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The Fourth Wave and the Approaching Millennium: Some Problems with Charismatic Hermeneutics

Charismatic hermeneutics are influential and important for all Christians, not least because they represent the kind of interpretive method used in the fastest growing section of the Church the world over. John Lyons subjects the hermeneutical method of one popular expositor, Mark Stibbe, to critical examination. Sceptical of the charismatic claim of a coming 'fourth wave' of the Spirit, Lyons is most concerned by what he sees as the inadequacies of the proposed criteria for the discernment of prophecy.

Introduction

As the Millennium approaches, popular expectation of world-shattering events is increasing. Of course, not everyone is so affected – after all, for Judaism 1998 is 5758. The year 2000 is primarily a Christian landmark which, in a western culture often described as post-Christian, has a significant hold on popular imagination. This hold is also exercised over the Christian churches themselves. For some this means falling in line with cultural expectations, but for others the millennium can be seen as being intimately connected with the return of Jesus Christ. The subject of this essay is what has become known as the 'fourth wave'. The claim of advocates of this wave is that *a fourth wave of the Spirit is coming in this century which will lead to a global revival of the church.*

We begin by explaining what lies behind the fourth wave, focusing upon the work of one of its proponents, Mark Stibbe.¹ Then we offer a critique of the

1 After gaining a double-first in English at Trinity College, Cambridge and a brief period of teaching, Stibbe was accepted for Anglican ordination training, completing a post-graduate certificate in Theology and a PhD on John's Gospel. A curacy under Robert Warren at St Thomas's, Crookes, Sheffield, led to Stibbe becoming vicar of St Mark's, Grenoside, Sheffield. A tireless speaker on charismatic topics, he was the editor of *Skepsis*, the theological insert in

Anglicans for Renewal for four years and is a prolific writer on subjects ranging from prayer to structuralism. In 1993, he taught a course on the 'Holy Spirit in the NT' for third year undergraduates in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield. Stibbe's popularity as a charismatic theologian can be gauged by his being headhunted for his appointment at St Andrew's, Chorleywood, a prominent charismatic church.

hermeneutical method that is used. This will involve problematising Stibbe's claim that he is accountable to the charismatic community because they have a number of criteria available by which the origin of his prophetic forecast of a fourth wave can be discerned. Although Stibbe's criteria fail to do what he claims, however, the search for criteria which can render our discernment orthodox must, I believe, continue.

The Fourth Wave

In order to understand the fourth wave, some background information is necessary; after all, what were the first three waves, and why is there a need for a fourth? The concept of 'waves' originates in an ecclesiology which sees the church as continually in need of renewal, a process which eventually can be seen as a series of revival events or 'waves'. It is important to note that not everyone using numbered waves is talking of the same four waves. For example, Smith Wigglesworth (1859-1947), an English Pentecostal and healing evangelist, prophesied three waves in 1947. His first wave is generally agreed to be the charismatic renewal (Stibbe's second wave), but his second has been seen as the House Church movement or as the Toronto Blessing. The importance of the series of waves which concern this essay is that they are the product of an understanding of twentieth-century history in which three distinct movements of the Holy Spirit have taken place since 1900.

The 'first wave' refers to the birth of Pentecostalism in the Azusa Street revival of 1906. This wave was, according to Stibbe, defined by an emphasis upon the experience of the Spirit as proven by the use of tongues as evidence of a second empowering blessing subsequent to conversion. This was known as the 'baptism in the Spirit'. It was further characterised by charismatic gifts such as healing, a remarkable degree of racial and social harmony (at least initially), exuberant worship, commitment to evangelism, and renewed interest in the return of Christ.²

The 'second wave' indicates the rise of the charismatic renewal in the mainline denominations, and began with Episcopalian minister Dennis Bennett's acceptance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in 1960. Stibbe notes that many features of Pentecostalism are present in the second wave but suggests three differences: first: people touched by this wave remained in the so-called historic churches; secondly, they are predominantly middle-class, a factor which leads to different emphases in the use of gifts such as healing (they focus more on inner healing); thirdly, they are more ecumenically minded than Pentecostals.³

The 'third wave' is a movement within the Protestant evangelical churches, linked with the signs and wonders of John Wimber. It was first designated 'the third wave' by C. Peter Wagner in the early 1980s. Again, similarities exist between the

2 M. Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing: A Practical Theology of Revival for Today*, Marshall Pickering, London 1995, pp 11-15. See C. M. Robeck, 'Azusa Street Revival' in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (DPCM), S. Burgess & G. McGee eds; Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1990, pp 31-36.

3 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 18. See P. Hocken, *The Strategy of the Spirit: Worldwide Renewal and Revival in the Established Church and Modern Movements*, Eagle, Guildford 1966.

three waves, but Stibbe argues there are clear differences. Third wavers do not believe in Pentecostalism's second blessing, seeing the gift of the Spirit as taking place at conversion, albeit with subsequent fillings. Speaking in tongues is accepted but only as one of the many charismatic gifts, healing being the primary feature of third wave Christianity. This has led to some conflict with second wavers, Bennett once challenging Wagner to debate on this matter. Finally, divisiveness due to praxis is generally avoided.⁴ For Stibbe, the existence of these three waves is 'historically sound',⁵ and each forms a separate and ongoing stream within the church.

Expectation of a fourth wave is strengthened by a self-perceived weakness of the three waves; namely, that of the division which exists, it is believed, between those who rely on the Word – the Bible – and those who rely on the Spirit – the ongoing work of the Spirit. In his 1947 prophecy Smith Wigglesworth said that a movement of God was coming in which the Word and the Spirit would be combined resulting in what Stibbe describes as 'the greatest movement of God's Spirit ever witnessed in church history'.⁶ Since Wigglesworth is held to have accurately prophesied the charismatic renewal, his prophecy is a potent force amongst those interested in a fourth wave.⁷

The fourth wave according to Mark Stibbe

For the last five years, Mark Stibbe has been concerned with the fourth wave. He began to speak about an interpretation of Ezekiel 47:1-12 which, he believed, God had given to him concerning an approaching fourth wave. Stibbe had read some of the writings of modern pentecostal theologians and linked their work with his interpretation, casting it as a form of charismatic exegesis. Particularly influential upon Stibbe has been J. J. Suurmond's *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology* (SCM Press, London 1994) and the scholars associated with the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (first published in October 1992) and its supplement monograph series, Steven J. Land, Rick D. Moore, and J. Christopher Thomas.⁸ Stibbe also began to characterize this exegetical approach as being that which would provide the link between Word and Spirit required within a wave of the type foreseen by Wigglesworth.⁹ He published articles on both Ezekiel 47¹⁰ and Pentecostal approaches to hermeneutics,¹¹ and a book entitled *Times of Refreshing*:

4 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 19-21. See C. P. Wagner, 'The Third Wave' in *DPCM*, pp 843-4.

5 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 10.

6 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 22.

7 See D. Pawson, *Fourth Wave: Charismatics and Evangelicals: Are We Ready to Come Together?* Hodder and Stoughton, London 1992, pp 14f and Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 22.

8 Further resources mentioned by Stibbe include exegetical works like R. Stronstad's *The Charismatic Theology of St Luke*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA 1983, and G. D. Fee's *The Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA 1994.

9 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 22, 24f.

10 M. Stibbe, 'Four Waves of the Spirit: A Charismatic Exegesis of Ezekiel 47:1-12', *Skepsis*, Autumn 1994; 'Four Waves of the Spirit', *Skepsis*, Summer 1995, pp 6-8.

11 'The Theology of Renewal and the Renewal of Theology', *JPT* 3 (1993), pp 71-90; 'A British Appraisal of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life*', *JPT* 4 (1994), pp 5-16; 'Where are We Now? Recent Contributions to Renewal Theology', *Skepsis* Spring 1995, pp 6-8; 'Interpreting the Word in the Power of the Spirit: The Emergence of Pentecostal Hermeneutics', *Skepsis*, Autumn 1996, pp 1-8.

A Practical Theology of Revival for Today. There he suggests that the Toronto Blessing which began in January 1994 is the crest of a fourth wave which will see global revival taking place before the end of this century.¹²

On reading Ezekiel 47, Stibbe was struck by a sense of 'this is that', a feeling that the 'this' of his own situation was the 'that' described by Ezekiel. Initially, the number four drew his attention and he quickly concluded that Ezekiel provides a four stage pattern of renewal in which the final wave completes the process.¹³ In his exposition, each of the three waves of the Spirit in the twentieth century matches one of Ezekiel's ventures into the water: the first wave of Pentecostalism is ankle-deep, the second wave of the charismatic renewal is knee-deep, and so on.¹⁴ Stibbe also notes that these waves are occurring with a decreasing time gap between them: approximately fifty years between first and second, twenty between second and third.¹⁵ Logically, Stibbe concludes that a fourth wave is due before the turn of the era. He then 'very tentatively'¹⁶ interprets the details of Ezekiel's vision, and identifies eight features which will characterise the fourth wave: 'great sacrifice', 'profound spirituality', 'biblical integration', 'supernatural signs', 'massive growth', 'extraordinary variety' of converts, 'practical compassion', and 'divine judgement'.¹⁷

Restorationism

But there can be a further significance to such a global revival, and this can be seen particularly amongst Christians affected by the eschatology of Restorationism. Andrew Walker describes this as being centered upon

the belief that a world-wide revival would herald the return of Christ... [A revival would occur because] God would not let His church be swamped by sin, or the forces of the evil one. On the contrary, He would restore the Church to her original splendor... Denominations will be abolished and the New Church will establish a substantial and glorious witness to the power and holiness of God. His people in the last days will prosper and become victorious over their enemies.¹⁸

Restorationism's view of history is based on certain biblical texts, particularly those concerned with the early and latter rains.¹⁹ The 'early rain' refers to Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. However, the church gradually lost this

12 Books promoting the Toronto Blessing include G. Chevreau's trilogy *Catch the Fire*, Marshall Pickering, London 1994; *Pray with Fire*, Marshall Pickering, London 1995; *Share the Fire*, Marshall Pickering, London 1996; P. Dixon, *Signs of Revival*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 1994; D. Roberts, *The 'Toronto' Blessing*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 1994. Responses include J. A. Beverly, *Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1995; M. Percy, *The Toronto Blessing*, Latimer Studies 53/54; Latimer House, Oxford 1996; S. E. Porter and P. J. Richter eds, *The Toronto Blessing – or is it?*,

DLT, London 1995; M. D. J. Smith, *Testing the Fire: A Biblical Analysis of the 'Toronto Blessing'*, St Matthew's Press, Cambridge 1996.

13 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 9-11.

14 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 11-21.

15 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 170.

16 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 22.

17 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 23-29.

18 A. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Principles of the House Church Movement*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1989, pp 134f.

19 See Job. 29:29; Prov. 16:15; Jer. 3:3; 5:24; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23; Zech. 10:1; Jas 5:7.

experience of the Spirit and entered the 'Dark Age of the Church' around AD 600 where it remained for a millennium. But with the Reformation, some light returned, and further revivals signified a groundswell of the Spirit's activity. With the pentecostal and charismatic movements of this century Restorationism reaches the point where the Spirit has returned to the church, the 'latter rain' has begun, and the church's final restoration into a glorious unity is within sight. The following items are believed to have been recovered by the church:

(1) the baptism in the Spirit, (2) the return of the gifts for both corporate and individual life, (3) a belief in a worldwide end-time revival, (4) the restoration of apostolic and prophetic ministries as a major means of bringing about the unity of the church, (5) the establishment of apostolic teams to supplement and complement the work of apostolic leaders, (6) the growth of discipling practices under godly leaders in the local churches, (7) a recognition that denominations are not in God's plan, and are ultimately unrenewable, (8) new freedom in worship and praise.²⁰

This view of history naturally leads to a group of very committed people who are working to bring about the return of Christ to his 'spotless bride', the church. (It has also, however, given rise to groups such as the Manifested Sons of God who have seen themselves as a super-apostle style élite.) It is not clear whether Stibbe holds these views, but others awaiting the fourth wave do and it may be concluded that, for some at least, the millennium is the time of the second coming of Christ.

The charismatic hermeneutic of Mark Stibbe

For many, Stibbe's readings of the Bible may seem far-fetched, but he includes in his work a justification for reading the texts in this way. Stibbe begins his book by arguing that those involved with the fourth wave need firm biblical foundations for their practices.²¹ He then claims to provide the biblical theology of renewal they require. However, he goes on to suggest that a new reading strategy is required by the charismatic churches. This charismatic hermeneutic is to be different from what Stibbe now negatively characterises as conservative and liberal exegesis. He asks both conservatives and liberals, 'Where in the Bible does it say that interpretation merely consists of uncovering the original meaning of the author in the original situation?'²² At this point a conflict enters Stibbe's work which will become a serious problem. Despite his insistence that the renewal should be built upon scriptural foundations, Stibbe is now implying that the largely conservative exegesis that he uses to form those foundations is inadequate for Christian praxis in the fourth wave.

The dominant themes of this new hermeneutic are an emphasis on playfulness in reading and a desire to find – under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – one's present Christian experience ('this') reflected in the biblical text ('that'), but without a Stendahl's insistence on knowing what it meant before one can apply it.²³ Citing

20 *Restoration* (Nov/Dec 1983), p 40; quoted by Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom*, p 143.

21 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp xv-xix.

22 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 4.

23 K. Stendahl's 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1962, pp 418-32.

Peter's speech in Acts 2 as an example of the way that the NT uses the OT through a 'this is that', or *peshet*, exegesis, Stibbe claims that the church should interpret Scripture this way today.²⁴

He describes 'this is that' under a number of headings.²⁵

(1) The exegesis is *supernatural*, being Spirit-inspired, and the exegete is an empowered individual. However, this understanding of an individual as empowered is one which would – or should – be formed *after* the origin of the prophecy had been discerned.

(2) Exegesis is also *communal*, a product of the 'community of the Spirit'.²⁶ Stibbe points to the We-Thou terminology of pentecostal preachers as an example of how the community relates to its leaders. In the work of pentecostal theologians, emphases on foot washing as a communal practice or on the purely facilitating role of teachers in Bible study provide further examples of community-leader interaction.²⁷ Stibbe also goes to considerable length to design criteria that the community can use to exercise discernment.

(3) It is (very loosely) *existential* in that readings relate to the present.

(4) It is *christological*, glorifying Christ.

(5) It is *eschatological*, interpretations heightening one's sense that one is in the end-times.

(6) It is *emotional*, using emotive language and is not 'merely intellectual'.

(7) It is *practical*, being oriented towards the life of the community and not an exercise for its own sake.

With these last two, a hint of anti-intellectualism is introduced.

Stibbe describes readings produced by this hermeneutic as 'revelatory, prophetic preaching'.²⁸ He writes:

if anyone uses a [this is that] approach to Scripture today, the same rules apply to their interpretation as applies to prophecy in general. All prophecy must be tested by the community of faith, who together exercise the spiritual gift of 'distinguishing between spirits' (1 Cor. 12:10). If discernment is not encouraged, then subjective interpretations which are the product of a wayward and often manipulative imagination will go unchecked. The effect of that can be truly disastrous.²⁹

Balanced against this 'prophetic' characterisation, however, is Stibbe's emphasis on the Bible as the source of these readings. Despite the claim that his exegesis is

24 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 5.

25 Stibbe, 'Interpreting the Word', pp 1-8.

26 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 8; Stibbe's definition of this community wavers from the whole charismatic church, or even the whole church, to a local assembly. But in the light of his global claims this essay will view it primarily as the former.

27 J. C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine community* (JSNTS 61; JSOT Press, Sheffield 1991); C. B. Johns and J. D. Johns, 'Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study', *JPT* 1 (1992), pp 109-134.

28 Stibbe, 'Interpreting the Word', pp 7f.

29 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 6.

no different to any other prophecy, Stibbe does not actually describe his exegesis as a prophecy couched in biblical language. He writes that

[at] the very least we can speak of a pattern of renewal portrayed in the Ezekiel text, a pattern involving four mighty and miraculous effusions of the spirit from the heart of the divine presence. That, as we will now see, is a symbolic picture of what I believe has been happening (and indeed is happening) in the twentieth century.³⁰

Stibbe's rhetoric seems to involve a claim for biblical authority; his prophetic exegesis of a fourfold renewal has become a fourfold renewal taught by the text itself, and this 'teaching' then becomes available to act as a symbolic picture of events in the twentieth century.³¹ When Stibbe warns those who reject his claim that the Toronto Blessing is the beginning of a fourth wave that they are in danger of committing the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,³² his rhetoric only calls his emphasis on discernment into question. He appears to have moved a long way from his 'very tentative' reading indeed!

A critique of Stibbe's fourth wave

Stibbe's claim that he is accountable to the community because they have criteria by which they can discern and reject his prophetic exegesis will form the focus of this critique. The question asked is a simple one: is there any possibility that the community of the Spirit will be able to reject Stibbe's exegesis of Ezekiel 47 and the fourth wave?

Before examining Stibbe's explicit criteria for discernment, an implicit criterion should perhaps first be considered. Stibbe uses John 8:17 to define what he calls 'a most important test' – that of whether two people *with no prior contact* are expounding the same interpretation.³³ In that text Jesus says to the Jews, 'in your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true', before claiming that it is the Father who testifies with him. Stibbe tells us that he had once related his exegesis and been told that Mike Breen, vicar of St Thomas's, Crookes, in Sheffield, had preached an almost identical sermon on that passage. Stibbe saw this as paralleled by the testimony offered by Jesus and the Father in John 8:17, and responded that 'what's going is that two people may be hearing similar things from the Lord. What you need to do is test and see.'³⁴

A number of questions should be asked of Stibbe's use of John 8:17. First, it is questionable whether it functions as a test at all; after all, the community must still discern the exegesis. Unless Stibbe wishes to claim that an individual cannot deliver a prophetic word to the people of God – a bizarre claim in the light of the OT prophetic tradition and the role of John the Baptist – it is hard to see what is gained by the test's employment. Secondly, John 8:17 actually provides no justification for the test that Stibbe envisages. The insistence on two witnesses is drawn from passages in Deuteronomy in which a person cannot be executed on the basis of

30 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 10f.

31 I am indebted to M. D. J. Smith on this point (see his now published comments, *Testing the Fire*, p 50).

32 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 170-180, and 'Four Waves', p 8.

33 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 6f.

34 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 7.

an individual's testimony. This is a useful juridical tool, but the NT itself calls into question its usefulness in providing a rule for discernment. When Jesus was tried before the Jewish leaders, there were many false witnesses against him (Matt. 26:60). They were false, according to Mark, because their testimony did not agree (Matt. 14:56). Then some people – Matthew says two (Matt. 26:60f) – stepped forward, testifying in agreement that Jesus intended to destroy the Temple. But Mark states that these also gave 'false testimony' against Jesus (Mark 14:57, RSV). If two can testify falsely against the founder of Christianity, how can such a mechanical rule establish a prophetic exegesis as true?³⁵ Finally, Jesus' words in John 8:17 actively subvert Stibbe's test. Stibbe argues that the test relates to two people *with no prior contact* expounding the same interpretation. But Jesus is invoking the Father as his witness and, rather than claiming that he has no prior contact with the Father, demonstrates a startling degree of 'collusion'.

John 5:20 'For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing.'

John 8:28 'When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but *speak thus as the Father taught me.*' (my italics)

John 10:30 'I and the Father are one.' (all RSV)

Should Jesus' testimony be rejected? John surely wouldn't think so. Not only does this 'most important test' lack consequences, it does not even do justice to the passage upon which it is based. It certainly does not allow a member of the charismatic community to either affirm or deny the divine origin of Stibbe's prophetic exegesis.

In *Times of Refreshing* Stibbe exegetes 1 John 4:1-2 in a thoroughly conservative manner, and suggests that tests of Christology, character (of the experience), and consequences be applied.³⁶ He later adds three more; namely, those of continuity, common sense, and community.³⁷

Only in the criterion of continuity does the biblical text itself have any bearing on its charismatic interpretation and so it will be dealt with first. Stibbe claims that a prophetic exegesis should either stand in continuity with the original author's intention or find a valid continuity between the reconstructed socio-historical context of the ancient author and that of the modern reader.³⁸ These intentions and reconstructions should be defined by the 'well tested methods of historical criticism', and will, he believes, prevent an interpretation which would 'result at best in allegory and at worst in the kind of super-spiritual interpretation associated with the Gnostic heresies in the early Church'.³⁹

This is problematic for two reasons. First, it clashes with Stibbe's claim that he is carrying out the exegetical approach of the NT since it can be stated with certainty that those authors knew nothing of that modern invention, the

35 Stibbe may appeal to the Christian tradition that the testimony of two witnesses is valid (cf. Rev. 11). It seems unlikely, however, that this indicates that the testimony of two people is inherently true.

36 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 36-39.

37 Stibbe, 'Interpreting the Word', pp 3-5.

38 Stibbe, 'Interpreting the Word', p 4, and *Times of Refreshing*, pp 7-9.

39 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 7.

reconstructed historical context.⁴⁰ NT writers did not – indeed could not – use historical criticism to prevent their exegesis of OT texts from being either allegorical or gnostic. Secondly, when Ezekiel sees the Temple altar as the source of the ever-deepening water and Stibbe sees four literal waves of the Spirit in the twentieth century flowing from the person of Jesus Christ, the use of the term ‘continuity’ becomes questionable. An exegesis which Stibbe does not believe stands in continuity is that of TV evangelist, Robert Tilton. Tilton understands Acts 2:21, which reads, ‘All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved’, as meaning ‘all who call [by phone] Robert Tilton will be healed’.⁴¹ This is considered illegitimate by Stibbe, but what is the difference *in terms of continuity* between seeing Ezekiel’s Temple as Jesus and seeing a call on the Lord as indicating a phone call to that ‘godly’ healer, Tilton? Continuity can probably also be found between any ancient reconstruction and any modern context; the modern and the ancient are not rigorously tied together at all. Stibbe’s criterion of continuity is unable to prevent allegorising or gnosticism.

Stibbe’s criterion of Christology is based primarily on the following:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God (1 John. 4:2).

John argues that a spirit which accepts the incarnation of Jesus is of God and one that denies this is not. But, as the history of heresy demonstrates, this is of limited use. John’s test would disallow a docetic rejection of the incarnation, but can Christians say that Arianism is of God when it affirms the incarnation as John requires and then denies the trinitarian nature of Christ? John’s test is problematic when universalised because it leaves open the question of Christology itself; who is Christ?⁴² Stibbe’s criterion requires a definition of who Christ is, and is thus subject to what may be termed a criterion of orthodoxy. This problem also afflicts his criteria of consequences, character and common sense: what constitutes for a Christian community the *right* consequences?⁴³ What character of supernatural experience is acceptable? Whose common sense is valid?

40 R. E. Brown notes historical criticism’s understanding of Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah is addressing King Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite war and the sign of a young woman giving birth refers to an event of that period; a woman of marriageable age will bear a child of the line of David demonstrating that God was with the people of Israel (*Birth of the Messiah*, 2nd edn, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1993, pp 147-9). But this understanding is fundamentally different to that of Matthew or indeed any other pre-historical critical exegete. Of significance for Matthew are elements of the text as it now stands, i.e. the Davidic nature of that now eschatological figure, the Messiah, and not details of Isaiah’s historical context.

41 Stibbe, ‘Interpreting the Word’, p 4.

42 Stibbe also cites 1 Cor. 12:3: ‘Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.’ Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, p 37. But which Jesus is being proclaimed Lord here?

43 This emphasis on consequences can become prosperity teaching, success in numbers – or even in financial terms – defining the correct consequences (T. Smail, A. Walker & N. Wright, ‘Revelation Knowledge and Knowledge of Revelation: The Faith Movement and the Question of Heresy’, *JPT* 5 (1994), pp 57-77).

Orthodoxy and discernment

The notion of Christian orthodoxy is a difficult one. Its shape can easily be defined as the Christian tradition(s)'s understanding of what is 'right, correct, true, proper, and approved', as 'in accordance with a recognized standard' or as being 'what is accepted or authoritatively established as the true view or right practice.' Few, however, would perhaps wish to define its contents. But in the context of Stibbe's criteria it is not the content of his orthodoxy which proves problematic, but his attitude to some of its sources. It is characteristic of an orthodox Christianity that the canon of Scripture plays a significant role in defining the content of that orthodoxy, with the exact nature of that role being dependent upon each church's attitude to its own tradition. Charismatics usually claim the Bible and the Spirit as the dual sources of the normative, of the orthodox. However, the tension that exists within any church when the orthodox encounters the outside world exists in an acute form within the charismatic tradition. As J. W. Jones puts it, 'the Spirit does not contradict the Scriptures but his job is more than just repeating what we can find by reading there.'⁴⁴ For these believers inherent in their use of a closed canon and their belief that the Spirit is still actively bestowing prophetic gifts upon the church is the problem of how they relate the Scriptures to the work of the Spirit within their churches in order to produce orthodox belief? Or, to put it another way, how do charismatics know that the Holy Spirit is at work in their churches and not some other spirit? In practice what the Spirit is doing today cannot form an independent source of the orthodox because the orthodoxy of the spirit at work is itself always open to question. It is the canon of Scripture as read within the community's tradition which provides – often subconsciously – the rule for discernment within charismatic communities, for deciding whether or not the spirit inspiring a prophecy is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is certainly not to claim that interpretive disputes are absent when considering biblical texts, but simply to point out that the effect of the Christian history of exegesis has been to define certain parameters which are regarded as part of the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy.

And this is where Stibbe's rhetoric becomes problematic. A criterion of orthodoxy capable of operating within any charismatic hermeneutic involves the application of the canonical text as a measure. Stibbe's criteria of Christology, character, consequences, and common sense, all rely on an implicit understanding of Christian orthodoxy underwritten by the acceptance of an authoritative and firmly closed canon read in a traditional fashion. But Stibbe has expended considerable effort in denigrating the kind of biblical exegesis which provides that orthodoxy as being either 'merely intellectual' or as unsuitable for the fourth wave, and so is left stranded by his dependence upon it. Stibbe's rhetoric consistently works against the application of these four criteria because it undermines one of the sources of the orthodoxy which sustains them. For a criterion of orthodoxy to function within Stibbe's charismatic hermeneutic it must be clearly acknowledged that his exegesis is based upon and discerned by the very exegesis he has negatively portrayed; his interpretation of Ezekiel 47 is subordinate to that 'old style' exegesis

44 J. W. Jones, *The Spirit and the World*, Hawthorn Books, New York 1975, p 98.

and the orthodoxy of which it is part. In fact, it should be accepted that Stibbe's prophetic exegesis is no different from a prophecy uttered using non-biblical language. It has no inherent biblical authority, no claim to independence as a source of orthodoxy, and any implication that it does is at best misleading and at worst manipulative.

Ultimately Stibbe's criterion of community seems the most significant of his criteria. Responding to letters sent to him concerning his exegesis, Stibbe writes:

I am painfully aware of the dangers of a false illuminism in charismatic interpretation of Scripture – of a kind of Gnostic subjectivism in a this-is-that hermeneutic. But that is where accountability comes in. It is the community of the Spirit as a whole that sets the boundaries for interpretation. If an interpretation is not accepted by that community, then it must be publicly withdrawn. I would be quite happy, in all humility, to do that if there was a strong feeling in that direction by a large number of people. That, as yet, is not the case. If you feel that it should be, write to me. Equally, if you feel that it should not, then also let me know.⁴⁵

It should be apparent that Stibbe's other criteria have proved problematic, and it is the very ability of the community to reject his exegesis that is in question. However, Stibbe's criterion of community seems to envisage rejection of a prophetic exegesis on the basis of a group decision taken aside from the criteria already discussed, as an independent criterion rather than as the application of the others. Is that likely to happen?

For such a criterion to work, it must be possible for a group to challenge a prophetic exegesis *whatever its origin*. However, this will probably not happen. First, many charismatic leaders are also 'charismatic' in a secular sense, and no amount of We-Thou terminology can hide the disjunction between such a leader and the community. (This disjunction is further emphasised with Stibbe because the cover of his book lists his academic achievements and titles.) Whether leaders are the source of the exegesis is irrelevant because they can control the proceedings in which such readings are offered; indeed, they are often encouraged by the community to do so. This situation is further complicated by those who are recognised as spiritually gifted in discernment, understood by Stibbe as people with a supernaturally heightened natural ability.⁴⁶ Who has recognised their ability and told them that they are gifted in discernment? If it is their leaders, then the problem of spiritual nepotism arises.

Secondly, there is a considerable rhetorical effect in Stibbe's use of the Bible as the source of his charismatic exegesis, particularly since he has simultaneously denigrated other types of Bible reading and, in effect, usurped the concept of biblical authority. Uncritical acquiescence in such an exegesis is likely to become the norm for the community, especially when one has what one may call, stealing parlance from the National Lottery, a roll-over set of prophecies such as the four waves. Thirdly, Stibbe's statement that a large number must disagree with his exegesis means that an individual is unable to effect a rejection of the exegesis

45 Stibbe, 'Four Waves', p 8.

46 Stibbe, *Times of Refreshing*, pp 31-33.

and the potential for marginalisation is a considerable deterrent to disagreement. Finally, such communities contain converts from different religious and social backgrounds who have often had no previous contact with Christian churches. Attempts to appropriate Jewish exegetical practices such as *peshet* are therefore questionable; such methods can prove anything, but a Jewish believer knows what can and cannot be said of God and uses the rules accordingly. The syncretistic nature of a charismatic community, however, means that the community as a whole is probably unable to formulate a consistent line on the identity of its God and so cannot discern a correct application of the rules.

In conclusion the community cannot be relied upon to reject a charismatic interpretation in the absence of any concrete criteria to which its members can point. The final arbiters of the exegesis are likely to be those in positions of power and not the community of the Spirit. In the light of his denigration of a concept of orthodoxy which would potentially allow community discernment, Stibbe's claim to be accountable is finally revealed as empty, and it is clear that his community of the Spirit will have a millennial fourth wave whether it is of God or not.

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