

# A SHORT COURSE IN BRETHREN HERMENEUTICS

by Dale R. Stoffer\*

Over the last fifteen to twenty years, the Brethren elders have dealt with such issues as baptism, ordination of women, and ordination of divorced people. In these discussions we have become increasingly aware that how we resolve such issues is dependent, to a great extent, on how we approach Scripture, that is, our hermeneutical foundation. Hermeneutics, or the way we interpret Scripture, is of crucial importance as we discuss these, or any other, Scriptural question.

Part of the frustration we feel at times as we deal with these questions is that we begin with slightly different presuppositions that predispose us to differing positions. In most cases, these differences have nothing to do with being liberal or conservative in our view of Scripture. In fact, elders in The Brethren Church today generally hold a high view of Scripture. This is as it should be, for respect for and obedience to Scripture are inherent in the Brethren heritage. Nevertheless, two people with an equally high view of Scripture may indeed differ on the above issues. Rather than labeling people because they do not hold the same view as we do, we need to take the time to understand why they approach the issue as they do. If we do this, if we seek to understand people's hermeneutics, we develop a point of reference from which we can begin a profitable dialogue.

A person's starting point in hermeneutics is crucial; it will color everything else. Brethren have started with Jesus Christ as God's fullest and final revelation to humanity. J. Allen Miller described God's revelation made in Jesus Christ and contained in the New Testament as perfect, complete, and final. We need to look for no other revelation. Because of this Christocentric approach, we see the New Testament as providing a more complete revelation than the Old Testament. Though they are equally inspired, and though there is a continuity of God's work between the Old and New Testaments, yet we give priority to the New Testament; we are a New Testament church. We take seriously the concept of progressive revelation in Scripture, i.e. that God has progressively disclosed His will from Genesis to Revelation. This approach differs from the Reformed view which tends to em-

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phasize continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Thus they would see a parallel between circumcision and infant baptism; they would support, historically, a state church, the close tie between state and church.

The Christocentric view of Scripture has also led the Brethren to give precedence to the Gospels, which record the words of Christ Himself. This again differs from the Reformed tradition which tends to interpret the Gospels by the epistles. The main practical difference here is how the Christian life is viewed. Brethren do follow the Reformed view of conversion, which tends to be Pauline and Petrine. But their understanding of the Christian life is more filtered through the Gospels. The Christian life is seen as one of unconditional discipleship to Christ, of wholehearted obedience to our Lord, of self-denying service. The whole debate over "Lordship salvation" in conservative and dispensational circles is inconceivable from a Brethren perspective. The basic confession of the early church, even in the Pauline churches, is Jesus Christ is Lord.

There are five other features of our Brethren approach to Scripture that deserve consideration. The first is the concept of the inner and outer Words. The Brethren have followed the Anabaptists in emphasizing both the outer Word, Scripture, and the inner Word, the Spirit, in the process of interpreting Scripture. The believer needs to follow God's outer, objective, written Word with wholehearted, humble obedience; but it is only through the inner witness of the Spirit that one can understand Scripture with a spiritual understanding. The inner and outer Words should always work together in a reciprocal relationship; after all, there should be agreement between both Words since it was the Holy Spirit who inspired all of Scripture. The outer Word and inner Word will therefore not be at odds; if someone claims the direction of the Spirit yet does not follow Scripture in his or her words and deeds, the guiding Spirit clearly is not God's Spirit.

Related to the preceding point is a second quality of Brethren thought; it is both conservative and progressive. The conservative side of our thought is that we must ever be obedient and faithful to God's unchanging Word (the outer Word of Scripture). The progressive side, which was emphasized by the Progressive Brethren, is that we must always be open to new ways of conveying God's unchanging Word to new and changing cultures. Progressives at the time of the 1882-83 division felt that we must take advantage of such "innovations" as Sunday Schools, evangelism, higher education, etc. if we were to speak to American culture effectively. This progressive side really represents the ongoing work of the inner Word, the Spirit of truth, who empowers and guides us in our engagement with our culture. Brethren have been

willing, at least at times, to be open to new light that the Spirit sheds on Scripture. This new light may bring us more in line with Scripture, as when the early Brethren modified their communion practices based on what they discovered from Scripture. Or it may lead us to new ways to communicate the gospel in contemporary culture.

A third characteristic of the Brethren hermeneutics has been a holistic approach to interpreting Scripture. The Brethren used to have a slogan, "The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible." They described themselves as a "whole Bible church." Brethren have tended to seek all that Scripture says on a topic and wrestle with all the relevant data in developing their doctrines and practices. We might call this a holistic hermeneutic. It is this quality that gave us our threefold communion; the early Brethren conflated the Synoptic and Johannine accounts of the Last Supper. It is this quality that also caused us to accept a number of rites that few if any other groups were observing: footwashing, love feast, love kiss, anointing service, discipline. It also led us to take the view of assurance we do, i.e., conditional security, which gives recognition equally to what Scripture says about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Fourth, Brethren give recognition to the role of both the individual and the corporate body in hermeneutics. Every individual who has the Spirit of truth living within is endowed with the necessary prerequisite to study and interpret Scripture. You don't need ordained clergy to do that for you. This is a sacred right and responsibility of every believer. It is this truth that undergirds the Progressive stress on the individual's freedom of conscience. The individual must not be coerced to do anything that he or she feels would be a violation of conscience.

But the Brethren have also viewed the church as a hermeneutical community. Part of the Spirit's work is to bring God's people to unity of mind on pressing issues as we humbly search Scripture together, hear one another, forbear one another in love, pray together, and genuinely seek consensus. Consensus can happen, but it takes work and demands speaking the truth in love. Our commitment to love each other in the body must lead us to the commitment not to leave or resent the body if a decision doesn't go my way.

A final characteristic of Brethren hermeneutics is that the end of all study must be practical and existential. Our pietistic heritage has caused us to affirm that it is not enough to hold correct doctrine; we must also move on to correct living. We must have both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The goal of all Bible study must be the application of God's truth of my life. Brethren hermeneutics thus lead to a practical and existential approach to truth. Theology must never become an ivory tower activity. Among the Brethren theology has thus taken more of

a Biblical, practical slant than a systematic, philosophical one. The bottom line for the Brethren is how obedient and faithful we are to the living Word of God. After all is said and done in the study of the Bible, this is all that counts. This point brings us full circle to where we began our hermeneutics--it is Christocentric. For the goal of Brethren hermeneutics is to have Christ formed in us; ours is an incarnational hermeneutic that desires to mature into the very stature of Christ Himself.

