D.J.A. Clines, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice," *Christian Brethren Review* 31, 32 (1982): 65-76.

Biblical Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice

David J. A. Clines

[p.65]

David Clines, an Australian, is Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Sheffield University and one of the Editors of the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. The following paper was originally given at a Consultation in February 1979.

'Hermeneutics' is a term for the arts and sciences of interpretation. It means no more, etymologically speaking, than 'interpretation', but the term has gained acceptance because it covers the methods of interpretation and not only the result. Thus, the term 'interpretation' in reference to a passage would be likely to refer to the end product of a hermeneutical process. Interpretations are arrived at by hermeneutical (interpretative) means.

One may refer to the 'sciences' of interpretation since there are aspects of the process of interpretation that resemble the activities of the natural sciences. The case of the dictionary meaning of words is an example: a Hebrew or Greek word is believed to have a certain meaning; this belief can then be tested by checking all the passages in which it occurs to see if it makes good sense there. In this respect, hermeneutics is dealing with verifiable data which can be tested again and again by various 'experimenters'. Of course, even the meaning of words is not completely clear-cut, and the analogy with the natural sciences is not wholly appropriate. But there is a host of individual pieces of data, and of systems of data (like grammatical constructions or the use of synonyms from cognate languages to reconstruct the meaning of an obscure and rare word) that have a definite affinity with the natural sciences.

One may also refer to the 'arts' of interpretation since it is apparent that *understanding*—which is a prerequisite for interpretation—requires not only the manipulation of data but a 'feel' for the subject-matter of the interpretation. Empathy, though not necessarily wholehearted agreement, with the material being interpreted is essential, many issues of interpretation hang' upon the interpreter's judgment, which has been built up over a long period and which consequently cannot always be fully explained or justified at any one moment; large-scale presuppositions on the part of the interpreter (e.g. about moral values or the nature of the supernatural) enter into and sometimes

[p.66]

determine the kind of interpretation that is produced; questions of sensibility and taste on the part of the interpreter are also relevant.

Because hermeneutics is an art as well as a science, there can be no such thing as an objective, neutral, interpretation that does not to some extent bear the stamp of the interpreter. Whether this state of affairs is good or bad, and whether one should always strive for the most objective interpretation possible, are other questions, that will arise again from time to time in the course of this essay.

It should be stressed that although the focus of this essay is biblical hermeneutics, there is nothing about hermeneutics peculiar to the Bible. Every time anyone reads anything or attempts to explain what someone else is saying, a hermeneutical process is going on. The same principles and methods apply, though the content of what is being interpreted may be radically different. Where biblical hermeneutics may be said to differ from general hermeneutics is in the particularly pressing and urgent need felt by most of its readers to interpret what by many standards would not be regarded as so highly significant for the contemporary age. But that difference stems from the value put upon the Bible by its readers, and not from the hermeneutical task as such.

Biblical hermeneutics is a subject of urgent attention in the contemporary church because of increasing dissatisfaction with the methods and results of purportedly 'objective' exegesis, and because of a growing awareness of the significance of the interpreter in the process of interpretation. The question is increasingly taking the form, not 'What does this text mean?', but 'In what way is it meaningful?' and 'To whom is it meaningful?' This move signifies a shift of attention from '*What* does this text mean?' to '*How* does this text mean?', i.e. a shift of focus to hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation.

1. HERMENEUTICS IN HISTORICAL BRETHRENISM

It must not be supposed that when the term 'hermeneutics' is not being used, hermeneutics is not being practised. Within the Brethren movement a variety of hermeneutical postures can be identified. For communities that associated themselves closely with the Bible rather than with church tradition, it was essential and inevitable that hermeneutical procedures should have been developed.

First, the decision that the Bible must be its own interpreter, viz. that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture is itself a hermeneutical decision. It has often implied the negation or minimal estimation of traditional patristic, reformed, or (to a large extent) contemporary biblical interpretation. Such a hermeneutic is not necessarily so inward

[p.67]

looking as it has proved with Brethren interpretation until the last few decades, but it does tend in that direction without some powerful countervailing force. The hermeneutic of 'Scripture is its own interpreter' also tends to play down the role of 'private' interpretation in the guise of 'spiritual' or 'Spirit-taught' interpretation; any novel interpretation is bound to have to run the gauntlet of scriptural passages apparently opposed to it. Herein lies both a great strength and a great weakness of this hermeneutic: it tends to protect and defend the unity of Scripture, but at the same time to reduce all Scripture to an unvariegated uniformity. If everything must be harmonious, no creative dissonances are allowed.

Secondly, a feature of historical Brethren hermeneutics very striking to the present-day student is the sharply polemical use that has been made of the Bible. The Bible has been seen as an arsenal of proof-texts for theological warfare, whether the pamphlet wars of the nineteenth century over the finer points of eschatology or Christology or the contemporary struggles over the role of women in the church or the

charismatic movement. This function of the Bible is founded upon particular views both of the nature of the part (e.g. the verse) in relation to the whole of Scripture and of the nature of biblical authority as essentially that of a court of final appeal. Both these hermeneutical views are open to criticism, as will be pointed out below.

Thirdly, the proof texting hermeneutic has found a further manifestation in the atomistic (verse-by-verse) exegesis familiar in Bible study groups, sermons and expositions. An atomistic hermeneutic springs, of course, from an entirely admirable desire to pay close attention to the text, but it often results in failure to see the wood for the trees, and opens up the possibility for an arbitrariness in interpretation (e.g. when the presupposition is entertained that two lines of OT poetry in parallelism must say different things *because* they are two lines).

Fourthly, dispensationalism, though not indigenous to the Brethren movement nor by any means confined to it, has been a powerful hermeneutical principle within Brethrenism, though its influence has greatly diminished in some parts of the world. Dispensationalism exists as a solution to the alienness of the Old Testament. By Judaizing it completely, i.e. referring it to Israel exclusively, dispensationalism makes the Old Testament irrelevant to the church except by the use of some further hermeneutical process such as typology or allegory—which will be mentioned below. Dispensationalism's fundamental principle is an absolutizing of the distinction between Israel and the church; in so doing it fails to recognize that the alienness of the Old Testament and the alienness of the New Testament from our own

[p.68]

time differ only in degree and not in kind. With the one hand dispensationalism pushes the Old Testament too much into the past, not to say the *passé*, with the other it pulls the New Testament too much into our world, as if there was no significant difference, for example, between the church at Corinth and a British congregation of the twentieth century. Dispensationalism has been the most powerful instrument in alienating Christians of the Brethren movement from two-thirds of their Bible, and has thus proved the single most deleterious factor in Brethren hermeneutics. Its influence persists long after the full-scale elaboration of the theory has been forgotten. Its only positive contribution has been to serve as a warning against a simple identification of Israel and the church, such as is to be found, in tendency at least, in Reformed and Puritan biblical interpretation.

Fifthly, typological and allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, while not necessarily supportive of a dispensationalist hermeneutic, has proved effective in promoting it. It is unquestionably true that typological patterns and correspondences exist between the Testaments (and within the Testaments for that matter; e.g. the 'exodus—new exodus' theme), but that is no reason for adopting typological relationships as the primary model for the relationship of the Testaments. The Old Testament exists in its own right as Word of God, and needs no New Testament to bestow or affirm its validity as revelation. Given the Old Testament, the New Testament offers a surplus; but we may also say that, given the New Testament, the Old Testament offers a surplus. Allegory, though much abused (ill-used and ill-spoken off, is no bad thing in itself it has a certain decorative function, and can appeal

to the imagination more readily than more sober statements of truth often can. But its role, hermeneutically speaking, is parasitic upon other, more prosaic, hermeneutical decisions and processes. In sum, typology and allegory in Brethren hermeneutics have alerted Bible students to patterns of correspondence between the Testaments, but have done more harm than good in obscuring or overriding the reality of Old Testament faith and history and its genuine experience of the true God.

Sixthly, a tendency is observable within the Brethren movement (as also in other evangelical circles) to delimit a *de facto* 'canon within the canon'. This hermeneutical principle, hotly resisted when stated as such, not only victimizes the Old Testament, but also within the New Testament tends to give priority to Pauline theology, second rank to the Johannine writings, and third place to the Synoptic Gospels. One has only to consider the normative function of typically Pauline concepts such as justification, redemption, and the church, or the use of the Johannine imagery of the second birth compared with the lan-

[p.69]

guage of Jesus in the Synoptics, to see this hermeneutical principle at work. Interpreting Scripture by Scripture ought not to mean making everything fat the categories of a Paul or a John. Unease with the principle of a 'canon within the canon' need not lead to the (possibly meaningless) assertion that all parts of Scripture are of equal weight and value, but ought at least to open us to questions about our unexamined presuppositions and to a greater eagerness to listen to the whole of Scripture in all its diversity.

What has been described in this section are some methods of Brethren hermeneutics that have struck me as typical. In every case I have found fault with the method in question, though with some there have been positive benefits. Standing back a little now from the hermeneutical methods as such, I conclude this section by asking, What lies at the root of these manifestations? There has surely been, and still is, an immense concentration of energy upon the precise and proper meaning of the Bible, sometimes pseudo-academic and practically speaking irreligious, but more often, I judge, the result of intense love for Scripture. Can the concentrated energy bound up too often in a faulty or stultifying hermeneutics be released for a productive and creative use of the Bible? I believe so, and I suggest that some attention to current hermeneutical theory can be turned to good account in our churches' use of the Bible.

2. HERMENEUTICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Biblical hermeneutics is a topic much considered in the church today, for various reasons, some legitimate, some illegitimate. Among legitimate reasons is the lately awakened recognition (in evangelical Christianity at least) of the culture-conditioned nature of the Bible and the consequent impossibility of transferring the Bible and its teaching 'neat' into the twentieth century. In more radical circles the problem is being posed more sharply: whether it is possible at all to translate a book like the Bible from one culture to another (so Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*), or in what sense, if any, the Bible may be said to have authority (so Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*). Another way of expressing this legitimate concern is the desire to do

justice to the meaning of Scripture in its original setting and the consequent unease when a distance between the original meaning and any possible meaning today opens up.

Among illegitimate reasons for an interest in hermeneutics is the hope that in a methodology dignified with such a prepossessing name there must be a basically simple formula that can deal with problems

[p.70]

of cultural relativity and can with assurance direct us to 'the correct' interpretation. Such a hope is ill-founded.

Hermeneutical theory concerns the nature of understanding; it can expose false interpretations and perhaps put us on the track of better interpretations, but it cannot provide a method or set of rules that will turn out a 'correct' interpretation. Hermeneutical theory is concerned with the problem of cultural transposition, and offers guidance to those wrestling with an ancient text, but it cannot remove the problem.

Some aspects of contemporary hermeneutical discussion that may be helpful here are these:

1. *The significance of presuppositions*. There is nothing novel about the view that we always bring our own presuppositions to the text we are reading or interpreting. What is difficult is to recognize our own presuppositions for what they are, especially if we have become used to understanding a text in a particular way. Often the existence of our own presuppositions only comes out into the light when we encounter people or traditions who are used to interpreting a passage in a quite different way.

Sometimes it is thought that, once the existence of presuppositions has been recognized, presuppositions should be abandoned altogether, as far as possible, and that our approach to the text should be that of an 'open' (or empty) mind. Not only is such a goal unlikely to be achieved, but also it is doubtful whether an attempt to shed presuppositions or preconceptions is always the best way of achieving openness to the text. For preconceptions, unless they are simple misunderstandings of fact or based on an easily-remedied ignorance, are likely to form part and parcel of the interpreter's whole outlook; which means that one can 'shed' such preconceptions only by a conscious suspension of belief, that will probably prove only temporary and that will catch up with one again when one comes to integrate one's new understanding with one's total outlook.

To put it positively, presuppositions are not merely inevitable, but actually indispensable, since without any presuppositions or 'preunderstanding' on our part, a text would remain meaningless to us. We need to have some preconception of 'sin', 'forgiveness', or 'God', for example, before any passage that uses these terms can begin to be understood at all. On the other hand, presuppositions, preconceptions, and 'pre-understandings' should not only be acknowledged, as if it did not matter how many and what presuppositions an interpreter has, so long as one frankly confesses

them, but should be progressively corrected by the text. The process of progressive correction takes place by means of the 'hermeneutical circle'.

[p.71]

2. The '*hermeneutical circle*'. This term describes the continuing process of interaction between the text and the interpreter. One takes one's own pre-understanding and expectations to the text, and thereupon finds, if one is open to the text, that its interests and concerns are not necessarily one's own. Thus the text 'responds' to the interpreter by divulging how it differs from the reader's pre-understanding, and thereby it invites the reader to revise one's pre-understanding and to address the text again. This process goes on even when people are totally unaware of the process; it is the only process by which an interpreter can attain a deeper understanding of the text. If the text means exactly the same thing to the reader every time that one reads it, the probability is that one is not gaining in understanding and appreciation of the text, but blocking the text out in favour of one's preconceptions. The image of the 'hermeneutical circle' conveys the idea that the movement from interpreter to text is neither a once-for-all event nor simply a one-way traffic system. It is a continuing process.

3. *'Distancing' the text*. An almost inevitable result of a serious study of the Bible that respects its historical origins is a sense of alienation or 'distancing' from the text. This often disturbing experience can be avoided only by a naievety that has no element of historical awareness. Most students involved in academic study of the Bible have this experience, and non-academic students of the Bible are increasingly brought within range of this experience through the issues raised in all but the more elementary helps to the study of the Bible. This aspect of the hermeneutical process at least goes against the grain, if it does not in fact prove positively traumatic, to the Christian reader of the Bible, who expects the Bible to speak to him or her directly and personally. But we cannot expect the Bible to speak to us unless we are prepared to listen to it on its own terms, i.e. in the context in which it was written. (That the Bible does speak to people who know nothing of its historical setting I do not deny; I am speaking only of what we have a right to expect.) We owe it to the text to recognize that it was not spoken to us or for us when it became a text, no matter how loudly and clearly it may seem to speak to us now. 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel' was not addressed to us initially, however much it may address us now, nor was 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' spoken to us, however comprehensive its scope may appear. To 'distance' the text is to recognize how 'other' the text is from the interpreter, and to see that it is a matter for objective study and not just a trigger for the reader's subjective reaction.

However, it must be stressed that 'distancing' is only a means to an end, and of course by no means an end in itself. It is valuable in recog-

[p.72]

nizing the time-conditioned nature of all the Bible, and not only of those parts that happen to be matters of contemporary dispute.

4. *The objectivity of the text*. In her book, *The Business of Criticism*, Helen Gardner speaks of the nature of literary criticism (which essentially means understanding, interpretation, and appreciation) thus: 'The beginning of the discipline of literary criticism lies in the work of art's objective existence as the product of another mind, which exists not to be used but to be understood and enjoyed. Its process is the progressive correction of misconceptions, due to ignorance, personal prejudice, or temperamental defects, the setting of the work at a distance, the disentangling it from my personal hopes, fears, and beliefs, so that the poem which my mind re-creates in the reading becomes more and more a poem which my own mind would never have created... The enlarging and continual reforming of one's conception of the work by bringing fresh knowledge and fresh experience of life and literature to it, this process of continual submission and resubmission to the work, is highly delightful and perpetually renews the original sense of delight from which the critic began.' *Mutatis mutandis*, these remarks apply excellently to the nature of engagement with the biblical text. The note of self-interest too prominent in many Bible discussion groups and devotional commentaries is put in its place by the principle that the text exists in the first place not to be *used* but to be *understood* and *enjoyed*. Above all the text of the Bible must remain an objective reality that stands to some extent over against us as readers as a reality which we never fully assimilate, however much we may come to agree with the text and make it part of our being. John Baillie, in speaking of the reality of the presence of God, might as well have been speaking of the continuing objective reality of the biblical text when he wrote: 'The test of reality is the resistance it offers to the otherwise uninhibited course of my own thinking. Reality is what I 'come up against', what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me' (*The Sense of the Presence of God*, p.33).

5. *The subjectivity of the interpreter*. Of what has been said above about the nature of hermeneutics, very little is novel. But at this point the insights of the 'new hermeneutic', inspired by philosophers and theologians of language, become relevant. In traditional hermeneutics, the interpreter has been regarded as the active subject, and the text as the passive object of his scrutiny, examination and knowledge. Now, with a fuller recognition of the role of the hermeneutical circle, it is being' realized that the text's action upon the interpreter is at least as important as the interpreter's activity directed toward the text. The

[p.73]

text addresses, questions, and challenges the interpreter. Meaning results from the interaction between the text and its reader(s); it does not make sense to say that the text has meaning irrespective of the meaning perceived by its readers. To take this view of meaning is to bring the interpreter's reaction—one's personal and subjective thinking, feeling and willing within the area of the meaning of the text. Meaning can no longer be defined in terms of the verbal meaning of the text nor solely in terms of the author's intention, but partly also in terms of 'what it means to me', the reader. There is no room here for arbitrariness or unbridled subjectivity, because the meaning of the text in its original historical circumstances has to exercise some control over the possible re-interpretations and new, subjectively-oriented meanings it has for its various readers. How such control is to be formulated is a difficult question, but a

tendency to antinomianism is probably to be preferred to a too rigidly prescriptive statement of the possibilities of meaning inherent in a text.

6. *Text and context*. It is an ancient rule of interpretation that a text (passage) must be interpreted in the light of its context. Precisely what this rule means, however, has now become a critical issue. It is accepted that the part can only be understood in terms of the whole, just as the whole can only be understood in terms of its parts. A movement towards understanding has to operate in two directions to be effectual: from the small to the large and the large to the small. The questions are: How large must the large be? and, What if text and context are not apparently in agreement? Ultimately the context for the interpretation of any passage of Scripture must be the whole of Scripture; but it is questionable whether the whole of Scripture has necessarily to be brought into the interpretation of every passage. The problem particularly arises in connection with the Old Testament, where some would argue that the Old Testament can reach a Christian audience only through an interpretation that involves the New Testament as context, and others would claim that the Old Testament can speak directly to a Christian audience without the intervention of the New Testament. Here I think that various levels of meaning may be allowed to stand, and that the interpreter may be free to interpret the text within a narrower or broader context as he chooses. It is impossible to say every thing at once, and it would be a pity if the exposition of Genesis 1 had necessarily to take care at the same time of Revelation 22. The Old Testament, therefore, does not need to be interpreted Christologically, though it can be, and John does not have to be interpreted in the light of Paul, though no doubt he can be. There would be something absurd in insisting upon setting every biblical utterance so firmly within a total biblical context that the particularity and pungency of the utter-

[p.74]

ante should be overwhelmed by the qualifications, extensions, analogies and comments that the rest of the Bible may offer. It may even be that the text is in tension with other texts or with the whole canonical context. It would indeed be unlikely that such should not be the case, given that the whole is so complex. The temptation is to disguise or dismiss the singularity of the particular in favour of an all-inclusive harmony. But to succumb to this temptation is to have decided in advance the nature of the unity of the Bible, which is unfair to its diversity. The unity of the Bible is a matter of faith and hope; it is not immediately apparent, and it is not produced by sleights of hand that make tensions and irregularities invisible.

3. HERMENEUTICS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The subject of hermeneutics has aroused suspicion and fear in some evangelical quarters. It has been seen as relativizing, detracting from the authority of the Bible, putting the interpretation of the Bible exclusively in the hands of professionals, producing a smokescreen to cover indecision and inaction.

These fears are not entirely without foundation, and one can imagine 'hermeneutics' being used as a 'cop-out' for all kinds of embarrassing situations. If it turns out, however, that there are sharp operators in the field of hermeneutics, it will be no

different from any other area of legitimate activity, and there will be no reason to blame 'hermeneutics' as such—since after all it is little more than the contemporary word for 'interpretation', a respectable and necessary activity.

Does hermeneutics tend to relativize the Bible? Hermeneutics can hardly do that; what it does relativize is our interpretation of the Bible, warning us that we cannot hope to reach a final, definitive interpretation, but one that must change from time to time and from culture to culture. This fact is already obvious from the history of the interpretation of the Bible from the earliest Christian centuries to our own day; but the significance of the fact may be wrongly understood as simply a progressive movement towards the correct interpretation. Rather, since the subjectivity of the readers is included within the meaning of the text, interpretations of the Bible are *bound* to change or vary. This is not to say that there are not better and worse interpretations of the Bible, more faithful and less faithful. But that is precisely what relativity signifies. While there are completely wrong and downright impossible interpretations of the Bible, most interpretations that are offered are relatively good or relatively bad. Where modern hermeneu-

[p.75]

tical theory scores over traditional hermeneutics is that it can accept the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings. The effect of this open ness is not to affirm that one interpretation is as good as another, for there is still room for debate about the value of an interpretation; it is to remove from the art of interpretation the triumphalist mentality that insists that because one interpretation (usually that held by oneself) is correct, all others are wrong.

Do the current trends in hermeneutics tend to weaken the authority; of the Bible? No, they make more clear the nature of the authority of the Bible. In the first place, it becomes clearer that the authority of the Bible, however it is defined, is an authority held by the Bible as a whole, and not by its parts as distinct from the whole. So while it would be true to say of a verse one is quoting, 'The Bible says...', it might be misleading; for that verse may mean, within its own immediate context or in the context of the Bible as a whole, something quite different from what it means, or appears to mean, when taken in isolation. So the authority of the Bible is not transferable to its parts, unless these parts can be shown to be in harmony with the thrust of the biblical message as a whole. This view undoubtedly leaves the way open for unprincipled sophistry denying the authority of the Bible on one issue after another; but what is the alternative? It is impossible to maintain that the full weight of Scripture stands behind every one of its parts (e.g. the speeches of Job's friends, or the sayings Paul quotes only to refute immediately).

In the second place, it becomes clearer that the authority of the Bible does not consist in its being an ultimate court of appeal in matters of faith and doctrine, true though that may be in certain situations. The kind of setting envisaged by the concept of an 'ultimate court of appeal' seems to be the medieval disputation and its modern analogues, rather than the everyday world of Christian experience of Scripture. It limits the authority of the Bible intolerably to think of situations of *dispute* as the typical situations in which the authority of the Bible is experienced. The Bible is

functioning well and properly, and exercising its authority most appropriately, when it is influencing the sympathetic reader or the believing congregation. Its authority is best spoken of as the authority of the performer rather than that of the despot; that is, its authority consists principally in its *function*, in its genuine ability to bring the Word of God to men. It extends, rather than limits, the authority of the Bible to look for its authority in its everyday power over the way people shape their lives, think of God. and act towards one another. *How* it exercises that influence is hard to pinpoint. But it is the fact that matters, and it is certainly not the case that its influence is limited to its clear-cut moral or religious teaching.

[p.76]

It's stories, parables, and visions are as much life-enhancing and world-transforming as its directly didactic elements.

Does the present insistence on hermeneutics put too much authority in the hands of the academic specialists? To be sure, the very word 'hermeneutics' makes the business of interpretation more complicated than it need. There is no particular value in even using the term in the context of a local church as long as its implications are recognized. If the text is recognized as an objective entity in its own right, if the question, What does it mean to me?, is constantly being asked, if divergences of interpretation are allowed, if the part is constantly being examined in the light of the whole, and so on, then sound hermeneutical method is being used, and it does not matter whether or not the term is used. It would be better, in fact, to eschew the term and attempts to explain it in favour of getting on with the business of interpretation.

The church's interpretation of the Bible is too important a matter to be left in the hands of the professionals. While their expertize should always be appreciated as one of the Spirit's gifts to the church, and not simply humanly-acquired knowledge, the fact is that no group has a monopoly on interpretation. Every Christian who reads the Bible for himself or herself is an interpreter, or else not understanding what is being read. To be sure, there are good and bad interpreters, skilled and unskilled. One person's interpretation is not necessarily as good as another's. But far from a 'professional' interpretation being delivered as a package to a simply receptive community, the desirable aim is for a communal interpretation to develop. By a 'communal interpretation', I do not mean a more definitive or authoritative one, but one that contains more dimensions, one that reflects the variety of meanings the text of the Bible actually has to the congregation.

Does a concern for hermeneutical method lead simply to more talk, masking indecision and inaction? I would argue the contrary. It may be thought that a systematic confusion between 'interpretation' and 'application' has run through the previous paragraph. That is indeed the case, and deliberately so, for the Bible admits of no interpretation that does not issue in questions of application. To 'understand' in this context must mean 'to understand in relation to ourselves or myself There is indeed an historical-critical interpretation that rests content with an interpretation of the Bible in its original setting and considers it no part of its business to project the meaning of the biblical text beyond its past and to interpret it as a living word in the present. The encapsulation of the Bible in the past, which I think to be appropriate not

even in the academy, certainly has no place in the church. Nor can the particularity of the biblical texts be transformed into 'general

[p.77]

truths' in such a way that the Bible becomes relevant to the church only through the interposition of a generalizing morality and theology. Except of course when the Bible itself is generalizing, it must be allowed to speak from its particularity to the particularity of the present personal, communal, or social situation. In that way the Bible's interpretation is engaged with action; the Bible does not stand in the background as a book of principles or simply a resource took but is involved in action. This view of the hermeneutical task negates the doubt that hermeneutics is a 'cop-out' from the pressing needs of the day.

This section of the paper has taken the form of a response to various suspicions of hermeneutics; but it has not been primarily defensive, for on every issue I believe that reasonable questions that may be asked of the current concern about hermeneutics prove to be opportunities for a positive account of its function in the local church. There are further levels of specificity that can, and must, be explored, but I have in this paper refrained from particular applications, on the whole, in order that this approach can be digested and assessed without direct involvement in current burning issues.

© 1982 *Partnership* (http://www.partnershipuk.org/). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/