the story we are hearing has to be understood like the story of Helen Keller, the story of Red Ridinghood or the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. If we failed to do that we would soon be in all sorts of trouble. Mostly we do it successfully almost without thinking. We have to make the same sorts of decisions when we read the Bible. A number of arguments about the meaning of some passages in Genesis, for example, have arisen from failure to understand this.

Again, a number of theological arguments about the meaning of some passages in Genesis have arisen from the failure to recognise Hebrew poetical form and to interpret the passages accordingly. For some years theologians distinguished between the 'image' of God and the 'likeness' of God because both words are used in Genesis 1:26. This was a failure to understand the Hebrew poetic use of parallelism whereby an idea is stated in two parallel ways. The author of Genesis 1:26 was not speaking about two entities, image and likeness, but one single entity that is spoken of in two ways. Again, from the following verse one theologian concluded that the image of God has something to do with our being male and female:

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

In the first two lines we see the Hebrew parallelism but the third line is not a parallel to the second. It represents a new piece of information. Its intention is not to explain the image in terms of

our sexual differentiation but to make it clear that male and female are both in the divine image. The three-line pattern is a common feature of Hebrew poetry. So it is important for us to recognise the poetic genre and to realise that it has its own rules of interpretation. The same is true with the other genres mentioned above.

Within biblical scholarship there are a number of distinct disciplines whose purpose it is to enable us to understand more accurately the precise meaning of the text. This chapter is not an attempt to give a quick overview of them. They can be studied in other places. We have simply been looking at some of the principles which anyone must keep in mind if he or she is to approach the Scriptures intelligently and arrive at an understanding which will stand up to inspection by others.

#### Exercises

1. Look at the accompanying entries from *An Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* by Morrison. In how many ways is the Greek word PRAYTES translated into English in this version? What would you say is the meaning of the word? Compare the different texts in which the word is used in the New Testament. Look up the verses mentioned in some other translations. How is the word translated there?
2. Look at the accompanying entry from the *Dictionary of the Bible*. How does it help us to understand Psalms 60:8 and 108:9?
3. What factors do you think should guide us in interpreting the meaning of Revelation 7:4?

*Entries from an Analytical Concordance of the New Testament*<sub>3</sub>

#### PRAYTES

courtesy

gentleness (5)

meekness (5)

## COURTESY

Tit 3:2 to show perfect courtesy to all men

## GENTLENESS

1 Cor 4:21 with love in a spirit of gentleness

Gal 5:23 gentleness, self-control

6:1 restore him in a spirit of gentleness

1 Pet 3:15 yet do it with gentleness and  
reverence

## MEEKNESS

2 Cor 10:1 I..entreat you, by the meekness of  
Christ

Eph 4:2 with all lowliness and meekness

Col 3:12 lowliness, meekness and patience

Jas 1:21 receive with meekness the implanted  
word

3:13 show his works in the meekness of  
wisdom

### *Extract from a Bible dictionary<sup>4</sup>*

SHOE.-See Dress, 6. The shoes were removed before entering a temple, or other sacred precinct, in order to save the latter from defilement. Hence the priests performed their duties barefoot. The shoe played a part further, in certain symbolical actions in Hebrew law. One who renounced the duty of levirate marriage (see Marriage, 4) had his shoe publicly pulled off by the widow, who also spat in his face, Dt 25:9. In Ru 4:7 Ruth was not present when the next of kin

renounced her, and he drew off his own shoe. This may have been a later modification of the custom, or, more probably, was due to the more distant relationship of the kinsman and the consequent lessening of the degree of reproach resting on him. This passage further implies that it was customary for the vendor to draw off his shoe and hand it to the buyer on completing a transaction. A similar custom is widely known. (In early Babylonian deeds of sale concerning house property we find the pestle [of the mortar] was so transferred.) In the expression 'upon Edom I cast my shoe' (Ps 60:8 108:9) it is possible that there is an extension of this shoe symbolism, the taking possession of the property being symbolized by throwing a shoe upon it. Some prefer the sense of RVM\* 'unto Edom,' and see here a reference to Edom's servitude, it being the part of the slave to carry his master's shoes. (\*Revised Version margin – GSD)

***For further reading***

- Carson, D. A., *Exegetical Fallacies*, Baker Book House, 1984.  
Mickelsen, A. B. & A. M., *Understanding Scripture*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 1992.  
Silva, M., *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, Zondervan, 1986.

Serious students of the Bible should also possess a concordance, a good Bible Dictionary, and a reputable one-volume commentary on the Bible. Many are available and the choice may be a matter of personal preference. The following may be considered:

***Concordances***

- Morrison, C. (ed.), *An Analytical Concordance to the Revised*



Standard Version of the New Testament, Westminster Press, 1979.

Whitaker, R. E., The Eerdmans Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988.

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#### Bible Dictionaries

Achtemeier, P. J. (ed.), Harper's Bible Dictionary, Harper & Row, 1985.

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Freedman, D. N. (ed.), Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, Eerdmans, 2000.

#### One-Volume Bible Commentaries

Guthrie, D. & J. A. Motyer (eds.), The New Bible Commentary Revised, Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.

Laymon, C. M. (ed.), Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, Abingdon Press, 1971.

James L. Mays (ed.), Harper's Bible Commentary, Harper & Row, 1988.

#### *Endnotes*

1 D. A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies, Baker Book House, 1984, especially chapter 1.

2 J. P. Louw, Semantics of New Testament Greek, Multnomah Press, 19082, pp. 26-27.

3 C. Morrison (ed.), An Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament, Westminster Press, 1979.

4 F.C. Grant and H. H. Rowley (eds), Dictionary of the Bible (Hastings' Dictionary), T. & T. Clark, 1963, p. 911.



## Chapter 4

# The interpreter and the text

'I think that if I were just a few years younger I would seriously think about going into the ministry', Agnes declared.

'Just as well you are not' Don replied rather testily. 'I am quite opposed to women in the ministry. It is just not scriptural.'

Agnes was taken aback and chose to respond rather meekly with a question:

'Don, how can you say it is unscriptural?'

'Everywhere Scripture makes it plain that women should take a subordinate role in the church and certainly should not take a primary teaching role like that of the minister. I mean, for a start, just look at I Corinthians 14:35. Paul says there, 'Women should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak'. 'This' Don continued, 'is the clear position universally maintained in Scripture'.

Sue Sherry came in but both were so engrossed in the argument that neither greeted her.

'How can you say that it is the universal position of Scripture?' Agnes questioned. 'Even Paul contradicts himself. He already admits in verse five of chapter eleven that women do pray and prophesy in the meetings, but says that they should do it with

their heads covered. What a boon that's been for milliners over the years!

'We must not read Paul in such a way that he contradicts himself, Agnes. He is not there talking about public prayer and prophecy. These women are not in charge of the meeting.'

'I think women had a very special role in the gospels.' Agnes returned to the argument. 'Jesus did not treat women as they were normally treated in Jewish society of the time. You would put women back into the position from which Jesus freed them.'

'But these are all just human arguments' Don replied. 'We have to follow just what Scripture says, not make up arguments to suit our own wishes and desires. It is not a question of how women were treated in Jewish society or how Jesus related to them. We are talking about whether or not Scripture permits women to be the head of a congregation. Go back to Genesis, if you like. Even there it is clear that woman is man's helper, not man's head or man's teacher.'

'I know the verse you are referring to,' Agnes responded, 'but I don't think you are interpreting it fairly. 'Helper' in English often suggests an assistant or a subordinate, but I have read that the Hebrew word used there does not have that meaning at all. Moses in Deuteronomy 33 used the same word when he called on God to be Judah's helper. And in Psalm 33 this word is used when God is referred to as our helper. That does not mean that God cannot be our head or our teacher.'

Don was about to reply but just then Flo Brown and Thelma Thompson arrived and Syd Churchill's voice was heard at the door asking, 'Can I come in?' After greeting all the new comers Arthur Baker turned to Don and Agnes and said, 'You two better continue your argument some other time. I think we should begin our Bible study for the evening.'

'Arthur,' Sue protested, 'they were really doing Bible study. It just wasn't what we had set down for the night but I hope we can come

back to it some time. I think it is really an important issue.'

### What we bring

When interpreting the Bible where people arrive depends very much on where they are coming from. No one approaches the Bible with a blank mind. We all bring to our study of the Bible a lot of experience, a lot of commitments and a lot of preformed opinions. They are part of the 'baggage' we carry with us whatever we are doing and all of them influence our interpretation of the Bible. That is clear from the conversation reported above. Agnes was clearly committed to the principle of the complete equality of men and women and that determined which texts she saw as the most important and what principles she used in the interpretation of Scripture. Don equally had a predetermined opinion about the relationship of men and women in church and society and that determined just as decisively which texts he regarded as primary and what principles he used in interpreting Scripture. They could have gone on forever and ever citing texts and other biblical evidence without reaching any agreement. The fundamental difference between them lies in what they bring to the study of the Bible. Unless there is some means by which Scripture can really get at that baggage, which they bring with them, neither will change and there will be no agreement. Their preformed commitments stand in the way of the Bible speaking for itself.

This is a problem we will need to return to later, but first it needs to be said that not all that we bring to the study of the Bible stands in the way. Without a wide range of human experience on which to draw we would not be able to understand the Bible at all. Without some knowledge about robbers and what they do we would not be able to understand the parable of the Good Samaritan. Nor could we understand that parable without the aid of our imagination. We may never have been in the position of the victim in that story

but we can imagine what it might be like. We can imagine his disappointment when the priest and Levite failed to come to his aid. We can imagine being in such a desperate situation that we would not care what sort of a person came to our aid, so we can imagine his gratitude to the Samaritan and his astonishment that someone, whom in normal circumstances he would have despised and from whom he would have expected nothing, was the one who actually saved his life.

### The importance of experience

Many people have found that a particular experience in life will give them a new insight into a text of Scripture, which previously they had passed over as of little significance. Previously they just did not have anything to bring to the text that would enable it to come alive for them. The early Christians who gave us our New Testament found this to be true for much of the Old Testament. It was Jesus' life and death that suddenly made Isaiah 53 take on new significance for them. That is not to say that no one really understood that chapter until Jesus lived and died, but those who experienced his ministry did have something new to bring to the text, which made it, light up in a new way.

The importance of what we bring to the interpretation of a document can be illustrated by trying to read the instruction book of some appliance we have never used before. Without hands on experience it is usually very difficult to make any sense of such books. It may only be after we have begun to use the appliance and get into some kind of jam with it and then go back to the book that some parts of it will really become understandable. Some kind of experience is often needed before we can arrive at a satisfactory understanding of something we are told. This is true also when it comes to

understanding the Bible. Not only do we need a certain amount of experience, imagination and empathy to bring to it before it can be fully intelligible, but often it only yields its meaning when we are actually engaged in the process of Christian living. Our reading of Scripture is always illumined by the experience of life in the world, which we bring to it and it, in turn, illumines our experience.

There is great danger, therefore, in disengaging our interpretation of Scripture from our lived experience. If we try to understand Scripture in a separate religious world totally divorced from the real world in which we live, work and play, we will not arrive at a genuine interpretation at all.

### Assumptions prejudice and culture

Having said that, it needs to be emphasised that there are many other things we bring to the Scriptures that actually get in the way of a faithful interpretation.

Firstly, nearly all of us bring to Scripture a lot of unexamined interpretations, which we have picked up here and there during the course of our lives. Sometimes these become so fixed that they blind us to the plain facts before us in black and white. One example is to be found in the conversation between Agnes and Don. Don had always been led to believe that the use of the term 'helper' in Genesis 2:18 and 20 indicated that the woman was an assistant or a subordinate to Adam. However, an examination of Scripture will not sustain that view. If Don wants to argue that from creation woman was made subordinate to man he will have to argue the case on some other basis. Similarly, when I tell my students that Scripture nowhere gives any basis for the belief that people have immortal souls they usually look at me in utter astonishment as

though I have taken leave of my senses. They have been brought up from childhood on the idea that they have immortal souls. That notion however has been derived from Greek philosophy, not the Bible. In the Bible immortality is always something we are yet to put on or attain, not an inalienable quality of a part of us called the soul.

Even where an interpretation of Scripture we have grown up with is not wrong it may have so shaped our understanding that we can never hear that piece of Scripture again in the way it was originally heard. Take for example Paul's stock greeting: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. None of us can hear or read that with the kind of shock it must have occasioned to some of its first hearers, nor do we perceive in it the astonishing claim that Paul is actually making. It is so familiar to us we pass over it without a ripple. For it to have an impact on us we have to imagine how it would strike us if someone wrote us a letter with the greeting: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from John Lennon'!

Take another example: the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. Originally it would have come as a great shock to its hearers to discover that God passes over the careful and 'right living' Pharisee, who is so sure of his superiority to the tax collector, and justifies the man everyone despised, who simply cast himself on the mercy of God. Today everyone regards the Pharisees as villains. No one is surprised that the Pharisee was not justified. No one would ever identify with him. We identify with the one Jesus approved of. We are not scrupulous like the Pharisee; we may not even have any desire to be scrupulously righteous, but never mind, a prayer of confession will put all things right, since God justifies the unrighteous. To a modern hearer, therefore, the parable can very easily carry the message of cheap grace. Instead



of unsettling its readers as it originally did the parable may today confirm them in the values they already hold.

How easy it is to misread the parable is illustrated in a story told by John Baillie. A well-meaning Sunday school teacher concluded a lesson on the parable by saying sweetly to the children, 'And now, children, let us thank God that we are not like that Pharisee!' Particularly with familiar portions of Scripture we need to be careful not to assume that we know very well what they mean and that we need no further instruction. Our very familiarity may in fact cloak a false interpretation and a lack of clear insight.

Secondly, our interpretation of Scripture may be adversely affected by such things as prejudice, self-interest and political and denominational commitments. It is not uncommon for people to go to the Bible with their theology or their ethics determined in advance. What they seek in the Bible is not the truth as a disinterested seeker might look for it, but support for an already assumed position. If we go to the Bible in this way we can find support for almost anything. Jehovah's Witnesses find support for their position in Scripture; indeed they have a very high view of Scripture. Seventh Day Adventists find support for their position, as do churches that no longer observe the seventh day. The slave owners of the southern states of the United States of America strongly supported slavery by the use of Scripture. So did the abolitionists. The 'prosperity doctrine' is supported by appeal to Scripture while others also reject it on scriptural grounds. If such opposing positions are all derived from Scripture and defended by it, clearly something is wrong. Some people at least must be reading Scripture with eyes clouded by personal interest or psychological forces from within. One of the greatest problems we have to deal with in interpreting Scripture is how we can neutralise these subjective influences and permit the Bible to speak its own message undistorted by the commitments we

already bring with us when we come to read it.

Thirdly, we bring with us to the Bible a cultural outlook entirely different from that of the authors, editors and first readers of the various books of Scripture. This cultural outlook supplies many of the assumptions we make when we read them. What is more, it is so pervasive, so much a part of us, that we do not recognise it as a distorting factor. We assume that the way we think in our cultural context is the way all people have thought every-where and at all times.

In order to understand how this cultural factor affects our understanding of Scripture, let us look at the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16.19-34. Most westerners have great difficulty with the baptism of the jailer's whole household. We are thoroughgoing individualists. As we see things we are responsible for ourselves and no one else. If I believe and am baptised that affects me alone; others must come to belief themselves and then be baptised. In the cultures represented in the Bible, as in many cultures of the present time, people are not so individualistic. They understand themselves as intimately bound up with other people in many respects. For them it would be difficult for one member of a family or household to embrace Christ and follow in the way while the others remained pagan. We know that it sometimes happened because elsewhere Paul advised believing spouses not to divorce their unbelieving partners (1 Corinthians 7:12~16). But it was recognised that in some way the unbelieving partner and his or her children participated in the benefits of the believing partner's faith. The unbelieving one, Paul says, 'is consecrated' through the believing spouse and their children are not unclean but holy. That is a part of Scripture we have never really digested, but in the light of that principle it is not surprising that the jailer's whole family was baptised. We do not need to assume that they all believed or even all understood the message. In fact Acts 16:34 says that he

with his whole household rejoiced that he believed, not that they all believed.

It is not said specifically that there were children in the household, though obviously there must have been, otherwise it would hardly have been referred to as a household. Nor are we told how young the children were. It is therefore not a proof-text for infant baptism, but if there were infants it is inconceivable that they would not have participated in baptism with the rest of the family.

Only individualists like us westerners could conceive of half the family being baptised while half the family remained part of the pagan society.

One Australian woman argued that it was unlikely that babies would have been baptised because it was the middle of the night, and what mother, she asked, would wake up a baby in the middle of the night to be baptised? But that also is a very modern western cultural assumption. Anyone who has lived long in an eastern society is quite familiar with babies being passed around at all hours of the night at wakes and other such occasions. They simply do not have the same fetish for neatly ordered, even regimented, life-styles that middle class Australians have.

It is important therefore that we be aware of, and examine carefully, the assumptions which we bring to the interpretation of Scripture. Insofar as they are assumptions arising from our modern western culture they may seriously lead us astray in understanding what the biblical writers meant in a quite different culture.

### Precautions

How, then, are we to deal with this problem of the baggage we

bring with us to Scripture getting in the way of a responsible interpretation of the Bible? There is no easy answer, but there are a number of precautions we can take and methods to use.

1 We need to be alert to the problem. That is the purpose of this chapter. Particularly we need to examine ourselves as we come to the Bible so as to recognise what commitments (political, social and religious), what prejudices and biases, and what self-interests we bring with us to the Scriptures. Before we begin the study of the Bible each time we need to pray for God's help not to mistake the insistent clamour of our own biases and prejudices for the authoritative, Spirit-revealed Word which God intends us to hear through the words of Scripture.

2 We need to take notice of whether the Bible always seems to confirm our views rather than other people's. If so, it is probably because we are homing in on the passages that seem to support us instead of considering the full sweep of Scripture, or it is because we are interpreting the Scripture in the light of our commitments rather than the other way about. None of us is so wise or so good that the Word of God always comes to us as confirmation rather than challenge. Indeed if we have a genuine desire to come to maturity in the Lord we should be seeking the Bible's word of challenge more than its word of confirmation.

3 We need to engage in regular and systematic Bible study which, in the course of time, covers the whole Bible, rather than just going to the Bible when we have a disputed matter to settle. If we only do the latter we will tend to find the bits that suit us. If we engage in regular and systematic study of the Bible there is greater likelihood that the Bible will actually shape our outlook and commitments rather than simply confirming the commitments we have formed in other ways.

4 It is important that our study of the Bible be done at least some of the time in a group context. In that way the different commitments and presuppositions that others bring to the text may help to alert us to the ones we bring with us. The church is the context for the interpretation of Scripture, rather than simply the individual alone.

5 We need also a method of Bible study that frees Scripture from the parochialism and biases of the interpreter. Within the circle of biblical scholarship the method that helps to achieve this goal is known as the 'historical critical method'. Basically this method seeks to understand any text of Scripture within its own historical context. It seeks to establish such things as: What was the date of the text's composition? What was the historical setting in which it was composed and in which it was first read? What were the historical issues that it was addressing? What was its purpose? In what kind of literature is it embedded – legal, narrative, prophetic oracle, poetry, prose, apocalyptic, etc.? How does it relate to other texts dealing with this subject? By asking such questions the method seeks to distance the text from the interpreter, to give it room to be itself rather than be a direct response to the interpreter's need. Only by being taken from us, as it were, can the text stand over against us to give us its true meaning.

To some extent we can study Scripture ourselves in a historical critical manner. If we have a good Bible handbook or introduction to the Bible we can discover when each book of the Bible was written, what the circumstances were and what issues it addressed. We may be able to discover who the author was and what the author's particular perspective was. We can then read the book with this information in mind, understanding the text in the light of the situation in which it was written and the situation to which it was addressed. However, it is not easy for the part-time Bible

student to gather together all the relevant material for him or herself and therefore it is advisable to make use of reliable Bible commentaries of an appropriate standard. Some commentaries presume that readers already have a wide knowledge of the principles of biblical scholarship and of the biblical languages. These commentaries may not only be beyond lay readers but may also be quite confusing. Other commentaries, just as sound in scholarship, are written with the non-professional person in mind and supply the ordinary reader with a great deal of background which could not be readily gained elsewhere.

The task of interpretation is not finished when we have discovered what the text meant there and then. That is just the beginning. Hopefully by distancing ourselves from the text we are able to let it yield up its ancient message undistorted by our concerns and self-interest. However, if it remains no more than a historical message to another day and another culture it will not be much help to us. We still need to ask if that was what the author meant in his time and situation, what does that text as Scripture mean for us here and now?

#### Exercises

Examine yourself to determine what strongly held views you have in the areas of politics, social issues, and theology. How might these views colour your reading of Scripture?

#### *For further reading*

E. Charpentier, *How to Read the Old Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1982.

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W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, Herald Press, 1983.





## Chapter 5

# The Diversity of the Bible

The Tuesday night Bible study group had reached Romans 4. Arthur Baker, the leader, was emphasising the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith as Paul explains it in that chapter. When Arthur paused to let his words sink in, Syd Churchill interrupted the monologue.

‘I have often heard people say the sort of things you have just been saying, Arthur, and no doubt you are right, but personally I’ve never been able to get very excited about the doctrine. I think it is a whole lot more important for people to do what is right than to just rejoice in being saved by faith, and I don’t see that it is all that prominent in the Bible. I mean, where do you read about it? Just in Romans and I suppose in Galatians, as you have just told us. But there is a lot of the New Testament left over when you’ve read Romans and Galatians. And what about James? He didn’t seem to be too impressed with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith.’

‘He wasn’t necessarily opposing Paul’s teaching,’ Arthur explained. ‘He was opposing a false understanding of the doctrine according to which faith was thought of as mere intellectual assent, and that was taken to be enough to gain salvation without any good works either accompanying or following it. Even Paul would have agreed such faith is dead and never justified anyone.’

‘Yes, Arthur, I know that’ Syd replied, ‘but I still think there is a big difference between James and Paul. I can’t imagine James agreeing to what you just said about justification by faith being so central to the gospel. And talking about gospel, where is this doctrine in the gospels? If it is so central wouldn’t you have expected Jesus to have taught it?’

‘But, Syd, he did,’ Arthur insisted, ‘not with the kind of argument Paul uses, but by his parables. Take, for example, the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son who has done everything wrong is accepted back without any good works to earn him a place again in the household. He is accepted just because his father loves him and he had come home penitent, while the older boy who has stayed at home doing good works and thinks that because of that his father owes him something, has no advantage over his younger brother. In fact the story ends with him out in the dark.’

‘Most unjust, I call it’ Flo butted in. ‘I don’t blame the older son for being put out about the party and all the fuss. I don’t think it would have hurt that young rascal to be treated as a servant for a while.’

‘That’s the difference between you and God, Flo’ Thelma Thompson said rather cheekily.

‘I wouldn’t call that exactly justification by faith,’ Syd picked up the thread of the argument again. ‘Besides, take the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25. The people in that parable were judged by their works, not their faith.’

‘That’s one of the hardest things about the Bible’ Maureen O’Reilly put in. ‘It seems to say different things in different places. I never know what to take notice of and which things not to.’

‘We have to take notice of all of it’ Don Clark assured her. ‘You know what I mean’ Maureen responded. ‘I don’t mean that there are things I just skip over, but I never know what is the main teaching and what is just there to correct wrong ideas.’

Arthur didn’t answer Maureen directly, but he went on, ‘the theme

of God's grace is central to the New Testament. Nothing can set that aside. That is the whole point of God's gift of his only Son. That is sheer grace. We can't earn our salvation. We just receive it as a gift, by faith. Other themes in the New Testament are to be understood in the light of that; not the other way around.'

'Well, you may be right, Arthur,' Syd joined in again, 'but I just don't see what basis you have for saying that. As I read the teaching of Jesus, he seems to be much more concerned about people living the right way than about receiving salvation by faith, and I think we could do with a lot more right living today.'

The discussion continued along the same lines for some time until Arthur's wife, Marge, said, 'I think it's time I put the kettle on. I'm confused enough for one night.'

In the discussion reported above Syd was not just being difficult, nor is Syd just dull and lacking in savvy. He has rightly perceived that while justification by grace through faith, to put it correctly, is clearly taught in Scripture, there are other strands of teaching which do not sit comfortably with this theme. Any alert reader of Scripture will have become aware of this and may even find it a source of difficulty just as Maureen did. If we are to interpret Scripture rightly we have to face up to this diversity and come to some conclusions about how to deal with it. Many people deal with it by denying that it exists. However, it does not go away just by our denying it. The denial of its existence only ensures a dishonest treatment of Scripture because it allows us to pick out of Scripture just what pleases us while insisting that the texts we have selected represent the simple unified teaching of Scripture.

When we speak about the diversity of Scripture we are not talking about the alleged contradictions in the Bible, such as the differing accounts in Matthew 27 and Acts I of how Judas died. Such things are relatively trivial. What we have in mind rather is quite

distinctive outlooks on various matters of life and faith existing alongside one another in the canon.

The discussion in the Bible study group already points to one case of diversity in the New Testament. There are elements of the New Testament that centre on justification by grace but there are other elements, which centre on notions of justice, good conduct and right living and to which justification by grace is peripheral. However such diversity can be found throughout the Bible.

### Diversity in the Old Testament

The so-called 'prosperity doctrine' has become popular in some church circles in recent times. This is not something simply imposed on Scripture. There are elements in the Old Testament that support such a view. One only has to read Psalm 1 to see that this is so. There are also elements in the Old Testament that stand opposed to it. It might be said that the book of Job was written to show that this view is too simple. It is Job's 'comforters' who take the view that the virtuous prosper and the wicked suffer. Since Job is suffering terribly he must have committed terrible sins and they advise him to repent. Yet Job is a righteous man. In the prophets the well-to-do are nearly always the wicked and unjust members of society. God's special concern is the poor who frequently are poor just because they are righteous and will not stoop to using false measures and bribing judges. In the gospels the call to discipleship is invariably a call to freedom from attachments to things or to wealth. All of this evidence points in quite another direction from the prosperity doctrine.

Again in the Old Testament there is one tradition that represents the clamour of the people of Israel for a king as a breach of loyalty to

God (1 Samuel 8:7, 9-20; 12:19~25). There is another strand that represents the appointment of a king as the gracious provision of a deliverer from the threat of annihilation (1 Samuel 9:15-16; I 0: 1). In accordance with this strand one finds in the Old Testament traces of a royal theology, which supports the monarchy and the order that it imposes, but more prominent still is the prophetic critique of the monarchy and the corrupt order that it tolerates and even promotes.

## Christology

Diversity is as great in the New Testament as in the Old. Let us look at a few examples. To start with there are a number of different views of the person of Christ. To simplify greatly, there is at the simplest level the understanding of Jesus as a good man whom God adopted as his son. This is given expression through the use of Psalm 2:7 as an explanation of how the person of Jesus is to be understood and is expressed directly in verses such as Acts 10: 38, Romans 1:3-4 and Hebrews 5:5. The virgin birth Christology of Matthew and Luke goes beyond the adoptionist Christology by asserting that God did not simply wait for the right man to turn up but took the initiative in providing the person of his choice. However, the virgin birth Christology does not, on its own, give us a doctrine of incarnation. More advanced still is the Christology of preexistence, which is expressed, for example, in Colossians 1: 15- 20. Though Christ is called the first-born of all creation he still belongs to the creature side of the creator – creature divide. Anyone who is aware of the prominence given to this passage by Jehovah's Witnesses will recognise that it does not affirm of Christ all that orthodox Christianity wishes to affirm. Finally, at the most exalted level, there is the Incarnation Christology, which is expressed in chapter one of John's Gospel. Orthodox Christianity has opted for

the last of these Christologies and has read the others in the light of it while the sects have grasped one or other of the alternatives and given them priority. The question that needs to be answered is why the choice made by orthodox Christianity is to be preferred to those made by the sects.

There is a similar diversity in the way the New Testament speaks of the work of Christ and the significance of Christ's death and resurrection. Three or four different metaphors are used to explain the work of Christ. For example, sometimes the work of Christ is represented as being a superior kind of sacrifice that replaces all the sacrifices of the Old Testament and achieves what they were unable to achieve. In other places his forfeited life is represented as a ransom paid to free sinners from their captivity, and in still others his death is spoken of as the punishment he bore for our sins. Christians have often chosen to emphasise one of these and to ignore the others. The question is whether this is really being faithful to the New Testament witness. And if orthodoxy has opted for just one of the various Christologies mentioned above why should it not do the same with views of the work of Christ.

## The church

Again the New Testament presents us with very different pictures of the church. In the early letters of Paul it is a very loosely structured charismatic fellowship in which all members exercise their gifts in ministry. By the time we get to the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) it is much more highly structured with bishops and elders, appointed ministries exercising authority within the congregation. Precisely because there are such different views of the church in Scripture we now have different denominations with very different polity all claiming that their structure reflects the

New Testament order. But which of them really does? And should we even think that today in our very different situation we have to follow precisely a New Testament pattern for the church?

### Life beyond death

The diversity of the New Testament witness concerning life beyond death is well known and provides inexhaustible possibilities for those who wish to try their hand at harmonisation. There are passages, which suggest that at death all people fall asleep and remain asleep until the final resurrection and judgment (1 Corinthians 15:20, I Thessalonians 4:15-17). There are also passages that suggest that when the righteous die they go immediately to be with Christ (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1.23). There are passages that suggest that the just shall be raised to life while the wicked simply perish (John 3.16). There are texts, which suggest that all people are raised, some to eternal punishment but others to eternal blessedness (Matthew 25.46). There are also passages which could be read as suggesting that at last all people will be redeemed and enter into eternal blessedness (1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:18; 11:32; Philippians 2: 10-11; I Timothy 2.4). If we take the Old Testament into account the diversity is even greater. How are we to deal with such diversity?

### Working with diversity

There are various observations to be made about this diversity before we try to see how we can work with it.

Firstly, we need to observe that there is a limit to this diversity. The fact that there is a canon of Scripture means that some

writings, which might have had claims to be scriptural, have been excluded. Thus, for example, early Christian writings that put forward a docetic view of Christ, that is to say those that deny his real humanity, have been excluded from the canon. That view cannot claim to stand alongside other views of Christ as part of the scriptural diversity.

Secondly, we should not so emphasise the diversity that we lose sight of the unity, or at least a number of unities, that make the Bible much more than just a collection of odds and ends. Taking the New Testament, for example, that unity is quite clear and basic. James Dunn has identified it as follows:

That unifying element was the unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and the same person, Jesus, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Within the strength of that unity a great deal of diversity could be embraced.

Thirdly, the existence of this diversity within the canon of Scripture suggests certain things about the nature of revelation that we ought to note. It might be said that God's revelation did not encounter the writers in a manner so clear and sharp that there was no possibility of such diversity. Or we might say that the writers' grasp of that revelation was not so perfect that they all said precisely the same things. Or again we might say that God's truth really surpasses all formulation in human language and concepts; the diversity



of Scripture results to some extent from the attempts of different people to express their grasp of that truth as best they can with the inspiration of the Spirit. It is worth noting in passing that if God's truth surpassed their grasp it will just as surely surpass our formulations also. In this respect the acknowledgement of the existence of such diversity in the Bible should be a humbling and sobering experience for us.

Another point to be made in this connection is that though God's truth always remains the same, it encounters people in their particular situations and those different situations require that the one truth be expressed in different ways. If the diversity is to be accounted for even partly by this latter consideration, it follows that some past situation and the application of God's truth to it may not necessarily be a blueprint for dealing with all similar situations in the future. What the Scripture provides is rather a model for arriving at a faith response to the new situation in the light of what we have learnt from the past. James Dunn makes the same point in a different way when he draws from the existence of this diversity in the New Testament the lesson that 'Christianity cannot be Christianity unless it lives out and expresses in its daily life the creative tension between the givenness of the historical past of its founding era and the vitality of the present Spirit'.<sup>2</sup>

Fourthly, the diversity of Scripture raises for us the question whether all parts of Scripture carry equal weight. People who hold fundamentalist or inerrantist views of Scripture tend to hold that Scripture is equally authoritative in every part. In practice however, like everyone else, they give more weight to some passages than to others. When Ecclesiastes says, 'Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits

them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return' (3:19-20 N.I.V.), most Christians would not accord that the same weight in determining their doctrine of human destiny as they would Paul's assurance of resurrection in I Corinthians 15 or Jesus' rebuttal of the Sadducees in Luke 20:27-38 or his assurance in John 14:2 that 'In my Father's house are many rooms'. Jesus himself did not accord equal weight to all Scripture. In the matter of divorce he gave greater weight to what was written in Genesis I and 2 than to the Mosaic law on divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Paul certainly made a distinction between the authority of his own words and the authority he ascribed to words of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:10, 12, 25), at least in some instances.

While this issue is not as difficult for some people as for others, the possibility that some parts of Scripture carry more weight than others does pose some problems for all interpreters of the Bible. Once we admit this we then have to decide which portions carry the more weight and which the less, and presumably we have to arrive at some means for deciding the question. And that is not easy. At least some wrong ways of doing that can be stated. We cannot say, for example, that the New Testament always carries more weight than the Old. In the New Testament we cannot say that what is more developed always carries more weight than what is earlier and less developed or vice versa. Many people would regard the church order of the early letters of Paul as more authoritative than the church order of the later Pastoral Epistles. On the other hand, the church has accorded more authority to the later Logos Christology of John's Gospel than it has to the more primitive adoptionist Christology found in some of the speeches in Acts.

## Some guidelines

Having said all that the question still remains about how we are to deal with this diversity when it comes to interpreting the Bible.

Firstly, what has already been said above needs to be said again, namely that we need to acknowledge the existence of this diversity and not try to deny that it exists. No one can deal adequately with anything whose existence he or she denies. Then, being aware of this diversity, we need to look at any issue in canonical perspective. That is, we need to look for the witness of the whole of Scripture on any matter and not just pick out a verse here and there. Scripture is not isolated verses culled from the Bible but all the books of the Bible in relationship within the canon, each part qualified by the distinctive witness of the other parts.

Secondly, our concern should not be how we can reconcile and unify all this diversity but how we can hear each text's distinctive witness. New Testament Scholar, Krister Stendahl, once made a remark to the effect that the Bible should always be presented with each of its parts fresh and alive, like good vegetable soup, which lets each of its vegetables contribute its own distinctive colour, shape and flavour and is never just a characterless, homogenised mush.<sup>3</sup> What we look for is not some highest common factor, but the distinctive light which each throws on the subject. Later we may have to concern ourselves with what kind of unity emerges in the process, but that is not the first consideration.

A note of caution needs to be sounded here. In attempting to identify a passage's distinctive message it is the main thrust of the passage we are to focus on, not its attendant features. For example, it would be erroneous to conclude that because in the parable of the talents Jesus said that the man with the one talent was told by his master

he should have invested his money with the bankers, therefore Jesus must have agreed with the whole banking and money-lending system of his day. If we were to draw such a conclusion we would have to conclude that Jesus agreed with embezzlement too because he told a parable in which an embezzler was held up as an example (Luke 16: 1 - 8).

Thirdly, we need to remember that broad principles enunciated in Scripture need to be given as much weight as clear statements in specific texts, if not more. In Exodus 21:20-21 there is a commandment about the treatment of slaves. Throughout the middle of the 19th century in the United States these verses were used to legitimate slavery. The slave owners and those who supported them latched onto these particular verses while ignoring the liberating message, which is the essential theme of the book of Exodus, not to mention the teaching of Jesus concerning our treatment of other human beings. This example could be repeated many times over. We all have a tendency to fasten onto what is short, sharp, clear and specific rather than general teaching and general principles that are less specifically focused. It is a tendency which needs to be resisted.

Fourthly, there are a number of different considerations that apply to scriptural diversity in different situations. Some diversity may result from different perspectives on a particular subject. An example of this would be the difference between Paul and James on the relationship between faith and works and even of the nature of faith itself. Sometimes the diversity is to be accounted for in terms of the cumulateness of revelation; hence the difference between the New Testament and most of the Old on the matter of life after death. The appropriate principle to use cannot be laid down in advance; it must be determined in each instance.

Fifthly, Protestantism, at least, has always recognised a principle of discrimination and organisation within Scripture. For Luther that principle was justification by grace through faith. This, as he understood it, is the centre of the gospel. The question to be addressed to any portion of Scripture is. Does it express the gospel? And since there is no gospel without Christ, one may ask more basically does it point to Christ and exalt him? If a portion of Scripture fails this test it must be subordinate to those parts of Scripture that do point to Christ and do faithfully express the gospel. While Protestantism has not slavishly followed Luther, protestant theologians have continued to make use of the notion of a principle of discrimination from within Scripture itself. For example, Gabriel Fackre, a contemporary American evangelical scholar, speaks about the evangelical core of the Bible and goes on to say: ‘This Evangel – the good news of God’s saving deeds done over the timeline of the Christian narrative – constitutes the substance of the scriptural “source”. As such the gospel story is the principle of interpretation of the rich and variegated materials of the Bible.’<sup>4</sup> If we are to deal consistently and responsibly with the diversity of Scripture we need some such principle.

Sixthly, we need to note the importance of tradition in the interpretation of Scripture. Protestants tend to react negatively to any mention of tradition, and the more conservative they are theologically the more negatively they react. Partly that reaction is due to a wrong understanding of what is meant by tradition. Many people think of it as a collection of stories and legends of uncertain origin together with a series of papal decisions on unscriptural dogmas. That is not what I mean by tradition. Tradition is literally that which has been handed on to us by the church of previous ages. It includes the historic creeds and confessions. Even the determination of which books belong to the canon of Scripture is part of tradition. It is the result of a number of decisions within the

church. Scripture itself does not give it. But much of the tradition comes to us in a much less formal manner than creeds and the like. For example, the debate in Britain and America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries about slavery has settled for us the question of whether biblical texts which speak of slavery, such as the letter to Philemon, and I Timothy 6:1-2, can be used to justify slavery. We now abide by the tradition that they shall not be read in that way.

Protestants are very much aware of the fact that at the Reformation Luther set tradition aside and ascribed authority to Scripture alone. However, this was only where tradition claimed to be independent of Scripture, a source of revelation alongside it. He accepted tradition where it was not inconsistent with Scripture or where it could settle questions that Scripture leaves open. He accepted the great creeds of the church because he believed that they were not inconsistent with Scripture. He also accepted other less formalised elements of ecclesiastical tradition. For example, he received the church's custom of baptising children, though he admitted that it was not expressly commanded in Scripture. In fact Luther could no more abandon tradition entirely than can anyone else. What needs to be added, however, is that tradition is not completed and dead, but alive and growing. Thus the Reformation itself became a source of tradition for Protestants, not least of all in determining how we view tradition itself, but also in defining the canon of Scripture more sharply and firmly and by making the doctrine of justification by grace through faith a touchstone of the gospel and thereby a norm for the interpretation of Scripture. But tradition was not closed at the Reformation any more than it was closed after the Council of Nicea in the fourth century or after the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. In every age the church struggles with the interpretation of some new aspect of Scripture, often in bitter debate, but always imploring the guidance of the Spirit also,

and we today thankfully receive the gains that have been made. That is not to say we do not check out the decisions that were made, but we do not go through all the uncertainty and agony of deciding all over again, especially when the decisions have stood up to the test of time.

The tradition of interpretation is, therefore, an important aid in dealing with the diversity of Scripture. We could, for example, read the Bible as the Jehovah's Witnesses do, or as Herbert W. Armstrong did and abandon the doctrine of the Trinity, or we can read it in the light of the Council of Nicea and the Creed that bears its name and subordinate texts which are subtrinitarian to those that support a trinitarian interpretation. And in many similar issues we are guided in our interpretation of Scripture by the living tradition of the church.

Finally, the fact that some elements in the diversity are subordinated to others does not mean that they cease to be part of the canon or that they are simply dismissed as worthless, having nothing more to say to us. To return to the passage from Ecclesiastes quoted above, while it does not carry the same weight as some New Testament texts when it comes to determining the Christian view of death and beyond, it still has a role to play within the canon of Scripture. For one thing, it testifies to the fact that even those who do not believe in life beyond death may be God-fearing people. For another, it reminds us that human beings do share much in common with animals. We share a common biosphere and so we cannot be indifferent to their fate without that affecting our own. In fact, we cannot say what important contribution that passage will make to human understanding and faith in some, as yet, unforeseen circumstance. Texts passed over in one age can easily become matters of life and death in another. While we realistically acknowledge the diversity, we hold fast to the canon.

## **Exercises**

1. Examine the following groups of texts and identify how each group interprets the saving work of Christ.

Group 1: Luke 11:20-22; John 12:31; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8.

Group 2: Mark 10:45; 1 Corinthians 7:22-23; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9.

Group 3: Matthew 26:27-28; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 10:12-14; 1 John 2:1-2.

Group 4: Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14,21; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24.

Can you think of other ways in which Scripture speaks about the saving work of Christ? How should we understand these different ways of interpreting Christ's work?

2. Look at the following argument for slavery used by the pro-slavery advocates in the U.S.A. What faults can you find in the argument? How would you argue on biblical grounds against the pro-slavery position?

The Bible says nothing to condemn slavery as sinful and may even be read as in fact commanding it. Slavery is rooted in Noah's prophetic curse on Ham-Canaan's descendants (Genesis 9:24-27). People of God have practised it in all ages. Abraham, champion of faith, had many slaves (Genesis 12:5, 14:14, 20:14). Scripture says that the Lord blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves (Genesis 24:35). God told the Israelites to buy slaves and gave specific instructions concerning their service (Leviticus 25:44-46; Exodus 21). Jesus never spoke against slavery but used



the slave image as a model for Christian conduct (Luke 17:7-10). Paul obeyed the fugitive slave law by sending Onesimus back to Philemon and both Paul and Peter gave instructions to slaves on how they should act as Christians (Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Timothy 6.1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2: 18-19). In the light of all this evidence to oppose slavery is to reject the authority of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

***For further reading:***

J. G. D. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1977.

P. D. Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture: A Theological Investigation*, Fortress Press, 1982.

W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, Herald Press, 1986. (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1977, p. 369

<sup>2</sup> J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> Krister Stendahl in the Thatcher Lecture series at United Theological College in 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Fackre, 'The Use of Scripture in My Work in Systematics', in R. K. Johnston (ed.), *The Use of the Bible in Theology – Evangelical Options*, John Knox Press, 1985, p.217.

<sup>5</sup> This argument is drawn from material in the book by W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, Herald Press, 1986.



## Chapter 6

# Discovering God's Word for today

'Next week we will move on to Romans 8' Arthur promised as he closed the meeting of the Bible study group.

'Thank heavens for that' Thelma responded.

'What do you mean?' Arthur probed in a rather hurt tone.

'Well so much of Romans seems academic – distant. All of that argument in chapter 4 about Abraham, and now what we have been discussing tonight – whether the conflict Paul writes about in chapter 7 was before he was converted or after he was converted or while he was being converted – doesn't seem to have any bearing on life here and now. It's like we were walking through a museum looking at ancient pots and stuff and arguing about when they were made. Who cares? It may be all right if you are nuts about archaeology, but I'm not. I want to know what God's word is for me now. It's the same when our minister preaches. He takes his text from the Bible but never gets past 30 A.D. 'Thelma spoke with a lot of feeling.

'I think you are being very unfair to Jim, our minister, Thelma. I've heard some terrific sermons from him that really touched me right where I am now.' Agnes Sheppard came to Jim Kennedy's defense.

'Perhaps I am being unfair' Thelma conceded. 'Maybe I was reacting to Sunday's sermon which didn't touch base as far as I

was concerned. But we are no different here. We're great on what Paul meant back in the first century, but not so hot when it comes to what it all means for us now. That's why I'm glad we are coming to chapter 8. It always seems to relate better to me here and now than the earlier chapters.'

'You're right Thelma. It's a great chapter. If that doesn't speak to you nothing will.' It was Don Clark joining the discussion.

'I must confess I am a little disappointed to hear you say that the study we've been doing doesn't relate to where you are. Doesn't justification by faith relate to your salvation now?' Arthur asked.

'Well, I suppose it might, but we really didn't spend much time on that. I mean, I am not likely to be hung up about keeping the Jewish law and circumcision certainly isn't an issue' Thelma replied rather facetiously.

'But surely justification by our works is a temptation we all face' Don argued.

'It may be your temptation, Don, but it isn't mine. I'm not particularly aware of any good works I have done. In fact what troubles me more is my utter lack of good works and the multitude of my bad works' Thelma replied.

'Ah,' exclaimed Don triumphantly, 'then the doctrine of justification by faith should be particularly precious to you, because it assures you that you are justified by grace apart from any works and in spite of what you think are your bad works'.

'Perhaps it should be precious to me, but really it is not, I'm sorry to say. I know that what you are saying is true, but I don't feel justified. I just feel very un-OK. At least at times I do' Thelma replied.

'I hear what you are saying, Thelma' Arthur assured her. 'Even though I know in my head I'm justified and accepted by grace there are times when I don't feel it either. But feelings are unreliable. We must not let them undermine our confidence in the gospel. It seems to me that it takes a long time for a truth we grasp with our minds to

percolate down to our feelings and change them. But if we hold to the truth in time it will happen, I am sure' Arthur assured her.

'You may be feeling un-OK for other reasons too' Sue Sherry joined in. 'if what you do is not appreciated, if you have a hard boss or something, you can feel un-OK. I think a lot of people feel un-OK just because the neighbours are more successful or more affluent and that sort of thing. But to me God's justification means that I don't have to worry about all that. I'm worthwhile just because God accepts me and values me.'

'I've heard it said that Paul only refers to justification by faith when he is particularly concerned about the tension between Jews and Gentiles' Syd Churchill contributed. 'For him the great point about justification by faith was that it meant Gentiles did not have to become Jews first before they could become Christians. I know that is not an issue any more but we do have issues like it. Look at the way some people in the church resent the young people having their own service on Sunday evenings with their own music and the informality they like. People think they should all come to the other services, yet they wouldn't change a thing to accommodate the young people. They think the youth should become like them, dress like them, like the same kind of music and love sitting quietly in wordy services before they can be Christians.'

'That's a good point Syd' Arthur commented. 'I think in the past missionaries have sometimes assumed that the people they were evangelizing should become like Europeans in their ways, their culture, their dress, and so on, before they could be true Christians. Perhaps if they had really heard the message of justification by faith they would have realised that God accepts people without them having to fulfil any cultural or legalistic conditions first. Maybe we are still doing the same thing when we try to make people accept our conditions before we recognise that God has accepted them too.'

'You are all helping me to see that the biblical doctrines we talk

about do have relevance for today' Thelma conceded. 'I wish we would spend more time on looking at the relevance of the passages when we study them. What still puzzles me a bit is how we make the link. How are we to know what issues of today the Bible really speaks to? And how can we translate what was written in the first century into God's word for our situation today?'



Thelma's questions are enormously important. Not many people study the Bible as a hobby only, or just because of an interest in ancient literature. Most of us study it because we believe that through it we can hear God's word for us today. But how? Understanding what the Bible meant to readers centuries ago does not necessarily mean that we understand what God is saying to us through it in our time. The issues we have dealt with so far in this book have focused more on understanding what it meant than on what it means for us. In some respects that is the easy part. At least there are some rules and some accumulated wisdom about how we should do that, but making the link between then and now is more difficult just because it is more uncertain.

## The historical critical method

In chapter 4 it was said that we need a method of Bible study that frees the biblical text from the biases, commitments and preconceived ideas which interpreters bring to their study. That method was referred to as the historical critical method. That method approaches the Bible in the same way it would approach any other ancient book. You will recall that it seeks to answer such questions as. When was the book written and for whom was it intended? Who wrote it and what sources were drawn upon? What was the historical setting in which it was composed and what were

the historical issues it was addressing? What was its purpose? What kind of literature is it - poetry, prose, prophetic oracle, letter, etc.? It is a secular method. It is scholarly, rigorous, and to some extent sceptical. Its one great advantage is that it is about as objective as any literary method can be. It has enabled great advances to take place in the understanding of what the biblical writers and editors actually meant. But it also has some weaknesses.

Firstly, the scepticism, which it brings to, the study of the text often extends to the subject matter that the text speaks about. Sometimes practitioners of this method tend to doubt the truth of anything they themselves have not experienced or that does not fit neatly into our modern world-view. This doubt and scepticism then tend to block the witness of the Scriptures. Scripture is no longer allowed to be what it claims to be or to speak to us in the way it claims to speak. Even when it does not have such a severe impact on the interpreter the method has an effect often referred to as distanciation. D. A. Carson illustrates the meaning of this by taking a hypothetical seminary student, Ernest Christian. He is converted at high school, studies computer science at university, works hard at his church and enjoys an effective ministry leading a youth group. He prays often and earnestly and when he reads the Bible daily he frequently feels as though the Lord were speaking to him directly. However, there is much of the Bible he does not understand, and he would like to understand it better. Increasingly he has the conviction that he should become a minister, and so with the blessing and affirmation of his congregation he goes off to theological seminary. After a term or two there, things are rather different. He is engaged in the hard slog of learning Greek and writing exegetical papers. After he has finished his lexical study, has surveyed all the critical opinions and evaluated all the conflicting evidence, the Bible somehow does not feel as alive to him as once it did. This troubles him. He finds it more difficult to pray and witness. He does not know why it is. The

fault is not in his lecturers, most of whom seem to be mature and godly Christians.

To some extent all of that has to happen in order that he may come to the Scripture with a new objectivity and with intellectual rigour. The danger is that, as Carson observes, the student may be so absorbed in the intellectual process that no time, energy or interest are left for the meditative reading of Scripture and the worship, prayer and witness which such reading supports.<sup>1</sup>

From all of this flows the second danger: that every expectation that the text will speak to us, that we will hear God's word to us through it, is lost. When this happens the intention of the Scripture is thwarted. It can no longer function as Scripture and is reduced to being no more than a curious collection of literature from a bygone age. Many scholars and preachers are caught in this bind. The result is the walk through the museum syndrome to which Thelma alluded in the discussion group.

It would be tempting to respond to this process by saying: 'Down with all scholarship and especially the historical critical method! Let us read the Scriptures with eyes tutored by the Spirit alone'. But that would be to put the clock back and would result only in more arbitrary interpretation, unrelated to what the author originally meant. The Spirit can be counted upon to come to our aid but not to substitute for the work we should do for ourselves. It has seemed good to the Lord to speak to us through historical events and human affairs and through Scriptures, which people have written, rather than always through the unmediated presence of the Spirit. That purpose of God is frustrated if we do not take the trouble to understand those events and understand what his servants intended to say. If anything that pops into our heads when we read Scripture will do, there is hardly any point in having Scripture at



all. Worse still there can be no objectivity in interpretation. Only an interpretation controlled by what the text actually meant can save us from unhelpful subjectivity and relativism. It is true that in recent theory of interpretation the idea of 'a surplus of meaning' has been recognised; that is to say, a text may have meaning above and beyond what an author thought he or she was saying. Interpreters of a national constitution, for example, do not only ask, 'What did its framers mean?' because what they actually wrote may say to us more than they foresaw at the time. But even allowing for the validity of the concept of surplus meaning, one cannot make of a text anything one pleases. The author's intention remains of great importance. This is true of Scripture also. Howard Marshall, in his little book on biblical inspiration,<sup>2</sup> reminds us that the meaning of the Bible for us today arises out of what the original authors intended to convey to their original readers, and does not simply set it aside.

## Hearing God's word today

What are we to do, then, to hear through the text of Scripture God's word for us today?

1. We should accept with gratitude all that biblical scholarship has to teach us about the Bible, including what can be derived from the historical critical method, bearing in mind however, that in literary scholarship one is hardly ever in a position to say that the last word has been spoken. At the same time we recognise that at best all this scholarship can do is to tell us what the text meant to the author and its original readers. It does not, on its own, tell us what God is saying to us through it today. Nevertheless, it will be a help to us, because by making clear the writer's intention it will rule out some possible false understandings. This kind of scholarship sees to it

that we cannot make the text mean anything we want it to mean. It acts as a brake on our tendency to read into Scripture what we would like to find there instead of reading what actually is there.

2. While accepting with gratitude what assistance biblical scholarship can give us, we hold firmly to the conviction that the Bible wants to speak words of grace and challenge to us from God, and that it can do so. We resist any influence from biblical scholarship that would lock up the Scripture in an ancient museum. We remain open to hear not only what it said in the past, but also what it says to us now. We come to the Bible with what a former colleague, G. Hughes, describes as a sympathetic and believing expectancy toward each text.<sup>3</sup>

3. Because we approach the Bible in this way, we also come prayerfully, calling on the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide us. The process of hearing God's word through the text is not something mechanical. It requires insight and imagination. The capacity to move from a word spoken in the past to a corresponding word addressed to the present requires a gift, which can only be called the gift of prophecy. Every Bible interpreter, every preacher, needs to implore the Spirit for that gift.

4. Nevertheless, having prayed we do not sit in idleness waiting for the message to strike us. There are things we can do, and must do if we are to be faithful. We have to struggle to hear the word God directs to us. This involves an active, struggling, listening to the text. As theologian David Wells reminds us, Martin Luther used to assert that there are three factors that are necessary for a right interpretation of Scripture. He used three Latin words to describe them: *oratio*, *meditatio* and *tentatio*. By the first of these he indicates the need for prayer as I have already mentioned. By *meditatio* Luther meant a contemplative, devotional reading and

study of Scripture leading to a profound personal inner grasp of it.<sup>4</sup> The kind of reflective thinking referred to as *meditatio* is very different from the kind of problem-solving thinking that most of us are accustomed to. It is much less aggressive, less outwardly directed; yet it is much more than pure passivity. *Tentatio* can mean attack, trial, or temptation. In this context in Luther it refers to the trials and tribulations which assault us in life, particularly if we are seeking to live faithfully as Christians. In this way Luther is signalling the fact that while meditation is necessary for discerning God's word in Scripture, this does not mean being cloistered away from all of life's tensions and disconcerting experiences. The good interpreter of Scripture, according to Luther, combines prayer and meditation on the one hand, with active spiritual warfare in the world, on the other.

5. We need to have a good understanding of the situation to which we wish to relate the biblical text. How can we know what the Bible says on a particular contemporary issue if we do not understand the issue itself? If, for example, we do not know what *in vitro* fertilisation is, how can we even ask whether Scripture has anything to say to the issue? If we have never studied what bishops are and do today, how can we know how or whether the passages in the Bible which speak of officials whose title is translated as 'bishop' really apply to these present-day ecclesiastical leaders? In the debate on homosexuality many people have said that they do not need to study what doctors, psychologists and social researchers have to say about homosexuality; all that is necessary is to read what the Bible says. But how can they know that the Bible is actually speaking to the same situation unless they really know from such study what homosexuality in our present day society really is? To know only the Bible and not the situation would be like a doctor who knows only about medicines and what they can do but knows nothing about diseases and their symptoms. Such a doctor would

never be able to prescribe the right drug for any illness. For a mild heart attack he might prescribe antacid.

The previous illustration is not meant to imply that biblical interpretation consists simply of applying the Bible to contemporary situations like applying a salve or ointment to a wound. Our understanding of Scripture and the situation interact with one another so that understanding the issue or problem may cast a new light on Scripture, with the result that suddenly it is lit up in a new way, and then it in turn casts a new light on the present issue. For example, an analysis of power in our own experience and in our society may help us to understand what the Bible says about power in, say, I Corinthians. Then in turn understanding I Corinthians may enable us to hear what God is saying about situations of power and powerlessness in our own society. Thus Scripture and situation enter into dialogue with each other. 'Scriptural orientation sharpens the ability to discern the signs of the times,' writes John Howard Yoder, 'but it is just as true that temporal orientation sharpens our ability to discern the signs in Scripture'.<sup>5</sup>

The task we engage in, at this stage, might be likened to bridge-building. Earlier it was suggested that what we need to do in order to let the text speak to us with its own integrity is to distance ourselves from it, let it go, so that it can be itself in its own time and context. But now, having heard how the text spoke to its own time and culture, we need to bridge the gap between that time and that culture and our own. One theologian describes this process as the fusion of two horizons, the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter, however the bridge-building analogy may be a better one, because a bridge does not eliminate the distance from one shore to the other; it simply makes it possible for traffic to take place between the two. That is what we are seeking. We want the work spoken then to cross that bridge and in that process become God's word for us now.

6. We need to check out with other members of the Christian community what we thus hear through the Scriptures. In spite of everything we have done to protect the Scripture from our biases and prior commitments, we still may be reading some of these into the texts instead of letting the texts speak God's word to us. Ultimately there is no absolutely foolproof guard against this, but we have not exhausted the resources given to us until we have shared what we have heard in the Scriptures humbly with other members of the church and listened equally humbly and patiently to their response. In this we must beware of the danger of listening only to those who are in agreement with us and dismissing, and even separating from those who have heard the word of God differently. In the latter half of the last century the churches made great advances in listening to one another in spite of long-standing differences. At the same time Euro-centred churches have made advances in listening to the voices of Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It would not be difficult to show that this ecumenical dialogue has enriched our understanding of what the Scriptures mean for us today. Unfortunately as individual Christians we have rarely made the same progress in listening to and learning from one another.

Finally, we can ask how what we hear through Scripture, as God's word to us in any particular instance, fits with what we have found to be truly God's word in other times and places. There is a consistency about what God does and says. God does not reveal or command one thing today and the opposite tomorrow. Thus if God is love, as the Bible says (1 John 4:16), he will neither reveal himself as vindictive nor will vindictiveness characterise anything which he commands us to do. It is in this way that a carefully ordered theology can be helpful to us. It will alert us when something novel comes along which does not fit with our other carefully tested conclusions. Of course, it is always possible that one new piece of

revelation may require us to abandon our whole theological system and start again, so that lack of consistency with what we have thought before was the truth may not always go against some 'new' word that we have heard, but at least it should alert us to examine the matter carefully.

### ***Exercises***

1 Read again the conversation in the Bible study group with which this chapter began. To what present-day situations do the members apply Paul's teaching on justification by grace through faith? Can you think of other situations to which that teaching might speak? How could you test whether it is a legitimate application?

2 Read John 2: 1-11. After thinking about the story and writing down everything that comes to your mind, research the background of the story in a Bible commentary. Try to decide what John thought the story would say to his readers at the time he wrote it. Now use some of the suggestions given in the chapter to try to hear what situations it may address today and what it says to you.

### ***For further reading***

R. K. Johnson, (ed.) *The Use of the Bible in Theology*. Evangelical Options, John Knox Press, 1983.

W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, Fortress Press, 1973.

#### ***Endnotes***

1 C. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Baker Book House, 1984, pp. 21-22.

2 I.H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1982, p. 97.

3 G. Hughes, 'How can we understand a biblical text?' unpublished paper.

4 D. Wells, 'The Nature and Function of Theology' in *The Use of the Bible in Theology – Evangelical Options*, R. J. Johnson (ed.), John Knox Press, 1985, p. 113.

5 J. H. Yoder, 'The Use of the Bible in Theology', in *The Use of the Bible in Theology – Evangelical Options*, p.113.

## Chapter 7

# The use of the Bible in Theology

Discussion of Romans 8 went very smoothly in the study group until they reached verse 29: 'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.' (N.I.V.) Then Syd Churchill stated flatly, 'I simply cannot agree with that. I don't believe we are predestined. Predestination robs us of our freedom and responsibility. It does not square with my experience at all, and I don't believe it squares with the justice of God either.'

'But Syd, it is written here in Scripture quite clearly. It cannot be denied' Don Clark remonstrated.

'Yes, it's written in this part of Scripture, but I don't believe it is the consistent view of Scripture' Syd replied.

'John Wesley certainly did not accept the doctrine, and he was pretty scriptural' Agnes Sheppard added.

'But how could he deny it when it is so clearly taught right here in Romans?' Don demanded.

'I know he had a number of arguments against it' Arthur Baker responded. 'He argued that if predestination were true all preaching would be useless. It won't do any good to the damned and isn't needed by the elect. He argued also that it undermines holiness.'

'What I want is an argument from Scripture itself' Don insisted.

‘These are just human arguments. That is theology for you; when you don’t like something in Scripture, you invent a lot of arguments to counteract it.’

‘I think you are being a bit hard on theology aren’t you?’ Arthur countered. ‘Scripture is certainly very important – I suppose, the most important factor – but surely we cannot turn a blind eye to all these other factors, such as our experience, our understanding of God, our observation of the effects a particular teaching has. In any case, Wesley did not rely on these arguments alone. He was well aware of the texts that favour predestination, but he used to quote just as many other texts that appear to deny it’ Arthur continued.

‘Texts like what?’ Don asked.

‘Well, I can’t remember them all, but isn’t there a verse in Romans 11 where Paul warns the Gentiles to continue in God’s kindness, otherwise they will be cut off? That seems to make salvation a matter of faithfulness rather than eternal election’ Arthur argued.

‘And there’s the passage in 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul says that he struggles to subdue his body lest after preaching to others he himself is disqualified. That doesn’t seem to fit too well with predestination’ Agnes contributed.

‘They don’t deny predestination outright’ Don objected.

‘Isn’t there a text which says that God doesn’t want anyone to perish but all to be saved?’ Thelma asked.

‘Yes,’ Arthur confirmed, ‘it’s in 2 Peter somewhere’.

‘But look, you are making Scripture speak against itself’ Don protested.

‘No, we are not making it speak against itself, we are only pointing out that there is a problem’ Arthur responded. ‘We have already had a discussion about the diversity of Scripture; you can’t get away from that, and that’s where the problem arises. I don’t think we can just pick or choose what we like. That’s what we are doing now. Don, you like the predestination texts and some of us prefer the anti-predestination texts as Wesley did. Perhaps this is a case where



theology is important. Maybe we need to look at our doctrine of God or our doctrine of atonement to see which of these positions is consistent with them. Perhaps if we thought about it theologically we might even find that there is truth in both positions.'

'Well, I still hold to what is clearly and distinctly stated in Scripture,' Don replied, 'and I am very suspicious of theologians and their arguments'.

So the argument continued for the rest of the evening, sometimes focusing on the issue of predestination, sometimes on what theology is and does and how it relates to Scripture.

Some people have rather strange and alarming notions of what theology is. Don Clark thought of it as a means of thinking of plausible reasons for setting aside the Scripture and adopting beliefs that are more to one's liking. Others no doubt think of it as something very learned which ordinary people cannot follow and which is more likely to confuse than confirm one's faith. In fact theology is not really far removed from the things we have been thinking about to this point. Our concern has been how we are to understand the texts of Scripture; now we need to consider how we use the understandings we arrive at to put together an argument and to arrive at convictions that apply to our own time and circumstances. Put very simply, we could say that what theology attempts to do is to articulate for our time and culture the Word of God which comes to us through the Scripture, but whereas what we have been speaking about so far considers texts in relative isolation, theology goes about its work in such a way that each part is set in relation to every other part, and the parts are arranged in an appropriate order. In theology orderliness and comprehensiveness are very important. In this respect theology is a bit like what a prosecuting counsel does in a court case. All the evidence is brought together so that all the bits fit in to make a case, which is presented to the jury in such a way, that the logic of it all is clear and convincing. If there are

odd bits of evidence which are left out because they are awkward and don't fit with the rest, or if part of the story is not dealt with because the barrister was too lazy to bother with it, the case will not be very convincing and the jury will come back with a 'not guilty' verdict. Or again if it's all there but it is so badly arranged that the jury cannot see the logic of the case they may be so confused that they cannot come to a verdict. So in theology also we seek to get it all together, as we say, in such a way that everything is taken into account and all is ordered in such a way that the logic of the case is compelling.

Far from being the activity of a very special elite, theology is an activity that all believers engage in. Every believer is a theologian because we all want to understand our faith as fully as we can. None of us wants to be illogical and none of us wants to have a faith that ignores large slabs of the evidence. The only question is: How good are we as theologians? The answer to that question depends on how serious we are about it. It depends too on whether we have the biblical resources and logical skills, which the task demands. Seriousness depends on our attitude and resources can be gathered together, so there is no reason why any of us should not be effective theologians.

## The Purpose of Theology

1. Theology is really about understanding our faith. Faith itself' contains an element of understanding. Blind belief is neither very praiseworthy nor very satisfying. Not only does faith contain an element of understanding, it contains also an impetus towards greater understanding. One reason why that is so is that God, with all his works, is supremely worthy to be known and understood. just as we do not worship God for the sake of some other aim or motive,

so we do not seek to understand God for some other purpose. We seek to understand God because this is the most worthwhile thing that the human mind can do. So, in this respect, theology does not need any further justification. The point is that we do it, and as Christian people we should do it as well as we can. Of course, God is an inexhaustible subject.

As Paul remarks in Romans 11, 'How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' Only in the world to come will we understand fully, even as we have been fully understood. Nevertheless here already we long to grasp as much of the mystery of God as we can.

Nevertheless, if theology needs no further justification than the fact that it is the attempt to love God with our minds, there are other purposes which understanding serves. In the first place, by exhibiting the rationality of our faith theology increases our joy in believing. It also helps us to deal with the doubts and challenges that arise from our life in an increasingly secular society. In fact it is not too much to say that we only really know the meaning of our faith when we theologise about it, for it is theology which enables us to relate our faith to all the other things which we learn and experience and engage in. Only things which are so related have meaning. When he was very young our eldest son loved the nursery rhyme 'Hey diddle, diddle' and used to ask me to say it every day. I cannot imagine that it had any meaning to him, for though I know all the words, it has no meaning to me, and still doesn't, because I cannot relate it to life in any significant way. The situation was even worse for him because at the time he could only speak Indonesian! A faith that is all words and formulas in the head may be no more meaningful than 'the little dog laughed to see such fun' was to him.

The famous Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge (1797~1878)

defined theology as the ‘exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation’.<sup>1</sup> As Hodge saw it, theology in going about its task really did not need to go outside the four walls of Scripture to take anything else into account. His method would give us what is sometimes called ‘biblical theology’, but the task of theology proper is much wider than that. Hodge’s method would not give us the understanding we are looking for precisely because it fails to relate what is in Scripture to the whole range of our knowledge, experience and behaviour. That is why theology has to bring the ‘facts of Scripture’, once they are determined, into relationship with the worlds of science, politics, literature, personal experience and all other spheres of human life and activity.

2. Theology is the means by which we can make a critique of the church’s doctrine. The word ‘doctrine’ is derived from the Latin word *docere*, to teach, and means literally ‘teaching’. Doctrine is the teaching of the churches, or perhaps of a particular church. Thus we can speak about ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘the Calvinist doctrine’ of election. Doctrine is enshrined in creeds, affirmations and confessions. Theology is to be distinguished from doctrine. It is an activity rather than a ‘teaching’. One of the tasks performed by that particular activity is making a critique of doctrine. Thus the Reformers in the sixteenth century made a theological critique of the doctrine of the church of that time and that critique, rejected by the church, led the Reformers to break from it. However carefully doctrine may have been formulated, we cannot assume that it is inerrant or true for all time, and therefore the process of critiquing doctrine must be continually carried through.

3. Equally, theology is the means by which we make a critique of the church’s faithfulness to her task of mission. Is the church proclaiming the gospel faithfully? Is its service to the world a true reflection of the servant Jesus Christ? Is the church in its life in the

world a genuine provisional sign of the kingdom or does its life belie its prayer 'your kingdom come'? Only through a continual process of theological reflection can these questions be answered and appropriate correction provided.

4. Theology is the means by which the Christian community refines and passes on the wisdom of the past. That wisdom has to do with the living of the Christian life. It deals with such issues as how we can pursue and cultivate communion with God, what things disrupt that communion, how to enable prayer, the nature of discipleship, and the facing of death. Within the Christian tradition there are great treasures of wisdom, but like everything human that wisdom needs to be subject to on-going theological scrutiny, not only because it is bound to contain error as well as true wisdom, but because as the hymn-writer warns us, 'time makes ancient good uncouth'.

Theology serves many purposes. It can really be called a servant of faith and mission. When it is carried on in a thorough, legitimate and responsible way it alerts individuals and the church as a whole to those aberrations of belief and action which undermine the gospel and mar the church's witness and service in the world.

### Theological method

It is very difficult to describe theological method. There are theologians who insist that their method of doing theology is the only right one, but in fact theologians use many different methods and there is certainly no general agreement that one method is superior to all others. Doing theology is a bit like engaging in a dialogue with a number of partners. If the partners to the dialogue are sincere and open, the conversation ranges where it will. No one prescribes in advance the order in which people will speak or

the number of issues that will be drawn into discussion and there is no telling what conclusions will be reached in the end.

### ***Scripture***

If we cannot define the method we can at least name the main partners in the dialogue. First and foremost amongst the partners is Scripture and the Word of God as we hear it through the Scripture. To say this is to indicate that theology is certainly not the same as philosophy of religion. The philosopher examines the whole of experience and the whole realm of knowledge and in that examination nothing has a privileged place in the way that Scripture has in Christian theology. Most Christian theologians would say that Scripture is authoritative for their theology, though when their theologies are examined Scripture seems to function rather differently in each one. Since the way in which Scripture is used in theology is the main topic of this chapter, it is a subject we must deal with more fully presently.

### ***Tradition***

A second participant in the dialogue is tradition. As well as listening for the Word of God in Scripture the theologian also pays attention to the way the church has heard the Word of God in the Bible in times past. Since ours is not the first generation which has had the Spirit, we may be able to learn a great deal about the faith by listening to the ways in which our forebears in the faith expressed it. We can learn from their successes and we can also learn from their mistakes. We will learn what interpretations have stood the test of time and which ones proved to be of no lasting value. Amongst other things, tradition protects us from being carried away by the novelties and untried enthusiasms of our own age. It also warns us of the crucial points which can be relinquished only to our peril.

It is true that the Reformers regarded tradition with suspicion. One of the catch phrases of the Reformation was *sola scriptura* or Scripture alone. In fact neither Luther nor anyone else was ever able to theologise with Scripture alone. On a vast range of issues Luther and Calvin accepted the tradition of the church. What they did object to was dogma that was said to have its basis in tradition but had no authorisation in Scripture. Their disagreement was not so much with tradition itself as with the church, which used tradition as sufficient authority in itself. They reacted to a view of tradition, which put it on the same level as Scripture and not subject to reexamination in the light of Scripture. Today there is wide ecumenical agreement that tradition is useful and has a proper function in theology, though it also has its limits.

### ***Experience***

The third participant in the dialogue is usually referred to as experience. This can mean many things, such as everyday experience in the secular world, practical experience of social and political life, the ordered, disciplined experience of the observational and experimental sciences, the knowledge we gain through the testimony of others as well as the kind of experiences we might label as 'religious', such as conversion, the infilling of the Holy Spirit, temptation, sin and forgiveness, prayer and the devotional life all the way up to mystical experience. Some of these kinds of experience would be regarded as very objective while others would be called subjective, but in fact no experience is entirely objective or entirely subjective. Modern science, particularly quantum physics, has demonstrated that we never know reality in itself, but only through images and models. Even in the sciences there is a large subjective element in our experiencing. On the other hand the kinds of experience we might label 'religious' and regard as highly

subjective are rarely divorced entirely from objective realities. For the most part, at least, religious experience is not something divorced from all other experience. It is rather an experience we have in and along with other experiences. The psalmist, for example, experienced awe in the presence of God as he experienced the starry heavens (Psalm 19). Many of our religious experiences are of this type.

Obviously theology cannot neglect experience. It must take it seriously into account, otherwise our theology would not relate to this world at all but would refer only to some other world, which might be just a make-believe world. The task of experience in the dialogue, which creates theology, is to see to it that the conclusions we come to really take account of what we take to be the facts of this world and our life in it. Any theology that runs counter to common human experience will be implausible and will not commend itself widely.

Nevertheless, as we all know, experience can be mistaken. When Copernicus and then Galileo argued that the earth was not the centre of the universe but that in fact the earth and all the other planets revolve around the sun, it was not just the ecclesiastical authorities who were sceptical. Many ordinary people thought they were mad. 'Haven't they got eyes?' people asked. 'Anyone with eyes can see that the sun goes around the earth.' We know now that what people took to be their indubitable experience then is in fact, an illusion, and that the appearance of the sun going around the earth can be explained in other ways that take account of other facts, which only the careful astronomical observer may be aware of. We may be mistaken about our experiences, even those of our physical senses, let alone those that are of a more subjective nature. For that reason experience cannot be an absolutely final and authoritative criterion of the word of God.



The relationship between Scripture and experience is what might be called a dialectical one. On the one hand experience questions whether what Scripture says is actually true to the world we know, or at least whether the way we are interpreting Scripture puts it at odds with the world and whether there might not be another interpretation which is able to bring both into agreement. This is well illustrated in the debate over cosmology in the seventeenth century. There are indeed passages in Scripture which speak as though the world is the centre of the universe and the sun revolves around it, just as much of our common language suggests the same thing (e.g. the sun rises, travels across the sky and sets in the west), but experience raises the question whether the Scripture is bound to be interpreted in this way. Indeed within fifty years of the Pope's censure of Galileo virtually the whole of Christendom had agreed that we are not bound by Scripture to hold to an earth-centred cosmology. Today a similar debate rages over whether we are bound by Scripture to hold that God created the earth and all that is in it, just as it is, in seven days, or whether we may not understand the earth and its contents as having been created over a much vaster time scale and through a process of development as most scientists hold.

On the other hand Scripture also questions experience. To stay in the area of cosmology, for thousands of years there have been theorists and scientists who have held from their observations that the universe is eternal and uncreated. But Scripture has continued to insist on the idea of creation and to question those theorists as to whether their observations are sound or necessarily lead to that conclusion. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century science has adopted a theory of the beginning of the universe which is much more congruent with the scriptural notion of creation. On a more personal level, people may say, 'I feel it is right for me to do such and such; I cannot see any harm in it, and it feels good', but

Scripture may challenge their feeling of the rightness of the action and their observation that there is no harm in it.

Experience, then, like tradition, has its limitations, though it is certainly a very important partner in the dialogue. It is very persuasive but it is not always absolutely authoritative.

### ***Practice***

The fourth participant in this dialogue is practice. Practice is a cousin of experience because it is really the knowledge and insight we gain when we act on a certain policy or doctrine. Practice tells us whether it works or not, whether it achieves the desired end in keeping with the gospel and the kingdom of God. If a particular doctrine never works or always seems to produce regrettable results we do well to be suspicious about the doctrine. That is one reason John Wesley was suspicious of the doctrine of predestination; when it was taught and believed it seemed to have undesirable results. To numerous other doctrines also Wesley applied the same test: Does it work? Does it have good results?

It is not theology only that applies this test. In his book *Love and Will*, Rollo May points out the undesirable results of the theory of determinism, quoting a psychologist who says that in our age we have gained determinism but in the process have lost determination. Because of this teaching that what we are, what we do and what we say are all determined by our heredity and environmental influences, many patients seem to have lost the will to get better and therapists find themselves wanting to say to their patients such things as 'You have to try', and 'Nothing worth while is achieved without effort'. At the same time they feel very sheepish about it because if their theory of determinism is true there can be no point in such urgings.

Yet it often seems to work. People seem to need the 'illusion' of freedom in order to change. This leads May to the conclusion that if the illusion works better than 'the truth' there must be some truth in what we call illusion and some illusion in what we call truth.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times Liberation Theology has put a lot of emphasis on right action as a test of doctrine. Juan Luis Segundo tells about the experience of the Brazilian Franciscan, Leonardo Boff during a period of pastoral work in one of the poorest areas of Brazil.<sup>3</sup> Boff found that the Cross and the suffering of Jesus were central to their understanding of redemption. However the suffering and death of Jesus had been presented to them in such a way that it led them to an attitude of resignation and fatalism towards the suffering and the crosses that an unjust society had made them bear. Instead of being a liberating power in their lives the doctrine of the cross, which they had received, appeared to Boff to be a further means of oppression, which is the very opposite of what God intended the Cross to be. Thus doctrine is subjected to criticism because of its practical outworking in the lives of people who hold it. However, care must be taken here. Doctrine cannot be judged right or wrong simply by its outcome. It is not uncommon for people to claim correctness for their doctrine on the grounds that God has blessed them. But the truth of theological assertions cannot be decided by asking whether God has blessed people who hold them. Similarly the truth of a theological doctrine cannot be decided by asking whether it works nicely for us. It is only when a doctrine in practice leads to results which are at variance with the gospel itself that the doctrine must be regarded with suspicion.

### ***Reason***

Various other less significant partners to the dialogue could be named

but only one other demands recognition, namely reason. Reason is rather more like a moderator and watchdog of the debate than a contributor. Reason does not really have any content of its own to add unless it is to remind the other contributors of conclusions they have already accepted which are at variance with arguments now being advanced. Reason is involved in the debate to remind the various participants that in theology, as elsewhere, the rules of logic must apply. Otherwise theology would become nonsense talk and it would be impossible to choose between one invalid argument and another. Yet even reason cannot be trusted implicitly. It can be co-opted in support of an individual's self-interest, producing rationalisation in place of rational argument. Fortunately the rules of reason are fairly clear and objective so it is not too difficult to demonstrate when reason has fallen down on its job.

### The role of Scripture

In evangelical theology all positions require authorisation by Scripture in some way. There is no room for positions that find no grounding in Scripture or are simply based on the silence of Scripture. That is why Protestants reject such doctrines as the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and her bodily assumption. There are also cases of marginal and doubtful grounding in Scripture. A case in point would be the five sacraments recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, which are not recognised as such by Protestants. In some cases at least, what is lacking is not their mention in Scripture, but any ground for according them the status of sacraments. Another case would be the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell. This is clearly suggested only in 1 Peter 3.19f and 4:6. Ephesians 4:9f is sometimes cited in support of the doctrine, but the passage is capable of quite different interpretation. Even in

1 Peter the purpose of Christ's alleged descent into hell is unclear and different theologians interpret it in different ways. In the light of such uncertain grounding it would be unwise to build major theological conclusions on this notion.

Usually a theological position will be authorised by Scripture in one or both of two ways. Either Scripture will provide the fundamental data for the theological position, the basic facts on which the argument depends, if you like, or it will provide the warrant for the argument, or both. This will be explained presently.

Firstly, Scripture may provide the data. Take, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity. A firm and constant principle of Scripture is that there is one God and none other. At the same time Scripture points to a threeness in the revelation of this one God. There are firstly binitarian formulae where God and Christ are spoken of on the one level. There are trinitarian formulae such as the great missionary commission in Matthew 28 and the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13. There are many passages in Scripture with a trinitarian ground plan, such as Ephesians 2:18. None of these amount to a doctrine of the Trinity but they are the essential foundations on which theology builds such a doctrine.

While the Scriptural data may be texts they may also be biblical principles or exegetical conclusions based on the study of many passages of Scripture. In fact, this will mostly be the case. It also goes without saying that in the use of Scripture in theology we will apply all the principles of exegesis and interpretation mentioned earlier.

Of particular concern in theology is the problem of the diversity of Scripture mentioned in chapter 5. If we have a number of texts that say somewhat different things, which texts are we to take as

the basic data for our theological case? That is an issue which the theologian has to decide, making use of some of the principles set out in that chapter. According to the tradition, in theologising about the person of Christ, for example, incarnational texts such as John I take precedence over adoptionist texts like Acts 10:38 or 13:32-33, which seem to suggest that Jesus was a good man whom God adopted and used as his servant and messenger. Nevertheless, even the texts that are passed over are not simply rejected. Even though adoption does not provide our basic scriptural model for understanding who Christ is, the texts that use that analogy are listened to as having something important to say to us. In this case the adoptionist texts underline for us the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Because these texts also stand in Scripture we may not construe incarnational texts in any manner that would deny or truncate Jesus' humanity. I believe they also tell against a Christology which holds that the Word of God assumed only general or unpersonalised humanity, as some theologians hold, rather than the quite specific and personalised humanity of the particular man, Jesus. In short the diversity of Scripture will often be viewed in theology as being like the diversity of instruments and parts in an orchestral composition. Though only one instrument may carry the tune, all contribute to the full tonal quality of the composition and at times even sharp discords may have a place.

Secondly, Scripture may provide the warrant for the theological argument. A warrant for an argument explains how we get from the data or the facts to the conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Let us go back to the doctrine of the Trinity. From Scripture we have produced textual evidence that God is one and not many. We have also produced textual evidence that God reveals Godself as Father, Son (or Word) and Holy Spirit. Therefore God is triune, a unity that embraces threeness – a threeness which is nevertheless supremely a unity. But the question may be asked: 'How do you get from the data to the conclusion?' Perhaps

the threeness of God is merely an appearance, a characteristic of the way God reveals himself to us but not an indication of how God is in Godself. In fact that was precisely what the modalists or Sabellian heretics of the second and third centuries, claimed. In the face of that challenge Trinitarians must provide a warrant for their argument. That warrant would be something like this: Scripture makes it clear that God is no deceiver and therefore God must be in himself as he is in his revelation. Therefore the threeness that we are given in his revelation must pertain to his very being; otherwise he would be a deceiver. Thus it is Scripture that provides a warrant for the argument in this case.<sup>5</sup> It is not always so. Warrants for arguments may be drawn from many sources but the theological conclusion will still have biblical authorisation if the foundations of the argument are biblical as explained above.

The other factors we have mentioned will be related to the theological argument in various ways. Tradition may help in the way the textual evidence is put together to give us the data of the argument. It may also suggest the way in which the argument moves from the data towards its conclusion. Experience will often supply the destination of the argument – the ‘facts’ which need some theological explanation, for example the fact that some very bad things seem to happen to good people. Sometimes experience, like practice, will act as a test: Do the theological conclusions we have come to, take account of the facts of life, or the facts of the world as we observe them? When our theology is acted out, are its results in keeping with the gospel and the life of the kingdom of God? Reason will both supply the rules of argument and test to see that they have been observed.

## Wisdom and Prayer

What has been said might give the impression that theology can be done with the kind of scientific precision one might follow in carrying out an experiment in physics or chemistry. That would be unfortunate. Doing theology is more like an art, which develops with time and practice. John Leith refers to it as theological wisdom; he writes

Just as there is a human wisdom that comes with maturity and is the result of the interaction of experience and critical reflection, so there is a theological wisdom that comes with maturity and is the result of the interaction of critical reflection, of experience in the church, of engagement with Scripture, of Christian witness today, and of the testimony of Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that while theology demands careful, scholarly and critical work, while it has no place for sentimental sloppiness, it is nevertheless an activity of faith and a servant of faith. The theologian is, or should be, a deeply committed person, working not with scientific detachment but with passionate involvement. On the other side, the Word of God, with which the theologian is concerned, is not just an object at the theologian's disposal, to be handled like a physical object. So theology has to be approached prayerfully, not only being begun and ended in prayer, but accompanied by it all the way.

### *Exercise*

Read the case, From Exodus to Exile carefully. To ensure that you have grasped the story clearly make a time-line of all the significant developments in the story. On a piece of paper, jot



down your answers to the following questions.

1. What sort of a person is Anna? What feelings do you have about her?
2. What sort of changes has she been going through? What has been happening to her?

The process could be characterised as doing theology. Anna has been testing her faith, trying to relate it to her experiences as she awakes to the changing world in which she is coming to maturity.

3. What factors can you see having a bearing on the shaping of Anna's theology?
4. Where can you see Scripture having a part in the process? (You may need to look below the surface of the story to discern the role of Scripture.)

### *From exodus to exile*<sup>7</sup>

Anna Holmes had come a long way in her spiritual struggles, but she wondered whether her journey meant involvement with the church and whether the church were open enough for her to take the next step. She was contemplating whether or not to seek standing in her former denomination as a candidate for ordination.

### Her background

Anna came from an upper-middle-class family in central Massachusetts. She had attended and loved church as she grew up, but she said, 'By the middle of my high school years, I experienced the Church as oppressive to women, as a place to preach war, criticize alcoholics, and relate socially.'

'I had experienced emotional, and moral reasons for leaving the Church, so I became a Unitarian - in part to find a unifying

principle and in part to find room to think. It was in that state of mind, really seeking, that I came to Harvard in 1971.'

## Harvard experience

Anna felt encouraged when she arrived at Harvard Divinity School by the number of women students with whom she could associate. In the fall soon after she entered, the Boston Theological Institute's Women's Coalition and the NOW Task Force on Women and Religion sponsored a talk by Betty Farians, the director of the Women's Coalition. 'It was a catalytic event,' Anna said. 'It inspired us women to organize and get ourselves together.'

'Shortly after that, Mary Daly told several of us that she had been invited to preach in Harvard Memorial Church. I think it was the first time a woman had been asked to preach there. At any rate, Mary wanted to plan that event with other women so that it would be a political event.'

'We had several meetings together, and she shared her perspective and wisdom with us. We encouraged her to do what her instincts indicated. Finally, we agreed that we would make some kind of political statement out of it by inviting women who knew what was at stake to come and participate.'

'At our second meeting Mary shared her desire to make it an Exodus time: a time to talk about the sexist history and dimensions of the church in its language, theology, and structure; and a time for us to make an Exodus from the church.'

## The sermon

'Mary's sermon first recapitulated much of what she had written in *The Church and the Second Sex*, and then outlined positions

she later elaborated in *Beyond God the Father*. She ended with a call, God's call to us, to make our Exodus from the patriarchal and sexist church; she walked down from the pulpit, and about fifty of us walked together out of the sanctuary.

'The news media were there, and it was an exciting moment. For me it symbolized the Exodus I had made myself five years earlier. But more importantly it marked the real firming up of my feminist consciousness and the beginning of new theological insight.'

## Theological Development

'Mary gave me just what I needed: the conceptual tools to engage in an acute criticism of Christianity, tools which really rang true to me in a number of ways. What it really means, and too few people realize this, is that I was using Christian symbols and concepts to criticize and recreate my own tradition.

'What was happening to me was an enormous and extraordinary conversion. My coming into consciousness as a feminist corresponded directly with my coming into a new deep connectedness with God.'

During this time, Anna was working with New Community Projects, a countercultural organization encouraging the formation of new communities. For her this fitted with what she called 'my fantasy about what the early Church was like - small communities experiencing transformation.'

Her experience of conversion continued through hospital chaplaincy training during the summer of 1972. In Intensive Care Unit Anna prayed with people, and she observed, 'I couldn't exactly pray to the Goddess of all wonder and life.

'I found myself praying to the Creator God, the Advocate God, the Sustainer, Redeemer, judge, Comforter and Companion God. All my words were like a process at work in me and not something I decided to do - it was really like the Holy Spirit

charging around in Anna Holmes.

‘In addition, as a result of the hospital experience, I found myself taking Jesus very seriously as a healer. He was a healer and I wanted to be one too. He was also a teacher and a politico for me. And in my teaching and work in a church I encouraged others to discover how they could heal each other, teach each other, and work together politically.’

## Exile

‘About this time I began to feel that I had not really made an exodus, but was in exile. I began to find trinitarian language useful theologically; it rang true to much of my experience and helped me make sense out of my life.

‘I remembered a professor from Trinity College of Hartford whom I’d worked with in a summer school in Rome a number of years ago. He said, ‘Anna, the Trinity is God trying to help us understand God.’ This began to make real sense to me.

‘In Jesus, God came to us as a person, to make God real to us. And yet that person, really to be of impact, had to be removed from presence in the world; God’s continual reminder of that presence is the power and force of the Holy Spirit.

‘I’m a confessed, and excited, trinitarian. I work with the doctrine of the Trinity in unusual ways - I can and sometimes do speak of God the Father, but never limit myself to that one image, and intentionally encourage the use of other images.

‘What Mary Daly did for me, really, was enable me to appropriate my tradition at a deeper, richer, and more critical level. She has incredible insight and sensitivity into the tradition, and for me her thought has turned exodus into feminist exile.’

## The next step

‘I think now I’m ready to cast my lot with the wandering people of God - and to say that the Church is my place of exile. But I’m not sure. I have to ask myself, ‘Anna, are you kidding yourself? Are you really a Christian?’ And I wonder about the church. Will it be open to me, accept me and my call, and let me work in new ways with other people?’

### *For further reading*

G. S. Dicker, *Faith With Understanding*, Joint Board of Christian Education, 1996.

R. K. Johnson (ed.) *The use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical options*, John Knox Press, 1983

D. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, SCM Press, 1975.  
(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by J. H. Leith in ‘The Bible and Theology’ in *Interpretation*, Vol. 30 No.3 July 1976, p.229.

<sup>2</sup> R. May, *Love and Will*, Souvenir Press, 1970, pp. 194-198.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Segundo, ‘Two Theologies of Liberation’ in *The Month*, Series 2 Vol. 17 No. 10, p. 322.

<sup>4</sup> I am making use of David Kelsey’s analysis of the form of theological arguments as set out in chapter 6 of his book, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, SCM Press, 1975. Kelsey is indebted in turn to the work of Stephen Toulmin.

<sup>5</sup> I am greatly simplifying Kelsey’s analysis here.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Leith, ‘The Bible and Theology’ in *Interpretation*, Vol. 30 no. 3 July 1976, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> This case was prepared by Professor Meredith B. Handspicker of Andover Newton Theological School as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of the situation. © The Case Study Institute 1975. Used by permission.



## Chapter 8

# The use of the Bible in ethics

Discussion in the Bible study group on Romans 12 was lively. It was a relief to Arthur Baker, the leader, to have a lively group again after several rather dull nights while they got through chapters 10 and 11 - Arthur had felt these chapters were very important and tried to make the theological issues live for the group, but he judged from the heaviness of the discussion that he had not succeeded very well. When they came to chapter 12 there was so much participation they were not able to get through the chapter in one evening. The second evening was just as lively as the first. What stirred up the hottest discussion was Paul's admonition, 'Repay no one evil for evil ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves ... No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink...' As Arthur remembered it, the conversation went something like what follows:

'I think what Paul says is far too idealistic' said Syd. 'I very much doubt whether I would be able to help an enemy who had done evil to me and I am not sure any of you would either. And if we were to apply what Paul says to the international scene it would be disastrous. If the terrorists thought nations would not avenge themselves if they were attacked they would soon control the world.'

‘We can’t just dismiss this as too idealistic’ replied Don. ‘This is what Scripture says to us and we are simply to obey. When you call it idealistic you are already saying you are not going to take any notice of it,’ he went on. ‘But I agree this cannot be applied in the national and international spheres. The state has to have a police force and has to punish evildoers. Nations need to be strong to protect their citizens. Paul is speaking to Christians as individuals and is not laying down rules for international relationships.’

‘I don’t think you can restrict Paul’s words just to personal relationships’

Agnes joined in. ‘True, he wasn’t writing to the Emperor or leaders of governments, but I think his principle still applies. Look at the conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. I can’t see any end to the trouble because both sides want to settle the issues by force and both seem to believe in avenging every wrong done or imagined. One thing just leads on to another without end.’

‘I don’t altogether dismiss what Paul says, as Don thinks I do. I know it has to be kept in mind as a kind of ideal which we try to get as near to as we can, the situation and human nature being what they are’ said Syd. ‘But I think it would be irresponsible not to be ready to deter aggression, whether personal or national, by strength.’

‘But, what if you don’t have any strength?’ It was Maureen who spoke. ‘Suppose you are just a poor black woman in South Africa, or a small nation next to a powerful one that wants the resources you have. What can you do then?’ she asked. ‘What could the Christians in Rome do? All they could do was cop whatever was doled out to them. Paul’s advice was the best option: pay back good for evil and leave vengeance to God. Perhaps in that way they would survive and even win some converts.’

‘Are you suggesting, Maureen, that Paul’s words were right for the Christians in Rome in the first century but not necessarily for Christians in Australia in the 20th?’ Arthur asked.

‘Partly, I suppose,’ Maureen replied. ‘Perhaps there are people



in similar situations today to whom he would say exactly the same thing. For those who are weak, as the Christians in Rome were, this is not idealistic at all; it is sound advice. But would he have said the same thing if he had been writing to the Christians in Sydney, say, or in Washington today?’

Don spoke up again. ‘I think you are moving in a very dangerous direction. Once we start saying that the words of Scripture were intended only for people in one time and place and that something quite different might be God’s intention for us today, you can throw out the whole of the Bible. Where do you stop? Perhaps none of it can speak directly to us, in that case. If the Bible does not reveal God’s will for us, where else can we find it? No, I believe that Paul’s words to the Romans are God’s word to us today, providing we understand them correctly.’

‘Does that mean you take every commandment in the Bible as applicable to us today?’ asked Sue.

‘I believe some have been set aside by the coming of Jesus’ said Don. ‘They belonged to the old covenant, but not to the new, like circumcision. But, yes, I believe all the others apply to us as much as they applied in Paul’s day.’

‘But, Don, you lend your money on interest. At least I imagine you have some money in the bank and you expect to get interest on it, yet in many parts of the Old Testament people are forbidden to lend on interest’ Agnes said.

‘I wish I had as much money in the bank as I owe to it’ said Don with a smile. ‘But, yes, I expect to get interest on the money I have in the bank. That’s quite different from what the Old Testament is talking about. That was about not taking interest when you lend to an individual in need. If you wanted to borrow a hundred dollars from me because you were in great need, I wouldn’t charge you interest. The modern economic system which uses great sums of capital to make a profit is quite different.’

‘Thanks, Don. I know where to go now when I need a loan. But

don't you see, you really conceded the point. The modern world is very different from the Old Testament world, so the Old Testament commandment cannot be applied today to every case of lending money. And if that is true of lending money, may it not be true of other things as well?' Agnes asked.

Syd said, 'I follow the argument and I think it's important, but you are getting away from the subject before us, which is whether we should or even could love our enemies and return good for evil.'

'My hunch is,' said Arthur, 'that if we turn what Paul is saying into a law which is just put in front of people and they are told that is what they have got to do in every case, it will not find very much acceptance. We would all react pretty much as you reacted, Syd. But if we hear this as a word to us as Christians who have been made new in Christ, then it is not impossible for us to act this way in relation to people who have hurt us. It all depends on how you hear what Paul is saying. After all, he is writing to people who have heard the gospel and whose lives have been transformed by it.'

## Christian ethics

We have all been involved in discussions of Christian ethics just like the one that took place in the Stansham Bible Study Group. Usually there is quite a lot of disagreement and many points of view. For example, the particular subject under discussion might be quite different – divorce, homosexuality, disarmament, drugs, invitro fertilisation, the use of our money. The point of the discussion also may vary. We may be concerned about what the attitude of the church should be on a particular subject. Should it, for example, encourage people to go in the Palm Sunday march for peace? Should it receive practising homosexuals into ministry or membership? Or it may be how Christians should try to influence government policy on a particular issue. Should

Christians encourage the government to go ahead with a law to prohibit discrimination on religious grounds in such matters as housing, employment and supply of goods and services? Should Christians call for an end to the invitro fertilisation program, or support it, and on what grounds? But sooner or later we all find ourselves on common ground in asking in some difficult situation, 'What am I, as a Christian, a member of the church, and a citizen of God's kingdom, to do in this situation?'

The Bible seems to speak much more directly to this latter question than it does to the former ones. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, does not seem to be very concerned to give directions for the whole of society at all. The whole thrust of the New Testament is not to provide a law for the organisation and direction of society but to proclaim a gospel by which people and society may be transformed. It is this gospel that Christians have to offer to the world, not a superior moral law for it to abide by.

For centuries, while the church was a major power in society, sometimes actually taking the government into its own hands, at others exercising great power over the rulers from behind the scenes, Christian ethics was largely understood in terms of legislation and discipline. Even in Australia in the last few decades when the church has largely lost its power to sway legislators, Christian ethics has often been directed to the censure of governments for failing to legislate or act in accordance with Christian principles. On the whole, it can hardly be judged that the church, and Christians generally, have been very successful in this kind of activity. Christians seem to be at their unloveliest when they try to legislate for others or are censuring others for not acting according to the will of God.

Nevertheless, Christians are members of society and have as much

right to promote programs and policies that seem good to them as anyone else has. In a pluralistic and secular society like ours Christians do not have any right to expect that their opinions will carry special weight just because they are Christians, but neither are they to keep silent just because they are Christians. In that case, what policies are they to commend and what things are they to oppose? These questions call for ethical decision-making. That process is bound to be complex, just because the issues are complex. Very rarely will the Bible have a simple and direct answer. How, for example, does anything the Bible have to say tell us whether or not we should support the trial of a supervised injecting room? In the public arena Christians do have a critique to offer, but it springs not so much from the direct ethical content of the Bible as from the Christian understanding of God and of his intention for his creation as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus it is primarily a theological critique with ethical implications rather than a critique based on a comparison of what is, with a divinely revealed ethical system.

## Personal ethics

The Bible plays a somewhat different role when we come to it not with a question about what the government should do, but with the question, what should I, as a Christian, do in this particular situation. It is still an ethical question, but it is personal and particular. It is seeking guidance in a specific moral situation, not a general rule for all people at all times. Here also what we expect to find in the Bible depends a great deal on our theology of the Christian life and our understanding of the nature and purpose of Scripture.

Let us look at the various ways answers might be given to the question, how can I know what I, as a Christian, am to do in a particular situation?

## ***Legalism***

1. The first answer might be: find the rule (or law) in the Bible that seems best to fit that situation and obey it. Behind that answer lie a number of theological assumptions, such as (a) the Christian life is a matter of following rules and obeying laws, and (b) the Bible is a book of rules which tell us what to do in all the varied situations of life. Let us look at these assumptions.

(a) The Christian life is commonly represented as a matter of keeping the laws or rules laid down in Scripture. This view of the Christian life is not very different from the Pharisees' understanding of the way a good Jew should live. According to this view of Christianity, the role of the gospel is very small. The law is used to show people how far they fall short, what sinners they are, and how much they need to be put right with God. Then the gospel is offered as a means of putting them right with God, after which they are placed under the law again as the standard according to which they are required to live. But is that the way the Christian life is represented in the New Testament? I think not. Rather what is said there is that in Christ we are cleansed, justified and sanctified; we are set free and incorporated into the family of God. What we are called upon to do is simply to be the new creatures that God has made us in Jesus Christ. What is said about the law is that it was added till the offspring (Christ) should come, that it was a kind of interim custodian but that 'now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian' (Galatians 3:19-26). For freedom Christ has liberated us and Scripture urges us, in the words of Paul to the Galatians, 'not to submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5: 1). The Christian life is therefore seriously misrepresented if it is presented as conformity to a set of rules whether biblical or any other kind.

(b) Again, we would seriously misunderstand the Bible if we took it as a set of rules for life, mixed with a lot of other material like sultanas in a cake. If the New Testament speaks about the end of the law for those who are in Christ, how could we see in it the establishment of a new law, which Christians are to obey? That is not to say that there aren't laws and rules in Scripture but it is to question whether the way to use Scripture in making moral decisions is to look for an appropriate law in the Bible and apply it.

Quite apart from that fundamental issue, this approach to the Bible always exalts clear and precise rules at the expense of broad but pervasive general principles. To return to an example already referred to, this tendency was illustrated by the supporters of slavery in the United States who combed Scripture to find every verse that might be construed as an acceptance of slavery, but completely missed the all pervasive themes of Scripture, that God is a God of liberation, that we are to love other human beings as ourselves and that we are to treat others as we would have them treat us. The fact that something is in the form of a law gives it no special weight. Many things which Christians today would regard as most irrelevant to faith are written clearly and tersely as laws, for example Leviticus 19:19 which forbids cross-breeding cattle, sowing a field with two kinds of seed and wearing garments made of two kinds of thread, while many of Jesus' teachings, which all Christians regard very highly, are expressed in parable and other non-prescriptive forms.

Similarly, there are ethical implications of the theological perspectives derived from Scripture though they are not expressed in Scripture in the form of laws. For example, one persistent theme in the New Testament is that in Christ all human barriers are broken down. That certainly has something to say about the roles and relationships of men and women, yet when it comes to the matter

of the equality of women and men in church and society this often gets overlooked in favour of the clear prescriptive statements in the Bible about what women may not do.

This approach to Scripture also fails to give us any guidance on what to do when we find conflicting rules. When, in spite of Leviticus 19:19, we wear our polyester and cotton shirts and dresses without pangs of conscience it is because we have dismissed that law as irrelevant and not because we know some other verses where a specific commandment is given to make cloth out of a combination of fibres (Exodus 28:5-6). However there are more significant cases where commandments give conflicting rules, such as on the matter of divorce. What are we to do then? Nor does it offer us any help when there are no rules at all, such as on the matter of invitro fertilisation or the use of modern methods of birth control.

Perhaps the weakest aspect of this way of using Scripture in ethics is that it can so easily lead to rationalisation. You just have to find a rule that suits you and stick to it, without weighing up all the biblical evidence that tells against it. That was precisely what the supporters of slavery did. If ever there was an indictment of this way of using the Bible in ethical disputes it is the way the slave owners used the Bible to support their position.

For all these reasons, this way of answering the question, 'How can I, as a Christian, know what to do in this particular situation?' is to be rejected as inadequate and untrue to Scripture itself.

### ***Doing what love requires***

2. A second way of answering the question is to say that what we are required to do as Christians is to respond to Christ in each new

situation. Since each situation is unique no rule can help us, except perhaps the very general rule that we are always to do what love requires. What we find in the Bible is a resource of practical wisdom and illumination, which, when placed alongside the situation that calls for decision, may spark insight in us. However, what we are to do as Christians is to decide freely in each new situation. Here again there are two theological assumptions which need to be examined. They are (a) that Christians can always, or at least mostly, make right decisions in the situation without any reference to rules whatsoever, and (b) that the Bible is so far removed from us, so diverse and so complicated that it really cannot do more than function as a general resource. These also need to be examined.

(a) What this view of the Christian life fails to take account of is that even when justified and sanctified in Jesus Christ, people remain sinners. Though righteous in the sight of God because of Jesus Christ, and though they have a new nature as children of God, sin remains for the time being as a contradiction of that new nature. Because of that sin they often use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, and act irresponsibly. That is why even when set free in Christ the free conscience needs to be confronted by the law in order that free action may remain responsible. Unless the Bible plays a much more active role in ethical decision-making, it is very easy for Christians, like other people, to be conformed to the spirit of the age.

(b) While this view of ethical decision-making is too optimistic about the capacity of Christians always to be able to decide freely and rightly in the situation what love requires, it is too pessimistic in its assessment of what the Bible has to offer. It is true that the Bible does not provide us with a neat, comprehensive and consistent set of laws, which we can apply as appropriate, but it does give us a lot of guidance on ethical issues. Sometimes that



guidance comes in the form of laws, like the two great commandments and the ten commandments, but frequently it comes through the witness of the Scripture as to who God is, what it is he looks for in those who would call on him, the nature of his kingly rule and the destiny for which he has claimed us in Jesus Christ. Out of our theological reflection on this witness important ethical principles emerge. We can and must make use of this material in the direction of the Christian moral life.

Before we go on to the third way of answering the question before us, one thing of value in this position needs to be noted. What we must do, it claims, is to decide in the situation what is required. Therefore it places a great deal of importance on understanding the situation as carefully and completely as possible. This may well involve bringing various analytical disciplines to bear on it. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that all the theological expertise and all the skills of biblical interpretation, which we may accumulate, will fail to guarantee Christian ethical action if we simply do not understand the situation or the nature of the problems we are dealing with. Ethical decision-making requires both an understanding of the fundamentals of the faith and a clear grasp of the issue about which a decision has to be made.

One of the arguments of the abolitionists in the U.S.A. last century was that the supporters of slavery were, in any case, in error in applying what the Bible says about slavery to what was known as slavery in America. They argued that the sole basis for the application of biblical texts to the institution there was the common use of the term 'slave'. Since, however, slavery in America was not governed by the Sabbath, the seventh year and jubilee laws, and many other provisions that applied to slavery in the Bible, it was an entirely different reality. This was a valid point, even though the abolitionists would hardly have dropped their protest

if the slave owners had agreed to abide by all the scriptural laws that applied to slavery. The point we need to note, however, is that unless we fully understand a situation we cannot even be sure that something written in the Bible actually fits it and is not, in fact, being misapplied.

### ***A new person***

3. A third answer to the question about what I, as a Christian, am to do in a particular situation is that I am to be the new person that God has made me in Jesus Christ. I am to put off the old nature, which is corrupt and leading to death, and put on the new nature created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24). In each situation I am to bring forth the good fruit, which the occasion requires and the new nature provides. In other words, I am to respond in Christian freedom, but because sin remains as a contradiction of the new nature that God has given, I am also to listen to the instruction, which Scripture gives in various ways, in order that my freedom may be exercised responsibly.

Here also there are some assumptions, such as (a) that the Christian life is one of freedom from the law, yet it is not lawless (antinomian), and (b) that Scripture is able to instruct us in such a way that our conscience is educated and the sinful misuse of freedom is checked.

(a) The theme of freedom from the law runs through the whole of the teaching of St. Paul. The whole pattern of his teaching is first of all to outline the gospel and the astounding change, which it has made in the lives of those who believe. Then he calls on believers to live out of that changed character, to live according to the new nature they have been given. But this is not something new with St. Paul; it is also the thrust of the teaching of Jesus. He does not call people to be super Pharisees; he does not call for an

even more careful keeping of the law, rather he calls people to be like good trees that naturally bring forth good fruit. He tells his disciples that they are the light of the world and commands them to let the light shine. He scandalises the Pharisees by the freedom he takes with the law. People are put before rules. Yet neither Paul nor Jesus abolished all guidelines. Paul continually urged people to be the new people God had made them and he made that command specific by quite specific suggestions, like the ones the Bible study group were wrestling with in Romans 12. Jesus did the same, as quick reading of Matthew 5, 6 and 7 will show. So the Christian life is one of freedom above law, but it is not lawless.

There are good reasons why the Christian life has to be understood in this way. Firstly, no set of laws can adequately embody the far-reaching requirements of God. The Pharisees took legalism to its limits, and yet they fell far short of the righteousness that God requires, so much so that Jesus said, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:20). We can never say, 'I have fulfilled all the rules; I have done all that God requires'. Matters as broad as mercy and justice can never be encapsulated in rules. The freedom that the Christian is given is not the freedom to fall short of what the Pharisees did, but the freedom to go beyond what any rules can stipulate, the freedom to respond to the needs of people and the call of the kingdom more appropriately than laws can provide. This is the freedom that turns the other cheek, that goes the second mile and loves the enemy instead of doing the enemy harm. This is the freedom to sell all for the one pearl of great price.

(b) In spite of the fact that Christians have often misused the Bible in ethics, and allowing for the fact that the use of the Bible in this area is clearly not simple and easy, we do not need to be pessimistic about the capacity of the Bible to help us. Already in what we have

said above, we have sought to be guided by Scripture. From the Bible also we know that love is of paramount importance and that the two great commandments take precedence over all others. As a rule of thumb we know the usefulness of the so-called 'golden rule'. Though the two great commandments take precedence, the Ten Commandments remain relevant. We know the importance which God sets on justice, mercy and humility and that can and should guide our actions in all circumstances. The centrality of the kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus is beyond dispute, and that certainly has implications for our actions.

### In the light of Scripture

In particular the teaching of Jesus on many subjects is a witness to the truth and shows us just how things really are. In the light of that witness we see moral issues in a different way. He gives a theological perspective within which we can make more sound judgments. The discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees about divorce is a good example of this. Since it is so instructive it is worth looking at carefully.

Mark tells us that the Pharisees came to Jesus with a question to test him. 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' they ask. There was no real test in that. The law of Moses permitted it and the law was universally accepted. The real test was the unspoken question: 'On what grounds is it permitted?' On this there were two schools of thought: the strict school which insisted that adultery was the only permissible ground, and the liberal school which held that a man might divorce his wife for anything displeasing in her. According to Mark's gospel, which preserves for us the original response of Jesus, he does not buy into the dispute. It is easy to see why he does not: it does not get down to basics. It assumes that we already know

that divorce is all right. So Jesus asks what Moses commanded, not because he does not know but because he wants to get the law tabled. They reply that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and put his wife away. But that is not the fundamental truth about marriage and divorce. Jesus replies that Moses gave that commandment only because of men's hardness of heart. (Husbands were abandoning their wives anyway without giving them any official release. This meant they were neither married nor free to marry again. At least the certificate of divorce brought just a little bit of mercy into a sordid reality.) But the law of Moses on divorce does not get at the fundamental truth. To get at that we must go right back to the beginning and seek the intention of God. Jesus points them to Genesis and God's purpose in giving woman to man and man to woman. Marriage is God's good gift. It is not a matter of convenience or social custom. It is not a human convention to provide men with 'playmates' and unpaid domestic servants and women with breadwinners and handymen. It is first and foremost God's gift to humankind, a blessing, a source of joy and fulfilment, a privilege and a pleasure. This is made clear by reference to the Genesis story. There, God sets out to provide Adam, who is lonely, with a helper and companion. So God creates the beasts, but they are unable to be the companion Adam needs because they are not Adam's equal. So from Adam God creates woman – bone from his bone, flesh from his flesh – his equal, his mirror image. Now Adam is satisfied. Here is a real companion with whom he will establish a relationship so close that it can be said of them that they are 'one flesh'.

This is what Jesus points to. For Adam and Eve marriage was good news. So it is to be for all God's people. Therefore it is to be received gladly and whole-heartedly as any good gift is received, not grudgingly and with reservations as did those people who wanted to debate the issue of how bad a woman had to be before her husband could get rid of her.

Responding to Jesus' teaching here about marriage and divorce it is easy to fall into either of two common errors. The first error is to regard Jesus' response as not pertinent to our situation, either because he does not give us a clear rule or because the rule that seems to be implied is too harsh, and therefore we arrange marriage and divorce in any way that is convenient for us. In practice this means that we are inevitably conformed to the spirit of the age. The other error is to turn Jesus' statement into an inflexible law. Divorce is not permitted on any account, and if by some means people do manage to dissolve their marriage, we will see to it that the church, at least, never blesses them in marriage again. This turns the New Testament into a law book more burdensome than the law of the Pharisees. To understand Jesus rightly here, as in many other places, is not to establish a new legalism, but to commit oneself to a new vision of human relationships and a new life-style that goes with it. It is the uncomplicated life-style of the kingdom of God in which, for example, one does not need to swear an oath because one simply tells the truth; one does not need to go to court or worry about the future because one does not live by material things but by trust in God; people make no provision for divorce because they commit themselves to each other in joyous love and fidelity for ever. Yet even in doing that one remains humble, and merciful to those who, in spite of all commitments, fail, and need to begin again.

Even for issues on which Jesus has not commented, we can follow a similar procedure to arrive at a theological perspective from which we can make an appropriate Christian moral judgment. So even if we cannot simply pick a rule from somewhere in the Bible and apply it neatly to a contemporary situation, the Scripture still has a great deal of moral guidance by which our consciences can be educated and our free actions as Christians checked for responsibility.

## Summary

Gathering up what has been said in earlier chapters together with the points made in this chapter, we can summarise the relation of the Bible to ethics in the following way.

1. What the Bible calls all people to first and foremost is repentance and conversion. Without the change of heart and nature that is involved in conversion, no laws or commandments will enable us to live a life pleasing to God. Those who through conversion are 'in Christ' are a new creation. What they are to do is to be and act the new people which God has made them.

2. There is no set of laws in the Bible, which can prescribe action for all people in all situations, but there is moral guidance in various forms. We are to act freely out of the new nature that God has given us, yet because sin remains even in those who are born again, we are to confront our free decision with that moral guidance which is available to us.

3. To obtain that guidance we need to approach the Scriptures in the manner described in earlier chapters. In particular we need to hear the witness of the whole of the canon on any particular subject, listening not only for specific laws, but also for the pervasive general principles and for the ethical implications of fundamental theological doctrines.

4. In order to act responsibly as Christians in any situation it is essential for us to understand the situation. That means we must examine the situation thoroughly, and often this will mean using secular disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, medicine and the other sciences. Thus, while the biblical input into

the decision-making and checking process is very important, it is not the only input.

5. Christian ethics is community ethics. The church is, amongst other things, a community of moral deliberation. Both because of the complexity of some of the situations in which decisions have to be made, and also because all of us come to the decision-making process with various commitments and self-interests, we need the help which only such a community can give. The role of the community is not simply in some final deliberative process, but belongs also in our examination of the Scriptures. By community we are to understand not just our friends or the local congregation, but also all the people of God in the widest possible context.

6. Only those who do the will of God shall know the truth. The use of the Bible in ethics cannot be a purely academic matter, as though we could be interested to know how things stand but do not actually want to live accordingly. Many times people came to Jesus to have an academic discussion (the rich young ruler, the lawyer who wanted to know which were the chief commandments, Nicodemus etc.) but Jesus would not enter into a conversation on those terms. He always turned it into a matter of personal decision. Our quest for ethical understanding will be fruitless unless we are actually about the business of living in a way that befits the children of God. Our decision-making will both be informed by our practice and validated by its results.

7. The function of ethical decision-making is one that needs to be accompanied by prayer and carried through in dependence upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even when we have tried to understand the process and the factors involved in it as fully as possible, there are elements that elude us. There is also need for a personal honesty and for imaginative insight that are beyond our



powers to summon and guarantee. For these reasons we do not go about the task in arrogant self-confidence, but in prayerful humility.

### ***Exercises***

1. Bill Bush is a factory foreman in his late forties. He is also a very active member of his church where he is an elder and Sunday School teacher. He has been worried because the factory has not been in full production for some time and there have been rumours that the plant might be closed and the workers, dismissed. Now the plant manager has come to see him to tell him that they have just landed a big overseas order and that the plant will have to work seven days a week for the next six weeks to fill the order in time. Their performance on this order could well determine whether the plant survives or closes. The manager tells Bill that as foreman it is absolutely essential that he work every day until the order is completed, Saturdays and Sundays included. Bill is in a real quandary. He wants to help the factory survive but he also has his commitments at church. He has always taken great care to hallow Sunday and has seen that as his fulfilment of the fourth commandment. How is he to decide what to do in this situation? How can he use the Bible to come to the right decision? What is the right decision and why?

This case is based on a case study in *Decision Making and the Bible* (Valley Forge, Judson Press, 1975, p. 20) by H. E. Everding Jr. and D. W. Willbanks.

2. Mark and Julie Collins are in their early thirties. They have been married for eight years. They met at church and have continued to be active in the life and work of the church. Their marriage has been a very happy one except for one great disappointment. Though they have been trying to have a child for six years Julie has not become pregnant. Now tests have shown that because of a childhood infection Julie's ova cannot reach the uterus or be fertilised. Her doctor has suggested that she enter the invitro fertilisation program. Mark and Julie have given it careful consideration and have counted the cost and were at the point of deciding to go ahead, but the Vatican statement condemning IVF has caused them to pause and think about it again. Though they are not Roman Catholics they wonder whether there might be strong ethical arguments against the practice, which they have not considered. Yet they feel this is their only hope to have a child of their own. They wonder if the Bible could possibly have anything to say to them on a problem as modern as this. How do you respond to that question?

3. Paul Cooper is an ophthalmologist. With his wife, Jenny, and two children he lives in a comfortable house in a good suburb. They all attend church and Paul is particularly concerned about issues of social justice and care for the poor and marginalised. He has had quite a struggle to get to his present position. Jenny has helped him. To cut costs, Jenny, a trained nurse, has acted as his receptionist, secretary and assistant at the surgery. Paul's aunt has just left him a small legacy. They wonder how to use it. They could use it to pay off some of the mortgage on the house, but they are taking care of that all right and it is not a pressing matter. Jenny would like to use it to put in an in-ground swimming pool in their back yard. She has always loved swimming and water sports and she would like the children to grow up with the same opportunities to appreciate the water that she had as a child. Since Paul leads such a busy life and neither of them have much opportunity to get to the beach or visit a

public pool, Jenny would just love to have a pool which they could get into early in the morning, after work, or in the odd moments they have free on the weekends, and which the children could use at any time without the need for someone to take them to the pool and bring them home again. But Paul wants to use the money to allow him to close down the practice for three months while they all go to visit Aboriginal communities in northern Australia so that he can treat eye problems, which he knows are very widespread and severe amongst Aboriginal people. Jenny would be willing to go along and she admits it would be a great education for the children, but she says Paul already gives a great deal of time and money to help people who cannot afford his services. She feels that they owe this small amenity to themselves and their children. How would you suggest they resolve the issue and how might the Bible help them come to a decision?

***For further reading***

B. C. Birch and L. L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1976.

G. S. Dicker, *Promise and Hope – A Theology of the Christian Life*, Openbook, 1999.

H. E. Everding Jr. and D. Wilbanks, *Decision Making and the Bible*, Judson Press, 1975.



## Chapter 9

# Methods of Bible Study

Before closing the Bible study group for the evening the leader, Arthur Baker, reminded the group that they were almost at the end of Romans and that they would need to think what they wanted to do next.

Flo Brown was first to speak. 'As long as it's not more Paul I don't mind. Perhaps we could do another gospel.'

'We haven't done anything in the Old Testament for a while', Don reminded the group. 'Why don't we do something like Exodus or Deuteronomy or one of the historical books?'

'I don't want this to sound like a criticism of your leadership Arthur, I think you really put a lot into it and we all benefit, but I wonder if we could not follow a different method of Bible study. The way we do it does not seem to relate the Bible very well to where we are today,' Thelma commented.

'I have tried to make it relevant,' said Arthur, 'and we have certainly had some very good discussions which seem to indicate that the Bible was scratching where we itch.'

'Yes,' said Thelma. 'Sometimes it has been very good in that respect, but there were times when it seemed to be very dry and irrelevant.'

'Well, I'm all for trying new things,' it was Agnes speaking. 'Have you got any suggestions, Thelma? What other methods are there?'

Thelma said, 'I can't just name them off the top of my head, but

I went to a course once where we learnt about different methods of Bible study that could be used in small groups. I could get my notes out and bring them along next week.”

‘That would be a help. I have a book on Bible study methods too, which I will look up,’ said Arthur. ‘I’ll plan for us to spend most of the meeting next week deciding what we want to study, and how we want to do it.’



Thelma is not happy with the method her group is using for the study of the Bible. Though it is a perfectly respectable method, her dissatisfaction reminds us that any one method, however good it is, can become tiresome if there is no variation from it. Perhaps her dissatisfaction is also fuelled by the fact that she knows there are many other methods. She suspects that some of them may achieve what she is looking for better than the one her group is presently using.

The method followed by the group was to take a book of the Bible, study it chapter by chapter or section by section, looking up difficult words, trying to grasp the argument by careful examination of each sentence, comparing different translations for the help they could give and finally reacting to the message as they understood it from their own perspective. Arthur Baker has functioned as leader, preparing the passage in advance each week with the help of the study aids he has, then giving some input as it is needed. This is a method followed in many Bible study groups throughout the church.

While in many respects it is a sound method, it has some shortcomings.

Its first weakness is that the members appear to come to the group without any special preparation of their own. Since they can

contribute no more than what comes to mind at the time, what they can contribute, and consequently what they get out of it, is limited. While there seems to be a lot of discussion in the group, in terms of who has the knowledge it is very leader centred. Secondly, it is rather intellectualistic. Its aim seems to be to understand the Scripture with the mind but it does not make any provision for grasping its intention at deeper levels of their being. Thirdly, partly for that reason and for others, it often seems to Thelma and perhaps to others also, to be unrelated and irrelevant.

While adhering to the basic structure of the method, it could be strengthened at a number of points. Firstly, each member could be assigned specific preparation tasks with corresponding roles of presentation in the group. Secondly, more steps could be taken to see that connections are made between each section of Scripture and our contemporary situation. Thirdly, elements could be introduced to enable the participants to relate to the Bible passage in other than purely intellectual ways. These might include role plays, mime, painting their feelings about the passage, modelling their response to the passage in clay or plasticine, writing a response in poetic verse, writing a psalm or a parable, writing a dialogue with a character in the Bible story, moving about repeating a key verse or sentence from the passage mantra fashion, for example, Romans 8: 1, 'There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus' (G.N.B.) and other imaginative exercises.

### Getting an overview of the Bible

Several times I have mentioned the need to consider any particular passage of Scripture within the context of the canon as a whole. To do that requires that we have some knowledge of the whole Bible.

Even without that it is possible, with the help of appropriate aids, to relate a particular passage to the whole, but it can be done better if, as well as using these aids, we have familiarity with the whole Bible. For this reason it is important that Christians who are serious about understanding and interpreting the Bible should undertake a course of study, which provides the kind of overview that is helpful as a foundation for any Bible study method.

Some study Bibles provide a brief historical background and summary of contents at the beginning of each book of the Bible. Provided the group members all have the same Bible edition, this might be a simple way of getting a modest overview. However, there are existing Bible study programs which accomplish this. One that was popular some years ago was the Bethel Series prepared by the Adult Christian Education Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A. Thousands of people have undertaken this program in Australia with great benefit. Initially the minister of the church does an orientation program in the use of the material, and then the minister prepares teacher trainees for the parish in a study course over a period of two years. These trained lay leaders then lead adult groups in a forty-session course spread over a two-year period. Many people who have done this course testify that they have come to understand what the Bible is about for the first time.

If the 'Bethel' program is not available or seems to require too much time, a person with a good knowledge of the Bible can easily prepare such an over-view Bible study with the help of some of the numerous biblical guides that are available in print, such as William Neil's *One Volume Bible Commentary*<sup>1</sup>, Lesslie Newbigin's *A Walk through the Bible*<sup>2</sup> or the two excellent guides by Etienne Charpentier, *How to Read the Old Testament* and *How to Read the New Testament*<sup>3</sup>. In this way a thorough overview of the Bible can be obtained in two years of regular weekly study, allowing for



vacation breaks.

In addition to the literary context, it would be helpful if Bible study groups were to devote some sessions to the geographical, historical and cultural contexts of the portion of the Bible under consideration. In many parts these can be crucial for the correct understanding of the text. The two Charpentier books mentioned above will be helpful in this regard also.

### Swartley's proposal for Bible study

Mennonite biblical scholar, Willard Swartley, proposes a threefold approach to Bible study which can be usefully combined with the method that Arthur Baker's group is using. Each week one member, or perhaps several members, could be assigned one of the tasks. Then at the meeting those people can lead the group through the results of their preparation. Swartley describes the three steps of his method as follows: (1) Listen carefully from within the text (observation), (2) Learn helpfully from behind the text (meaning), and (3) Live freely from in front of the text (significance).<sup>4</sup> We shall look at these steps one by one.

(1) Listen carefully from within the text. At this stage we simply become familiar with the text, noticing all that is distinctive about it; all its oddities, its contrasts, its relationships and its progression. To do this it is good to read the text aloud and reread it; read it in several different translations and in the original if possible, not analysing all the differences at this stage, but hearing it and responding to it holistically. After a time we can begin to write down our observations about the text, including such things as its literary genre, its distinctive images, its key words and the way these relate to each other, perhaps even making a diagram of its

structure. In other words, this is a process of becoming familiar with the text, even its cracks and crannies, the things we often pass over in a normal reading. (Some of these matters were dealt with in chapter 3.)

(2) Learn helpfully from behind the text. By this Swartley means that we try to break through to the background of the text. We try to find out as much as we can about the specific historical setting in which the text was written and the setting of its original recipients. We find out as much as we can about the religious, cultural, economic and political factors that influenced the writer and the first readers. We also research as far as we can the background of the main words and ideas that occur in the text. We study the literary context of the passage, how it fits into its literary unit and into the whole book in which it occurs, and even more widely still, what its place is in the whole canon of Scripture. This may involve us in considering the tension it stands in with other parts of Scripture as well as how it supports and complements other texts. Finally, it is useful to discover how other believers and scholars have interpreted the text in other times and places in the church's history. (Much of this is included within what was referred to in chapter 4 as the historical-critical approach to Scripture).

(3) Live freely from in front of the text. We begin this step by looking at ourselves and asking, 'who am I? What possible biases and prejudices do I bring to the interpretation of this text, and what special strengths?' Next we reflect upon the differences between the world of the text and our own world. After assessing the changes that have occurred between then and now, we ask how the text, written and first read in that ancient world, now speaks God's word to us in our world. We may then spend some time in meditation on the text. Finally, sharing our response and interpretation with others, we test them against other interpretations to become aware of the breadth

of responses the Scripture elicits and to place ourselves within a community of interpretation and response.

## Bible study for personal transformation

Two American authors have developed methods of Bible study, which are designed specifically to assist in human transformation. The one that has been around longer is that of Walter Wink, who was Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, and is set out in his book entitled *Transforming Bible Study*. He also refers to his method as ‘communal exegesis’.

The designated leader (members of the group usually take turns at leader-ship) is responsible for researching the passage for study, assembling any information necessary for grasping the meaning, and for preparing both a set of questions on the text to draw out the thoughts of the group and an application exercise. The role of the leader is important, but Wink insists that it must be clear that the text, and not the leader of the group, is the focus. Wink describes the leader’s function as ‘like that of a conductor of an extemporaneous jazz ensemble at a jam session.’ The conductor does not know what a single member will play, but he must choose the key and keep the beat. There is a dynamic tension between discipline and spontaneity.<sup>5</sup>

When the group meets, the session begins with a time for centring. Through deep breathing and relaxation exercises people are assisted to focus on the task. The members of the group have various translations of the Bible and, if a gospel passage is being studied, a copy of the synoptic gospels set out in parallel. A volunteer reads the passage aloud. The leader then guides discussion through the prepared questions, sometimes adding new questions as the

discussion suggests them, or leaving out questions no longer felt to be appropriate. The first element in the discussion has to do with literary and historical issues. The aim of this is to let the text have its say free from the biases, theologies and presuppositions that members of the group may bring to the study. The second element in the discussion is the attempt to 'live into' the passage so that the text can come alive for the members of the group. This is a more subjective task, and accordingly Wink accepts all answers and does not permit any answer to be branded as wrong unless it involves a pure error of fact. Nevertheless, Wink warns that the goal of the study is not merely subjective; we are interested in learning what Scripture has to say to us, not just what feelings or trains of thought it triggers off in us. Anyone proposing to lead a group using Wink's method should first study his book carefully, especially chapter 4, on leading a group. The final part of the study consists of an application exercise or exercises. This is very important and care must be taken to see that enough time is left for this part and that members do not opt out of it. By means of such things as painting, sculpting, drama, poetry and music the aim is to allow the text to confront the part of our personal or social being which is in need of healing, forgiveness or transformation.

Wayne Bradley Robinson, the senior minister of a Congregational Church in Minnesota, has written up another method for transformative Bible study in his book, *The Transforming Power of the Bible*.<sup>6</sup> He describes the method in seven steps, as follows.

***Step 1 Active listening.*** The aim is to get inside the text 'on its own terms'. The leader prepares a number of questions that emerge from the text. The group's task is to come up with as many 'hunches' as possible in response to the questions. By hunch he does not mean a guess, but an insight that arises from one's intuition or one's creative imagination. This step is rather similar to the question-

discussion element in Wink's method.

**Step 2 Bridge-building.** Each person in silence builds a bridge from the text to the person's hidden dimensions, so that a person in the text or a piece in the text can 'walk' across, find and call forth the 'twin', in that person. This is accomplished by an exercise planned by the leader, often using artwork of some kind. For example, on the story of the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:9-11, Robinson suggests that on a large sheet of paper each member of the group should draw or paint the baptism of Jesus. Then on the other side each member draws a line down the middle of the paper. On the left side each participant writes down things in their lives that are dying right now, and on the right side, things that are rising right now. When this is completed the group members team up in pairs to share and verbalise what the experience was like.

**Step 3 Identifying learnings.** Each person writes down in silence what that person has learned about (or for) herself or himself from steps 1 and 2.

**Step 4 Identifying wants.** Group members are challenged to write down what they want to do about what they have learned about or for themselves (not what they 'should' or 'ought' to do).

**Step 5 Goal-setting** Using a set of guidelines for goal setting, members are invited to transform their wants of Step 4 into short-term behavioural goals.

**Step 6 Covenanting.** Meeting again in pairs, each member is asked to state his or her goal to the other member of the pair, to make a commitment to carry out that goal, and to set up a procedure for sharing with the covenant partner how it is going.

**Step 7 Sharing how it went.** In a group meeting on a regular basis, this would normally be done at the beginning of the next meeting, each member shares how he or she progressed in achieving the set goal.

## Thematic Bible Study

The methods that have been mentioned so far all study the Bible section-by-section or book-by-book. There are many advantages in studying the Bible in this way, but it is not the only way and for some purposes a quite different method may be more appropriate. Another common way of organising Bible study is by a thematic approach.

There have been some study guides marketed that follow this approach. One such was the Kerygma program, used widely in the Australian and New Zealand churches some years ago. It was an adaptation of original Canadian and USA materials for use 'down under'. The main course of study, *Kerygma: The Bible in Depth*, consisted of an introduction and ten themes, each theme consisting of several parts, making up 33 parts in all. A group could get through the whole course in a year.

In our life situations very often we will be led to approach the Bible in a thematic way. An issue will arise in church or society about which, as Christians, we need to make some decision. In making that decision we want to know what the witness of Scripture is on the matter. Detailed study of individual books of the Bible may not have prepared us fully for this task. It might be wise for any study group to get some practice with this method before trying to learn it in a crisis.

For practice in thematic Bible study without a written guide, it is best to begin with a theme that is not too large for an inexperienced group to handle, and not so contentious that it is likely to lead to sharp polarisation.

To begin with, direct references to the theme should be looked

up in a concordance, preferably an analytical concordance that shows which words in the original languages are represented by the theme word in English. Some of these references may be trivial or unhelpful. They can be dropped from the list. Significant references should then be studied carefully in their contexts to discover just what Scripture is affirming on the theme at that point. Results of these studies should be carefully recorded. When all references have been examined in this way, results should be scanned for patterns of agreement, development and diversity.

Next, thought should be given to larger biblical themes and theological perspectives that have a bearing on the theme under consideration. For example, a study of homosexuality is not complete when all the passages in which that subject is mentioned have been studied carefully. We would also need to look at what Scripture has to say about sexuality generally, about treatment of outcasts and non-conforming minorities, and about the duty of neighbourly love. Only then could we begin to say how heterosexuals may view homosexuality and relate to homosexual people.

Even when we have determined what is said in Scripture on any theme, we have to try to understand the distance between the scriptural context and the present and try to bridge that distance. Supposing we were studying war and peace in the Bible; whatever conclusions we came to, we would have to ask to what extent statements made about war in the days of spears, bows and arrows and the like can be applied without modification in a nuclear age.

Having completed its own study of the biblical material the group might then consult a good dictionary of the Bible or Bible word book to see what others have concluded from a study of that or a related theme in the Bible. This may alert the group to material that has been overlooked or lines of interpretation that it has missed. These should then be considered in relation to the conclusions the group itself has already reached.

## Other ways of studying the Bible

There is probably no end to the methods one may use in studying the Bible. In his book, *Learning and Praying*,<sup>7</sup> John Mallison lists and describes 28 different methods for Bible study in small groups and anyone looking for further suggestions should consult that book.

One method being used by many groups in Australia is based on the daily reading guide, *With Love to the World*, and the questions suggested for discussion at the end of each week's commentaries. Some groups consider all seven readings for the week, some focus on the set readings for the coming Sunday and some focus on just one of the set lections. A particularly useful exercise, where the minister is willing, is to consider with the minister what message, emerging from the readings, should be proclaimed to the parish in the sermon on the following Sunday. This requires the group not only to understand the passages well but also to make the transition from what is said in them to what God's word is for that parish at that time.

A word of warning! Bible study can easily run off the rails in either of two directions. It can be too objective and intellectualistic, seeking merely head knowledge of what was written back then in the biblical ages. In that case many people will begin to feel that it is remote and unrelated. This seems to be an ever-present danger in our society. Walter Wink believes that it is a matter of left and right brain function. He writes:

Studies have led researchers to conclude that the left hemisphere, which dominates the right side of the body, normally specializes in temporal and causal relations,



speech, logic, analysis, and verbal behavior. It handles math problems and grammar, naming and abstract thinking, and processes information sequentially in a linear orderly fashion. Its paired opposite, the right hemisphere, which normally dominates the left side of the body, handles spatial relations, gestalts, the synthesis of wholes, the grasping of meaning-in-context ... It processes information more diffusely and indirectly, integrating material in a simultaneous, holistic manner.<sup>8</sup>

Because most of us, particularly men, have been brought up to favour left brain activity we tend to be stronger on analysis of biblical material than on grasping meaning-in-context. For this reason we need to take special care and build into our method processes for grasping and processing biblical material in a more relational and holistic manner.

On the other hand, Bible study can become too subjective, concentrating too much on what happens in us when we read the text and neglecting what the text objectively has to say to us. In fact, in some methods the Bible passage is little more than a springboard for self-analysis, and a suitable passage from any other book would serve just as well. Genuine Bible study must fully honour the text and seek to discover what it has to say in its own right.

### *Exercise*

Members of the Bible study group should each be given responsibility for obtaining one of the resources mentioned in the chapter so that the group can inspect them and determine which one to use next. In some cases it would be possible to sample each method for a single session before deciding on a longer program. Don't neglect the possibility of a do-it-yourself study along one of the lines suggested in the chapter.

***For further reading***

J. Mallison, *Learning and Prayer*, Renewal Publications, 1976.

I. Paul, *Refreshing Bible Study*, Grove Books, 2004

W. B. Robinson, *The Transforming Power of the Gospel*, Pilgrim Press, 1984.

M. Ryan, *Reading the Bible: an introduction for students*, Social Science Press, 2003.

H. R. Weber, *Experiments With Bible Study*, World Council of Churches, 1981.

W. Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, Abingdon Press, 1980.

*With Love to the World* published by Strathfield-Homebush Parish of the U.C.A., 62 The Boulevard, Strathfield, 2135.

***Endnotes***

<sup>1</sup> W. Neil, *William Neil's One Volume Bible Commentary*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> L. Newbigin, *A Walk through the Bible*, Triangle Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See references at the end of chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, pp. 224-228.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, Abingdon, 1980, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> W. B. Robinson, *The Transforming Power of the Gospel*, Pilgrim Press, 1984

<sup>7</sup> John Mallison, *Learning and Prayer*, Renewal Publications, Sydney, 1976 pp.61-128.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Wink, pp. 21-22.

## Chapter 10

# The authority of the Bible

It was the first Sunday of February and all the regular activities of the Stansham Church were getting under way again after the end of year break. The Tuesday evening Bible study was to recommence the following Tuesday. Before the group went into recess Syd Churchill had indicated that because of increased work load he would have to pull out of the group for a while, and Sue Sherry said she would be doing a lay education course on Tuesday evening in first term. Hearing that, the other members decided that they should recruit some new members, if necessary singling some people out and inviting them personally. That is why Arthur Baker had caught Mark Knowles after church. The group had agreed that Mark, being still in his twenties, would add a little youthfulness to the group. Besides, Mark did not seem to be very involved in things.

‘Mark, I have been trying to catch you all through the holidays, but always seemed to miss you’ Arthur began rather apologetically. ‘You have probably seen on the newsheet that our Bible study group is starting up again on Tuesday evening. We are going to try a new kind of study on the parables and miracles of the gospels. The group decided to give you a special invitation to join us. Do you have any other commitments on Tuesday evenings?’

‘I don’t do anything regularly on Tuesday evenings,’ Mark began hesitantly, ‘but I’m not sure I want to join your group. I think

you take a very different view of the Bible from what I do' he explained.

'How do you mean?' Arthur asked.

'Well, I've heard you don't really believe in the authority of Scripture' Mark replied.

'Oh, but I do,' Arthur protested. 'There may be members of the group who are uncertain about that, but Scripture is certainly authoritative for me. I wouldn't be bothered with Bible study if it weren't.'

'But Don Clark told me you don't believe in the inspiration of Scripture' Mark countered.

'I don't know why Don would have said that' Arthur responded in a shocked tone. He could not believe that Don, a member of the group, would have said such a thing about him. 'I do indeed believe that Scripture is inspired' he assured Mark.

Agnes Sheppard, seeing Arthur talking to Mark, walked over and listened in on the conversation with an unacknowledged 'Hello Mark'. Arthur explained the drift of the conversation. 'Have I ever said in the group that I don't believe in the inspiration of Scripture, Agnes?' he asked, hoping for her backing.

'I can't remember you ever saying that, Arthur, nor can I imagine you ever doing so' Agnes responded supportingly.

'Well, you may never have actually said those words' Mark corrected, 'but you see discrepancies and errors in Scripture. You do not acknowledge that it is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Don has told me some of the conclusions you have come to in the group.'

'Hold on' Arthur responded rather more aggressively. 'Don't put inerrancy and inspiration together. Inspired does not mean that Scripture must be without discrepancies or factually correct in every detail. A pianist may give an inspired rendition of a piece, but that need not mean that he did not hit a single wrong note. I believe that Scripture is inspired, but I don't believe that

it is perfect in every detail. It is a human work as well as a divine work.'

'That's just what I mean' Mark pointed out. 'That's not really inspiration at all. If God really inspired it Scripture cannot have any errors or discrepancies at all.'

'But Mark, how can you take that view of Scripture? There are so many obvious discrepancies you can't really miss them. I am not saying they are serious, but they remind us that as well as being the Word of God the Bible is also a human document. Just to take the common things that people bring up all the time. Did Judas die by hanging himself as Matthew tells us, or did he die accidentally by rupturing his abdomen as Acts tells us? Did Jairus tell Jesus his daughter had just died, as Matthew says, or that she was on the point of death as Mark tells us and Luke supports? Did Jesus cleanse the temple early in his ministry as John relates, or at the end of his ministry as the other gospels have it? Did Isaiah write... '

'There you go,' Mark butted in impatiently, 'that's just the trouble with people like you who do not believe Scripture is God's Word. You spend all your time finding faults and picking it to pieces, instead of just listening to what God says. And all these things can be explained anyway.'

'Mark, that is not a fair response,' Agnes responded sharply. 'These things are a minor matter as far as I am concerned. It is people like you who have to spend so much time and energy explaining away the kind of things I mentioned. For me, as much as for you, the important thing is discerning God's Word in Scripture, but to do that we need to recognise honestly the true nature of Scripture. Unless we do that we cannot interpret it correctly.'

'Truly, Mark,' Arthur added in a more conciliatory tone, 'the group really is only concerned to understand what God is saying to us. We don't sit around looking for errors in Scripture. Our concern is the same as yours, even if we understand the nature of Scripture and its inspiration differently. We would appreciate the contribution

you have to make. Why don't you come to a couple of sessions and see, Mark? You would be very welcome.'

'Well, I'll think about it' Mark offered noncommittally.

The lunchtime crowd sat on the grass beside Sydney's Circular Quay and watched the activities at the Overseas Terminal as they munched their sandwiches. On the deck of the liner berthed at the terminal an Asian seaman, oblivious of the crowd, unaffected by latitude and unmoved by the passage of history, bowed towards Mecca and prayed. To someone viewing the scene there appeared to be something incongruous about this man's action. We know that, because that person reported it to *The Sydney Morning Herald* and it was noted in that paper's *Column Eight*. I imagine that many people would have regarded it as just as odd if the man had been reading the Bible. To many people it is incomprehensible why every day of the week thousands of people in Australia, and millions of people around the world, read from a book that was written thousands of years ago. In an age when any scientific book is superseded in ten years, and some are out of date by the time they reach the book seller, it is hard to believe that anything written so long ago can still have any relevance. And yet the millions of people who read the Bible do not do so because of some quaint interest in ancient things. They read it because they perceive it as relevant to their lives, and more than that, they acknowledge that it speaks to them with authority. What is that authority and how does it operate?

Christians are not agreed on the answer to these questions. There is, for example, disagreement about the scope of biblical authority. Some hold that the Bible is authoritative in all matters it alludes to, including matters of history, biology and cosmology. Many others would disagree and it is certainly not a position that I would want to defend. The Bible is not, for example, an authority on modern

medicine and very few people would consult it on how to treat some serious infectious disease. It knows nothing about germs and viruses let alone antibiotics and vaccinations. Nor do we normally consult it any longer about astronomy and cosmology. The physical universe is much vaster than the authors and editors of the books of the Bible could have imagined. To learn about such things we go to the astronomers. If we read the Bible for authoritative information about such matters, I believe outsiders would have a right to regard us as rather odd. These are matters that belong to an area in which human knowledge has developed over the years and still continues to do so. What we think we know about such things is subject to change. The Bible exists to tell us about matters that have an unchangeable character about them, such things as who God is, what human beings are and how we may relate to God. The proper area of the Scripture's authority is well indicated by 2 Timothy 3: 14-17, namely the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, sound teaching on matters of faith and life, the direction of personal conduct and the equipment of people for the service of God and humanity in a life of good works.

In this area almost all Christians would regard the Bible as their supreme authority. It is not the only authority even here, since there are other factors also to be taken into account in doing theology and ethics, but it is quite special. Protestants generally would regard it as having primary and sup-reme status amongst authorities.

Of course, care must always be taken to distinguish the authority of the Bible from the authority of any particular interpretation of it. People sometimes object that this or that theologian, or this or that document, ignores the authority of Scripture, when what they really mean is that they do not regard their particular interpretation of Scripture as authoritative. Whatever we may say about Scripture, there is no infallible interpretation of it, and therefore no

particular way of interpreting it can claim absolute authority. Every interpretation is open to examination and, where there are good reasons, to correction.

Bearing in mind, then, that we are considering the authority of Scripture itself and not the authority of a particular interpretation of it, and remembering that the Bible is intended to speak authoritatively in a certain specific area, let us look at the question of how and why it is authoritative, which is another matter on which Christians hold differing views.

### The inspiration of Scripture

The most common answer to the question of how and why the Bible is authoritative is that it is so because it is inspired. Nevertheless that common agreement would cover a wide range of disagreement over what inspiration means. For some Christians the inspiration of Scripture means that it is God's own inerrant word. It is usually such people who hold that the Bible is without error on any matter at all which it deals with. Other Christians, who agree that the Bible is inspired, would not agree that this implies inerrancy. There are, in fact many different views on what inspiration means.

In earlier days some Christians held that the inspiration of Scripture meant that God had, as it were, dictated the words of the various books of the Bible to their authors, who simply wrote down what they heard from God. However, careful study of the Bible made it clear that each author had his or her own peculiar style and vocabulary. How could this be if God were the actual author of each book? Why is there not simply one style recognisable as the literary style peculiar to God alone? Some answered this question by saying that God accommodates himself to the style of each



writer, but it was not a very convincing answer. And there were other questions also. When dictating the same story to Matthew and Luke as he dictated to Mark, why did God change it in various details? Because of such difficulties virtually no one any longer holds a dictation theory of inspiration.

### The fundamentalist view

Careful exponents of the fundamentalist view today hold that inspiration, as applied to Scripture, refers to a unique act of God by which he 'breathed' its message into the authors in such a way that what they wrote became the very Word of God. This unique act was not some mechanical process of dictation, nor on the other hand did it amount only to giving the authors the right thoughts, which they were free to express in their own words. The process was so precise that it resulted in the choice of one set of words rather than another. So even the words of the Bible are the very words of God. However, this needs to be qualified in one respect; modern fundamentalist scholars recognise that many textual changes have crept into the text of Scripture over the years through copyists' errors and alterations. Therefore the text of the Bible as we have it now is no longer precisely as God intended it. Inspiration, and the inerrancy which it implies, belong only to what was originally given and written down, that is, only to what are called the original autographs.

This theory has been called, rather uncharitably, Clayton's dictation - the dictation you have when you aren't having dictation. It is not dictation, but the result is the same. Precisely for that reason it does not deal with the original objection to a dictation theory. If God's guidance extends even to the choice of words, how is it that each author has his own particular vocabulary and style? In fact the theory does not really fit at all with the way in which the

Bible was written. Only a few books, such as some of Paul's letters were written by one person at one time, or dictated as Paul's letters usually were. Most were brought together over a period of time by the gathering together of numerous sources. Even if we had every edition of every book carefully preserved we would be hard pressed to determine which was the original autograph that is to be regarded as inerrant.

The grounds on which this theory has been established are also subject to criticism. Generally the theory is arrived at along two lines. On the one hand, it is argued that the Bible itself claims to have been written in this way; on the other, a deductive argument is produced to support the claim.

The text most often used in support of this view is 2 Timothy 3:16: 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'. The passage refers to the Old Testament, since most of the New Testament had not been written, and that which had been written would hardly have been recognised as Scripture. But more importantly, the word, inspired does not mean that the books referred to were written in the way this theory asserts, and does not of itself mean that they are inerrant. The text only supports the theory if the theory is first read into the text.

Another text frequently quoted is 2 Peter 1:21: 'no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.' But again this text only supports the theory if a great deal is read into it. It speaks of how prophets were moved to speak and not about the process of writing, and the fact that they were moved to do what they did by the Holy Spirit does not necessarily mean that every word they said was precisely the word God wanted them to use. Other texts used along with these include Matthew 5:17-18 and John 10:35, but neither of these support the

theory unless we import ideas into them derived from non-biblical sources.

The deductive argument to support the theory runs like this: God is true and perfect in every respect, and therefore whatever he does or gives is perfect and without blemish, and therefore the Scriptures which he has caused to be written and given to us must be perfect and without error of any kind. But the argument already assumes what needs to be proved, namely that God so controlled the writing process that only the very words he desired to be used were used and the writers' sins and weaknesses in no way affected the end product. Deductive arguments of this kind are always very shaky. Who are we to say what God must have done? Is that not an arrogant way to argue? Should we not rather look at what we have in the Scripture and from a careful examination of it conclude what kind of thing it is that God is content to use for our instruction and salvation?

When we actually examine Scripture with an open mind we see that it is not perfect or inerrant. That is not to say that it is deliberately misleading or untrustworthy, but in honesty we cannot claim that it is in all respects inerrant. The examples quoted to demonstrate this are numerous and probably well known. For example there are two accounts of how Judas died and they cannot both be true. Mark 1:2 says that the quotation that follows is from Isaiah, whereas the first half of it is from Malachi. Both Leviticus 11:6 and Deuteronomy 14:7 maintain that hares are ruminant animals that chew the cud whereas a careful examination of a hare will show hares are not ruminants. Most of these things are not directly significant for doctrine or right conduct but the way we understand the nature of Scripture does have a bearing on the way we interpret and use it. To point out that Scripture is not inerrant in no way implies that we want to diminish its importance or minimise its role in the church

and in our lives. We do it because it is important to recognise the human aspect of Scripture (along with the divine) if we are to interpret it correctly.

If it is believed that the words of Scripture are the very words of God, then of course the diversity of Scripture of which we have spoken already cannot be acknowledged. In fact inerrantist interpreters have to go to great lengths to explain away the diversity and disagreements that are so obvious to others, often doing violence to the text of Scripture in doing so. Once the diversity of Scripture is eliminated, what Scripture says in one place does not need to be balanced by what is said in another. A single text can be taken from any place in the Bible and can be taken to represent not only the biblical position, but even God's view point on the matter in question. This in turn opens the way for a quite selective use of texts to legitimise theological and ethical positions the reader has adopted on other grounds. In this way the Fundamentalist view of Scripture becomes the justification for a particular theology.

It is sometimes argued in favour of the inerrantist view that it alone can guarantee true doctrine. In fact it is no more successful in preserving orthodoxy than any other view of Scripture. Most of the strangest sects hold to a doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, are inerrantists but they deny the doctrine of the Trinity and the full divinity of Christ. Herbert W. Armstrong, another inerrantist, also was not an orthodox Trinitarian.

An inerrantist view of Scripture requires also a fixed and inerrant canon of Scripture. If the canon is not closed and perfect then there could be books, or parts of books, in the Bible, which ought not to be there because they are not inerrant. On the other hand, if the canon is not infallible, there could be books outside it which

are inerrant, but which through error have not been included in the canon. But which canon is the infallible one – the Protestant canon, the Roman Catholic canon or the Eastern Orthodox canon, or perhaps some other canon that none of us has got right? Scripture itself does not tell us what it consists of. That has been decided by numerous decisions of church councils over the centuries. Have those decisions been infallible, and if so which set of them? If we cannot give an inerrant answer to that question we cannot really speak about an inerrant Scripture either.

For some people the thought that Scripture might not be inerrant or infallible is very worrying, but it need not be. By his Spirit God manages to use effectively copies of the Scripture that have been corrupted over the centuries and are now far from inerrant. He also manages to get by with translations in hundreds of languages, which are not by any means without error. So we need not doubt that he could use for his glory a Bible, which even in its original form was not without error. Of course, that means we have to take great care with interpretation, but so do imperfect copies and translations, and it just may be that is how God wants it to be, so we may learn to depend on him alone.

## Infallibility

Recognising the difficulties in the understanding of inspiration just presented, many evangelical Christians have now abandoned it in favour of a more flexible view. They prefer to speak about infallibility rather than inerrancy. They recognise that this infallibility applies only to matters of faith and ethics, not to such things as science and history. In such matters some would hold that God accommodated himself to the understanding current amongst the people at the times Scripture was written. This idea

of 'accommodation' is by no means new; it has been put forward by theo-logians for generations and is not without merit, so it is not surprising that it continues to have supporters. Some who have abandoned the inerrantist position would go so far as to say that only the ideas are inspired and that their expression in words and sentences is human and fallible. Nevertheless they wish to maintain the infallibility of Scripture in the sense that in matters of faith and Christian living it unerringly leads us to the truth.

This position is certainly easier to reconcile with the facts that a close inspection of the Bible reveals. However it is open to question whether ideas and their expression can be so separated from each other that one may be said to be infallible while the other is human and open to error. Surely if the expression is capable of being in error, the ideas expressed will also be open to error. In any case the use of the term 'infallible' is open to question. Surely infallible is just another way of saying inerrant or without error. To distinguish one from the other is confusing, especially since in the history of the debate the two words were at one time used interchangeably. It would be better to avoid this confusion by dropping the term and using instead terms such as 'trustworthy', or 'effective for its purpose'.

A final criticism of this view is that it still sees inspiration as a process through which God conveys information to the writers, in the form of ideas, which they then put into writing. In this regard, this view is a kind of watering down of the position of strict verbal inspiration. We need to ask what grounds there are, either in what Scripture says or in what we know of the way Scripture was written, for understanding inspiration in this matter.

## Social inspiration

As a result of reflection on what we know from scholarly research on the manner in which the books of Scripture were written, many scholars now are speaking about social inspiration. What they mean by this is that Scripture was not produced by a few literary individuals who wrote whole books as a modern author might write a novel. Sometimes they gathered up and brought together into a new synthesis traditions, which had developed and circulated in the community for generations. Even the books of the prophets combine oracles from different sources and have been brought into the form in which we have them by a number of editors and redactors. The gospel writers also have drawn on oral and written sources that existed well before they began to write. The nearest we have to a single person's work are the letters of Paul; even then, in at least one case, we have a number of letters brought together either haphazardly or by a later editor. Most of these letters also came out of an interaction between Paul and a Christian community. So if we are to speak of inspiration we need to see it as involving not just a few individuals but all who contributed in any way to the final text. Even those who helped to determine what the canon is, the members of the Synods of Hippo and Carthage in the fourth century A.D. and even the Reformers of the sixteenth century must be included, since they helped to determine what the final form of Scripture would be. Inspiration, therefore, must extend to a large number of anonymous people and perhaps ultimately to the whole community of faith. This is not to overlook the role played by significant individuals, but is to recognise that they could only do what they did by belonging to a people of God who moulded them and provided them with the sources and traditions with which they worked.

The idea of social inspiration preserves a valuable insight. Since this was the way Scripture came to be, the notion of God breathing his message into a few specially chosen writers cannot be maintained. Whatever guidance God used in the production of Scripture it must have spread over a lot of people and a very long process. The weakness of the social theory of inspiration is that it does not tell us positively what inspiration is. It tells us that it is something that involves a lot of people but it does not really say what that 'something' is.

### The biblical record

The Bible itself tells us very little about what inspiration means. The word occurs only once in Scripture, in 2 Timothy 3:16; so it can hardly be called a strong biblical concept. The Greek word translated there as inspired means literally 'God-breathed' or, to preserve the English root, 'God-spired'. To make the task of understanding its meaning even more difficult, the verse can be translated into English in either of two ways, each of which has equal support in the Greek syntax. The more common translation is 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching', but it could be translated equally well as 'every scripture inspired by God is also profitable for teaching'. In the first case, inspiration is a kind of static quality that belongs to all Scripture. In the second case inspiration is something that may be a characteristic of some Scripture, or may happen to Scripture. When it is present Scripture becomes more than the dead letter of the law; it becomes profitable for teaching. The latter is more compatible with what happens in other areas as a result of God's breathing. In the Bible God's breathing does not usually result in information being passed from God to a person, rather it results in something lifeless coming to life either literally as in Genesis 2:7, Job 33:4 and Ezekiel 37:5, or



figuratively as when Jesus breathed on the fearful and distraught disciples and gave them new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). If 2 Timothy 3:16 is translated in this way it means that it is when God breathes life into the ordinary words of Scripture that it becomes a vehicle for the divine message.

It reminds us that inspiration cannot cease with writers, redactors and editors of Scripture, but must extend also to readers and interpreters, otherwise Scripture remains the letter that kills rather than the message that gives life through the Spirit. However, most translators and New Testament scholars hold the view that the more common translation is also the more likely. In that case we can understand the verse to mean that Scripture has a certain quality about it, whether readers recognise it or not, which results from the fact that all the people, who had a role in producing Scripture, were inspired. But just what would it mean for them to be inspired?

W. J. Abraham<sup>1</sup> tries to understand inspiration from our common experience of what it means to be inspired. He takes the example of people who have an inspiring teacher. As a result of the inspiration of which he or she is the source these students produce work that is beyond their usual range of quality. Their natural intelligence and talents are enhanced and enriched yet their individual differences are not obliterated, so that each still has something unique to offer. Yet, being inspired by the same teacher, there will be a degree of unity to their work and their views will not diverge radically from those of their teacher. Their work is not necessarily without mistakes or error, but in spite of these, other people are still able to recognise their work as truly inspired. A great pianist, for example, may give an inspired rendition of a Beethoven concerto even though there are some wrong notes. Abraham also makes the point that 'inspiring' is not a separate activity which a teacher adds to the other activities of teaching. A good teacher inspires through lecturing, demonstrating,

supervising, discussing and relating to the students, not through some special activity over and above these. Abraham recognises that some adjustments need to be made when this analogy is used of God in his relation to those who gave us the Bible. He thinks that it may be too cerebral and fail to do justice to the diversity and cruciality of the acts through which God inspires people but of course every analogy however helpful, needs enriching when applied to God and his activity.'

Abraham's analogy is helpful and he is right when he makes the point that unless there is some common ground between the theological and the non-theological use of the word inspire, it would be better for us not to use the word at all, for its use can only be confusing. However, it seems to me that Abraham's discussion does not take sufficient account of the metaphor of God-breathing and all that is associated with that in Scripture. As indicated above, that always contains the idea of the giving of life to that which is lifeless and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Consequently a prominent element in what is meant by the inspiration of Scripture must surely be that those who gave us the Scriptures were enlivened by the gift of the Spirit of God who would be active in their lives to produce gifts and fruits of the Spirit, which would show in the way they interpreted the events in which they were caught up or in the way they handed on the traditions they received. The original revelation of God, which he delivered in his great revelatory deeds, would continually come alive for them and they would bear witness to what they understood in that experience and what its implications were for their situation.

We know from our own experiences of God's inbreathing of life and Spirit that it does not obliterate our personalities or personal qualities, nor does it make us totally incapable of sin or error. Rather, as Hendrikus Berkhof has said, in filling us the Holy Spirit

‘occupies our individuality, the special mark, which I and I alone bear, the special contribution which I have to make to the whole of life. He takes it up for the whole of the Kingdom of God.’<sup>2</sup> We know too that some people allow themselves to be filled more fully than others. Therefore inspiration is not a matter of all or nothing. Nor, of course, can it be confined to those who gave us the Bible. All through the history of the people of God men and women have been inspired in this way. For this reason the books of the Bible cannot be distinguished from all other books on the matter of inspiration alone. Who could say that Ecclesiastes is inspired while the book of Ecclesiasticus is not, or even that the one is more inspired than the other? Who can say that the letter of Jude is inspired but the Gospel of Thomas is not, or even that the one is more inspired than the other?

It follows from this that while the idea of the inspiration of Scripture is important, it cannot on its own account for which books are in the canon and which are not, nor does it account on its own for the authority of Scripture. There are other factors that need to be taken into account.

### **The Bible as record of revelation**

Many people would argue that the authority of Scripture rests primarily on the fact that it records and preserves for us the normative testimony to God’s self-revelation. According to this view certain events and experiences of God’s revelation are absolutely constitutive for our faith. Such events would include the Exodus, the appearance to Moses in the burning bush and on Sinai, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the pentecostal experience of the disciples. Our one access to these is through the Scriptures. Of course, not every one who actually and literally

wrote the Bible was a witness to these events, but many of them preserve for us the traditions that come from those who did. Others of them bear witness to what the implications of this revelation are for them in their differing circumstances, and thereby they help us to see how we may read the meaning of the revelation of God for us in our particular situation.

This is certainly a contributing factor in the authority of Scripture, but once again it cannot account for that authority on its own. It does not fully account for the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, for example. On the other hand, it does not tell us why Esther is included in the canon while Judith, which is rather similar, is not.

### Authority through canonisation

Another source of Scripture's authority is the fact of its canonisation. The plain fact is that we all read the books that are in the Bible, and not those of similar age and content which are not, simply because some are called Bible because of the decisions which canonised them, and the others are not. We ascribe to the biblical books an authority, which we do not ascribe to the others. In this respect we accept the testimony of the church over the centuries, which has said, by various decisions in council as well as by its general consent that this is where it hears God speak and these are the writings, which are authoritative for the shaping of its faith and life. In a sense the church has conferred authority on these writings, but it has done so only because it is here that it has consistently experienced God's authoritative Word. The other side of this is that these writings provide a norm by which the church tests its life and teaching and by which individual Christians may test theirs.

In a sense we can say that becoming a Christian involves accepting Scripture as an authority and norm. In part, at least, conversion

means conversion to this story. The story of Scripture becomes our story; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel become our ancestors; their God our God. The Exodus becomes part of our history, the shame of the bad kings of Judah and Israel our shame and the prophetic heroes become our heroes. The friends of the Lord as he lived and taught and suffered in Palestine are our brothers and sisters. Gentiles though we may be, we have become immigrants into the history, experience and witness which Scripture preserves. As Christians we accept the fact that this canon of writings is what shapes our way of being and believing and our way of being the church.

### The Bible establishes its own authority

In a very large measure things and people are authoritative because they exercise authority and people acknowledge it. To put it simply, and apparently tautologically, people are authoritative because they exercise authority. To give this meaning, let me illustrate it this way: In high school we had many teachers. All of them were employed by the Education Department and within the school had a certain degree of authority over us boys. In fact some of them had no authority at all. Their classes were a shambles. We learnt nothing from them and must have made their lives as miserable as we made our own. We had other teachers who had perfect control over exactly the same class. They did not have some status, or degree or some special standing with either the headmaster or the Education Department that the others did not have, but we knew they had authority and acknowledged it by our behaviour. The same is true of Scripture. It acts authoritatively in people's experience and understanding. Arthur Bolkas experienced it when he picked up the New Testament given to him in prison and his life was changed and quite literally saved by it. By its power to do

such things, again and again and in every age, the Bible exercises authority and therefore is acknowledged as authoritative. Were it not able to do such things, all the claims in the world, by whatever powers or institutions, would not establish its authority. Because it can and does do such things, it will have authority, however we explain it.

## Conclusion

There is not a simple answer to the question how and why Scripture is authoritative. It is not as simple as saying, 'It is authoritative because it is inspired', or 'Because of what it conveys to us'. It is our authority as Christians and as members of the church for these and the other reasons we have mentioned. All of these factors have something to do with it. And because it is authoritative for us, the Bible will have supreme importance in the way we make up our minds about faith and life. Precisely because it is so important we need to know what it says and what it means. What we think it means or would like it to mean, is not good enough. It is worthwhile, since it is our authority, to go to great pains to get beyond what we 'think' or would like, to what it really does mean.

It may seem incredible to some people that such an ancient book has anything useful to say to us in the twenty-first century, but when we come to the Bible with the right questions and in the right way it is certainly not out-dated or irrelevant. In fact, it is more relevant today than ever it was. The greater the challenges that face humanity, the greater the need we have to bear and heed the Word of God. As the Bible functions to enable us to bear that Word it is untouched by time and unaffected by latitude. Time and culture may make it more difficult for us to understand clearly, but once understood it speaks with an authority which we need and

cannot deny. Whatever marvels of science and technology human ingenuity still has in store for us, we will still need the Scripture, at the very least just to keep human life human, and at best to enable us to share in the life eternal.

### ***Exercises***

1. In matters of health our doctors are usually authoritative. We pay attention to what they say and do what they tell us to do. List the people or agencies that are authoritative in other areas of your life.
2. How and where does the Bible fit in amongst these authorities?
3. Who is the most inspiring person you have ever known? How did he or she inspire you?
4. Do you see any parallels between the ways in which such a person inspired you and the ways in which God may have inspired those who gave us the Bible? In what ways might God's inspiring surpass human inspiring?

### **For further reading**

- W. J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1981.
- P. J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, Westminster Press, 1980.
- J. Barr, *Escaping From Fundamentalism*, S. C. M. Press, 1984.
- R. Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible*, Paulist Press, 1985.
- B. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*, Harper & Row, 1983.

### ***Endnotes***

- 1 W. J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1981, p.65.
- 2 H. Berkhof, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Epworth Press, 1964, p.90.

