

Living Under The Word: Hermeneutics Is Not as Easy as We Thought!

I have been asked today to say something about hermeneutics within Churches of Christ – or to put it in more familiar terms, how do people in Churches of Christ go about interpreting scripture? And all of this is to take place in just a few minutes, so I plan to paint with rather broad strokes. But I hope to leave you with a basic point to consider.

Hermeneutics of Consent

In his articles Richard Hays talks about the difference between a hermeneutics of consent and a hermeneutics of suspicion in reference to interpreting the Bible. I would contend that the same principle applies to assessing a theological tradition. It would certainly be easy for me to stand up and dismantle many of the ways we have used or abused scripture in the Restoration Movement. This would be true of any tradition. So let us see if we can transcend that. Today I wish to speak as one who has spent all of his life in Churches of Christ. Throughout my adult years I have sought to do theology within this tradition. So, as I speak, in Richard Hays' terms, I come from the perspective of trust or consent. I love this tradition. I am not mad at it!

Indeed, it is one of the more interesting places to talk about hermeneutics. Across the board our people love the Bible, study it, and constantly talk about it. Moreover, a lot of us see ourselves as a contrast-society to the “do your own thing” culture of much of contemporary Western society. For many of our people, not just in America, but around the world living under the Word as part of this community signifies a considerable commitment. Some of the stands we take have consequences.

Our Stance on Hermeneutics

I believe, for purposes of an overview, our venture with hermeneutical issues can be roughly divided into two stages. The first stage may be called an understanding of scripture as a *Divine Pattern* or *Blueprint*. Historically speaking this stage stretched from the beginnings of the American Restoration Movement with the Campbells to the latter part of the twentieth century. The second stage may be called ‘the shattering of the consensus.’ It stretches over the last several decades of the twentieth century to the present time. Procedurally, I will give short descriptions of our ventures with scripture in these two eras. I will conclude with a brief summary of where we are today and the challenges that face us.

The Divine Pattern Model

The American Restoration Movement emerged at the end of the Western Enlightenment era roughly dating from 1680-1810. The leaders of the Enlightenment had an ambivalent view of antiquity. On the one hand they were deeply suspicious of the truths of inherited opinion from the past. On the other hand they believed if they stripped away the myths and accretions of the ages (read Catholicism) they would find basic truths in the ancient teachers by which to live. All one needed to do was to separate the wheat from the chaff. We needed to get to the basic facts of what the ancients said and did. Based on the facts one could build the framework for a defensible religious system and one could find ethical guidelines by which to live.

The Restorationists of the nineteenth century were no exception. They believed that God had revealed himself and His will in the Bible. The basic data of this revelation was understood as a set of facts. These facts, embodied in the text, were thought to authorize the Christian

enterprise either by direct command, approved example, or necessary inference. As a total package it was reckoned that this approach would provide a basic pattern for restoring New Testament Christianity in its purity. A transparent reading of the text, if one were in Nigeria or on a desert island, would disclose the plan of salvation, and build a true church. Indeed, the church papers are full of stories of people who supposedly did precisely that.

This way of looking at the world remained fairly well in place in Churches of Christ until the 1960's. Embedded in manuals on hermeneutics in the nineteenth century and in the widely read *Gospel Advocate* commentaries of the twentieth century, this model was remarkably durable. But in the sixties the supportive Southern culture of unquestioned respect for a transparent reading of the Bible and elite support for its ethical precepts were washed away in the king tide of pluralism that swamped modern America. Members of Churches of Christ, particularly the young college-educated group, were forced, from the ground up, to rethink their faith. And, of course, they could not avoid thinking about how they read the Bible.

This turned out to be a very wrenching experience – especially with respect to some vital matters of biblical interpretation. And I am not just talking about questions like whether charismatic gifts ceased or off-the-wall millennial views. The bottom line is this. Basically, many of our people came to see that the Bible was not as clearly transparent as they thought it was. Not all seekers after truth saw its message alike. (Now this happened to be coterminous with developments going on in the wider world of hermeneutics; but that is another story.) To put it in “uptown” language it is the triumph of “perspectivalism” over “perspicuity.” We find that people bring different presuppositions when they read the same text. Just listen to the discussions in an average Bible class! How do you sort all of this out? I am not sure. The result is that we see it is more and more difficult to find common ground when we come to the text. And what does this do for the basic pattern or blueprint for restoring New Testament Christianity that was taken as inherent in the text?

Now this is not meant to be a counsel of despair. Ironically, at just this time, from the sixties onward, Churches of Christ experienced a great groundswell of dozens of able biblical scholars who came on the scene to help in these matters. Each one in his own way would say the Bible is a multifaceted set of writings encompassing many different kinds of literature making all sorts of claims. Yet most of them would note that the one kind of literature you do not find there is an architectural manual or rulebook that informs us how to play the game called Christianity. If we construe Christianity as a rulebook then God gave us the wrong book!

Still, a word of caution: I do not believe this observation invalidates the principle of Restorationism. If Christianity is true, it was true in its beginnings. I believe that. We need to rethink how it is plausible to contend for this faith today. It is clear that the old consensus is shattered. We will have to face the tough hermeneutical issues of current times.

The Shattered Consensus

So where are we today? Like a number of other venerable theological traditions (Wesleyan, Reformed, Lutheran) we are faced with widespread diversity and all that entails. Moreover, there is no doubt that the old familiar landmarks are disappearing rapidly. Teachers find it more and more difficult to give solid plausible reasons to the young why they should accept the way we construe Christianity over the way others do it. The tide of pluralism and its siren call for tolerance is still in. Yet, interestingly enough, in the confusion of all these changes there is still a common link to our past hermeneutic. No, we less and less hear the watchword: “We must have divine command or apostolic example before we will accept it.” Instead we hear

a new watchword: “If there is no verse against it why can’t we do it?” Those who are sensitive to church history will recall this kind of debate in earlier timeframes. But, in my judgment, I would want to say that, if this is what we have come to, we are not much farther along than earlier generations. All we have done is shuffle the chairs around.

A Modest Proposal

Well, what do we propose to do? Tom Olbricht has made the comment that scholars are remarkably astute at explaining what happened and equally inept in giving prescriptions as to what to do about current challenges. With this warning in mind, allow me to offer a modest comment. Social scientists tell us that each culture has a network of basic presuppositions for viewing reality that has its own distinguishing features. They refer to this as ‘mapping the culture.’ I have labored today to say that the Restoration Movement emerged within a particular culture – Post-Enlightenment American Christianity. The ways that the early Restorationists construed the faith and explained it were appropriate to the culture of the time. We now live in a different culture. This does not mean that the ancient faith once delivered to the saints is superseded. And it does not mean that viewing Christianity at its beginnings as true and commendable is wrong. But it does mean that we need to shift the lens by which we view the common faith of the ancient church. Hermeneutically speaking, that faith cannot be reduced to some kind of an abstract quasi-metaphysical philosophical system. It must center in the dynamic truth of the Gospel and how its proclamation united people across the Greco-Roman world into one dynamic faith. For want of a better word, we may call this ‘the common faith’ of the ancient church. I believe that our own Stone-Campbell tradition has witnessed to the central features of this faith in the past.

As I noted yesterday, at its heart is stress on the centrality of the proclamation of the gospel and the reception of its benefits received by baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the life of an ecclesiastical community. This is the common vision for Christian life we have shared for 200 years. From time to time, even in our history, it becomes eclipsed; but without a common vision it is hard to see whether we will last as a faith community. It is time to bring it out of the shadows again.

Allan J. McNicol
Austin Graduate School of Theology
presented at The Austin Forum on Christian Unity
July 11-12, 2008