

The proper approach to the interpretation of Scripture is one of the two or three most urgent issues within our churches today. Dr. Newman, Head of the Theology Division, Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Vice-Chairman of ATSSEA, reflects on this issue for theological students.

Biblical Research: A Matter of the Proper Emphasis

PAUL W. NEWMAN

The method one uses to do Biblical research will have a great influence on one's faith and theological thought, on one's preaching and ministry and even on one's style of life and the way one serves God and one's fellowmen. The Bible is not a simple book. If it were simple and easy to understand there would not be so many different kinds of Christians in the world. There would not be so many different ideas about what is God's will for the Church and for the world. The Bible is a very deep book and there are various methods that people use to try to understand its deep truth. If the method used is inappropriate the results of the Biblical research may be inadequate. Every Christian scholar has to consider the main elements in Biblical research and decide which ones he must emphasize. In this paper I wish to consider some of the main factors in Biblical research and explain why I would stress the importance of some factors and minimize the influence of other factors.

I. An Historical or a Doctrinaire Approach to the Bible?

The terms "historical" and "doctrinaire" are sometimes replaced by the terms "inductive" and "deductive". The question here is whether one should go to the Bible with as few presuppositions as possible to discover the truth of God there or whether one must have certain beliefs about the Bible and about God before starting Biblical research. The latter belief results in a mainly deductive approach to the Bible in which the Bible is shown to prove whatever beliefs the person has who is doing the research. In other words, a deductive approach can be a doctrinaire approach. But one cannot entirely avoid having presuppositions when one starts to study the Bible. Therefore, the question becomes which presuppositions are the appropriate ones for a Christian to have. I believe that Biblical research must be mainly inductive rather than deductive and I prefer to call this the historical approach to the Bible in contrast to a doctrinaire approach. The presuppositions of this approach will become clear as I describe the method.

The historical approach holds that the events of the Bible happened in the same kind of world and the same kind of history of which we are also part. Therefore, it follows that if we wish to understand the events of the Bible accurately we must look for interpretations that would be possible in the world as we understand it today. This is not to say that the interpretation of the Bible is limited to what can be proved scientifically. There are many things in the world that science cannot and never will be able to prove. For example, all decisions about values or about the ultimate meaning of

life are beyond scientific determination. But historical events are at least partly open to scientific investigation and we cannot discover the most accurate knowledge about them unless we use a scientific historical method. If God is the God of truth we must try as hard as we can to discover the truth about the events recorded in the Bible. Otherwise our biblical research will not glorify God or serve him in the best possible way.

This raises the question of the relationship of science and religion. Science is basically a method for discovering new knowledge, and no one can deny that it is a very successful method for discovering certain kinds of knowledge. It has been estimated that in the first half of the 20th Century more new knowledge was discovered than in all of human history up to the 20th century. Furthermore, the increase in new knowledge is so rapid that the total amount of knowledge has doubled again since 1950 and will double again before the end of this Century. There can be no doubt that scientific methods are valid ones to explore the truth of the universe. They are certainly not the only methods for discovering truth but in their proper sphere they are the right methods to use. The question is: do scientific methods have any place in discovering religious truth? More specifically, do scientific truths have any effect on the way we understand the truth of the Bible? Some people would say "absolutely not". They would say religious truth and scientific truth are two entirely separate things and that if there seems to be any conflict between scientific understanding of the world and the Bible then we must accept the Bible and deny the scientific knowledge. However, it is surely true that not only the truth of the Bible but all truth is from God, and that we must use whatever methods are appropriate to discover the various kinds of truth. If the writers of the Bible who were not scientists give some explanations of nature or the beginning of the world that are different from what we know by scientific methods then we simply say that the Biblical writers did not know about these matters as well as we know today. There can be no question that this is true. But it is necessary to explain further that the Biblical writers were primarily concerned to witness to theological truth, not scientific truth, and it is the theological truth of the Bible, not the prescientific explanations of nature, that is important to us. The Bible is a theological authority for us, not a scientific authority.

We must have an historical approach to the Bible in order to understand the meaning of the gospel itself. The central theme of the Biblical message is that God is the Lord of history and that he comes into this world to save it. If we treat the world of the Bible as a different kind of world from the one in which we live then we may not understand the main point of the gospel concerning how God is with us in the world today. In 1 John 4:1, 2 it says that the test for true prophets is if they confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. John was warning his readers to beware of people who said that Jesus was not a real man but only seemed to be a real man. John knew that the gospel is lost if people do not acknowledge that God became real flesh in Jesus Christ. If Jesus was not a real man in the real world then the gospel is irrelevant to real people in the real world. If we do not use an historical method to discover the facts about Jesus we are in danger of treating him as if he were not real flesh living in the real world but only a mythical character in a book. If God came into history in Biblical times in ways that are entirely different from his relation to the world today then we have no hope for His presence in the world of today. An historical approach helps

to show the meaning of God's acts recorded in Scripture for the world of today. In other words, it helps to discover the full gospel in the Bible as well as to uncover the real truth about the events through which God reveals Himself. Because God reveals Himself in history the method of discovering the truth of revelation must include historical method.

But there is another indispensable element in theological method, namely, the openness to hear God's living word addressing us in our situation and calling us to glorify God and obey Him. The truth of God comes only to those who wait upon the Lord. Jesus said again and again "He who has ears to hear let him hear." (e.g. Mtt 11:15) If we approach the Bible only as an historical document and do not hear with the ears of faith, then we will certainly miss the revelation of God in the Bible. It is possible to press the historical-critical method to such an extreme that one virtually denies all revelation. As a result, some people tend to discount the authority of the Bible for faith and lose sight of some important aspects of the gospel. For example, in a mistaken application of historical method some people would say that the resurrection of Jesus was merely a psychological phenomenon in the minds of the disciples and that Jesus himself was not raised at all in any real sense. But a sound historical method does not exclude the possibility of a real resurrection. A sound method of investigation is open to all possibilities and decides the truth on the basis of the evidence. This what an inductive or historical approach tries to do. Because some people discount the reality of the resurrection they lose sight of an important aspect of the significance of Jesus and miss an essential part of the gospel. Our hopes for history and our trusting in God's saving power in history are drastically affected if we assume that the grave was the final end for Jesus and for ourselves. St. Paul stressed this strongly in I Corinthians 15:19 when he said "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all men most to be pitied."

A doctrinaire approach to the Bible is one which starts with a fixed set of theological or other beliefs and then tries to show how the Bible proves these beliefs. Some scholars, for example, seem mainly concerned in their Biblical study to prove that the Bible has no errors of scientific or historical fact in it. Others seem mainly concerned to show up every possible mistake. These latter people seem to accept as a proven fact every possible doubt that they can discover about the accuracy of the Biblical records. People with a doctrinaire approach of one extreme or another believe that their approach glorifies God because it shows so much trust in the Bible or because it is so diligent in the search for truth. Actually, however, a doctrinaire approach does not glorify God so much as it stresses the person's own doctrines and ideas.

II. The Truth of the Bible as Static Propositions or as the Living Word of God?

Some people regard the Bible as a kind of infallible textbook which has a legalistic authority for faith and behaviour. The weakness here lies in a misunderstanding of the nature of revelation and faith. These people believe that revelation is a set of perfect statements about God that faith should accept. This set of perfect statements is set down objectively in the Bible and what one has to do to be saved is to believe this set of statements. According to this way of thinking faith actually becomes a kind of good works

that people do to be saved. But faith is not in fact accepting a set of statements about God because revelation is not primarily a set of statements about God. And, certainly, salvation is not because of good works but because of God's grace.

Revelation is God's own presence through His Spirit in the hearts of men. And faith is the condition of being awakened by God's grace to trust and glorify God. Revelation and faith are the product of the living word of God. To say that God is living means in part that He Himself always reveals Himself. Revelation is God's self-disclosure. Nothing in this world reveals God by itself. There is no proof for the reality of God to be found anywhere. If a person comes to know something about God and to trust in Him it is only because God Himself has shown Himself to that person. Of course, the chief place where God shows Himself to people is in the Scriptures, but the Bible by itself does not reveal God; God reveals Himself through the Bible.

The statements in the Bible are not perfect in themselves any more than our theological statements are perfect. In II Corinthians 4:6, 7 St. Paul says very clearly "God . . . has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." If the man who wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament thought that he was an "earthen vessel" to hold the knowledge of God we are surely making a mistake when we treat his writings as if they were the writings of God Himself. This mistake sometimes destroys the adequacy of a person's research in the Scriptures. If a person thinks that the Scriptures are absolutely perfect and without any human mistakes there are some questions which he cannot ask in his biblical research. For example, some people think that it would be impossible for some of the letters in the New Testament which claim to be written by St. Paul to be written by some one else. If this were true, they say, then the Bible would not be perfect and the authority of God's word would be destroyed. But in fact there are almost certainly letters in the New Testament that were written by anonymous writers and then ascribed to Paul or Peter. Many scholars think that Ephesians is one such book and also the Letters to Timothy and II Peter. Of course, we cannot go into this question fully here but only say that there is some evidence of pseudonymity that should not be ignored. Biblical research becomes inadequate when it refuses even to look at the evidence of other Biblical scholars who raise such questions as the question of pseudonymity or the question of a real resurrection of Jesus, or when it sacrifices objective research in order to prove its own doctrines or ideas.

To acknowledge the imperfection of one's own theological doctrines is essential to an adequate faith in God. Faith is the relationship of the individual with God through Jesus Christ. It is the product of God's Spirit dwelling in the person's heart and mind. As St. Paul said "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." God transcends all our ideas or statements about Him at the same time as He is present in our ideas and statements revealing Himself to us. Our ideas and words are "earthen vessels" that always stand under the judgment of God's perfection and that can be replaced, if necessary, by other "earthen vessels". In spite of their imperfection they are justified by God's grace just as our whole selves are justified by God's grace even though we are not perfect. This process of being judged and forgiven by God's grace

in all our words and actions and thoughts is the meaning of faith. There is no such thing as "pure doctrine". If one denies that "pure doctrine" needs to be justified by God's grace, that is, to be judged and affirmed before the Holy and transcendent God, the result is to separate religious truth from a living relationship with God in faith and make one's doctrines into a kind of idol, that is, something which claims to be perfect and absolute as God is perfect and absolute but which in fact is neither perfect nor absolute. This is a tragic mistake because it is usually done with the best intentions, namely, the intention of glorifying God. In fact it does not glorify God. On the contrary, it takes the doctrines of the Church away from the judgment and mercy of God, that is to say, away from the relationship with God that is a living faith. It undermines the new covenant of Jesus in which the meaning of his death and resurrection are written on the hearts of men as the new law of love. And it makes Christianity into a religion whose revelation is written in a book as if the book were made of stone. In fact, however, God's revelation is living and is written by the Holy Spirit in the living hearts and minds of men.

The opposite extreme to a completely static idea of revelation is to conceive of revelation as completely dynamic. Some people are not aware of the unchanging heart of the gospel revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. They do not understand the judgment and mercy of God that justifies and sanctifies all our words and thoughts and actions. As a result, these people accept as truth whatever is new or fashionable. They are "tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14) and end up "conformed to this world" rather than being transformed to show forth "what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). To say that God's revelation is "living" does not mean that it changes and changes. The substance of God's truth surely does not change but it keeps coming to life again and again every time that a person is inspired to hear the word of God and believe it.

It is a mistake to make the Bible into a legalistic document to be interpreted literally in every verse, and it is a mistake to treat the Bible only as a collection of myths that are interesting and possibly helpful for faith but not really authoritative. We believe that the Bible has unique authority for faith and that it is the final criterion for the adequacy of theological beliefs. We believe that God encounters us and graciously reveals Himself to us as we study the Bible using the best methods that we know to discover the historical truth in the Biblical records. The Bible contains the records of God's self disclosure to the prophets and disciples and other Biblical writers, and as we study the writings and actions of these people the original revelation of God to them comes alive for us by the power of God's Spirit working again in us.

III. Tradition or Renewal in Biblical Interpretation?

Biblical research includes an element of interpretation as well as discovering the historical facts. How should the interpretation of the interpretation? Certainly, it would be irresponsible to ignore the interpretation of Jesus made by the great religious leaders in the history of the Church. In any case, we certainly cannot ignore the apostolic interpretation of Jesus that is already present in the New Testament. But, can we or should we limit our interpretations of the Biblical truth to the traditional interpreta-

tions? What about the need to renew the interpretation of the gospel for each successive generation and each new culture in which the gospel is preached? This process of adapting the interpretation of the gospel for different kinds of hearers can be seen in the New Testament itself. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses a method of interpretation which he thinks will be suitable to people who come from the Jewish culture and religion. For this reason, he uses the metaphor of the High Priest to interpret Jesus' identity and significance. St. Paul wrote in I Cor. 9:20, 21 "To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews; . . . To those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . that I might win those outside the law." There is some validity in the constant renewal of Biblical interpretation in order to help win for Christ people who have different ways of thinking and different cultural backgrounds. Because the world is changing more rapidly than ever before in history, the Church must renew the interpretation of the Scriptures so that the younger generations will be able to understand the gospel and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. At the same time we believe that the substance of the revelation of God through the Bible does not change.

We cannot lightly disregard the passionate beliefs of our fellow Christians in the past who were earnestly trying to serve God and witness to Our Lord Jesus Christ. But we are responsible for witnessing to Christ in our generation and, like Luther, we sometimes have to differ from tradition and say "So help me God I can do no other." Like Luther, also, we love the good traditions of the Church and, especially, love the Scriptures as the medium and criterion of our faith. (We say "medium", not "source" because God is really the only "source" of faith. We are steadfast in the belief that nothing new can replace Jesus Christ and the word of God as it comes to us through the Bible.

Conclusion

I have dealt with only three pairs of factors in Biblical research but they are perhaps the most important ones. Should we be more historical or more doctrinaire in our Biblical research? Are we seeking static propositions of revelation or a living relationship with the living God? How much should our interpretation of the Bible be determined by tradition and how much should it be renewed in order to help new generations of people understand the gospel? I have emphasized the historical, living revelation of the God who says "Behold, I make all things new." (Rev. 21:5) This does not exclude or deny the need for an adequate doctrine of Scripture in order to do adequate research. It does not deny the fact that God speaks to men through the propositional statements of the Bible. It certainly does not deny the importance of the apostolic tradition in which we stand.

There is one more point that I must make. Because we believe that our doctrines and ideas are "earthen vessels" and because we know that as Isaiah 55:9 says: as the heavens are higher than the earth so are God's ways higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts; therefore we must be humble about our doctrines and ideas and tolerant of those persons who have different ideas or doctrines. Perhaps not all the faculty and students of the Theology Division in Chung Chi College would agree with my understanding of the right approach to the Scriptures. But all the faculty members and students would agree that we must live together

in mutual love and peace. We must accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ because Christ has accepted us. In the Theology Division there is room for difference of opinion. There is room for a person to grow in his understanding, to change his thinking, or to keep his old ideas if he wishes. We try to test one another's ideas here and help to strengthen one another's weak points but we do not force any one to accept a certain position, and we do not wish to make any final judgment about a person's faith. All we insist upon is a mutual acceptance of one another in love. We simply try to fulfil Jesus' new commandment, namely, "that you love one another as I have loved you" because "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34, 35.)

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