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Issues in Biblical Interpretation

Professor Scholer, who teaches at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, delivered this paper at a dialogue on biblical interpretation and practice sponsored by the General Conference Mennonite Church. It pulls together admirably several of the main problem areas in interpretation and we are sure that our readers will find it as helpful as did the original hearers.

Introduction

I would like to share three vignettes from my experience which draw attention to issues in biblical interpretation. The first incident occurred in a local Baptist church after I had given a brief talk on the subject: 'How to Interpret the Bible'. A man greeted me at the door and said very earnestly: 'I guess, professor, it's all right for you to interpret the Bible if you want to, but I am just going to accept what it says!' The second case is drawn from a letter to the editor I read in the third issue of the new periodical *Bible Review*: 'The Scriptures do not need interpretation; they need understanding. And understanding comes when one comes to the author with that desire in his heart. Please cancel my subscription.'¹ My third story comes from an intense debate in a local Baptist church over the issue of so-called 'rebaptism' and open membership. At a critical moment a lay person arose with an open Bible in his hand and began his declaration with these words: 'Now, *my* Bible says . . .'

These accounts from life in the Church draw our attention in their own powerful way to some of the profound issues surrounding and involved in biblical authority and biblical interpretation today. Why does the Bible require interpretation? How does one interpret accurately? obediently? reverently? Why do interpreters differ? Where is the locus of authority? in the Bible? in the interpreters? To what extent can these issues be resolved?

The literature on biblical interpretation is legion; much of it is helpful, even profound. For example, in the last few years we have books such as the following which attempt to address the

¹ *Bible Review* 1:3 (Fall 1985) 20.

complex issues involved: *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (1984) edited by Willard Swartley²; Clark H. Pinnock's *The Scripture Principle* (1984)³; Robert K. Johnston's collection of essays, including one by John Howard Yoder, entitled *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (1985)⁴; and Kenneth Hagen's book of essays entitled *The Bible in the Churches: How Different Christians Interpret the Scriptures* (1985).⁵

There are, of course, various angles and approaches that can lead one into the issues of biblical interpretation. I want to focus my comments for your consideration on four areas or issues which have deep roots in my own struggles as a believer and biblical scholar and which I believe are crucial and fundamental to the discussion today. These are areas in which we must assess our own positions and approaches if we want to be responsible biblical interpreters and if we wish, in the words of the general goal of this Dialogue, 'to allow the unity of the Spirit to hold us together while we continue dialogue on diverse biblical interpretations in discerning truth and practice.'

The four crucial areas of issues in biblical interpretation I would identify as follows. First, the issues that cluster around the significance and role of the text itself in matters of interpretation. This is that aspect of biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics which Anthony C. Thiselton refers to as the 'first horizon' in his important book, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description . . .*⁶ This 'first horizon' recognizes the historical particularities and conditionedness of the biblical texts and seeks to assess what roles the text plays in biblical interpretation.

Second are the issues which are related to the role of the interpreter, what Thiselton identifies as the 'second horizon'. Here is the recognition of the fact that interpreters, like texts, exist in particular and conditioned historical places or moments and that such a reality also plays a role in biblical interpretation.

Third are those issues which related to the phenomenon now usually called or recognized as the unity and diversity of or within the Bible. What is the unity of the Bible? What effect does it have on interpretation? What is the significance of the diversity of the

² (Text-Reader Series, Volume I) Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies.

³ San Francisco: Harper & Row.

⁴ Atlanta: John Knox.

⁵ New York/Mahwah: Paulist.

⁶ Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980.

Bible for issues such as biblical authority or appropriation of biblical teachings and examples for the life of the Church today?

The fourth area may serve in some ways as a summary or conclusion to this reflection on issues in biblical interpretation. Here I refer to what the American religious historian Grant Wacker has called 'the dilemma of historical consciousness'.⁷ I believe that our whole hermeneutical enterprise today among those who wish to adhere to what Clark Pinnock calls 'the Scripture principle' lives with the tension that exists between understanding of the Bible as God's Word in some authoritative, significant and powerful sense and understanding that the Bible is comprised of texts set *thoroughly* within the historical process.

It is, obviously, assumed throughout this paper that the Bible is accepted as the authority or norm for the life of the Church in its theological understandings and its practice of obedient discipleship. The precise nature of biblical authority and matters of revelation and inspiration are not issues pursued here except by implication. Nor are the broadest questions of religious authority in human experience, both within the Christian traditions and outside of it, which may challenge the assumptions of biblical authority pursued here. Rather, the focus in this paper is on the four primary issues of biblical interpretation which are of special concern to those who confess the importance and primacy of biblical authority and seek to conform the practice and thought of the Church to its teaching and directives. As indicated, certain issues of biblical authority will necessarily be addressed in the discussion of the fourth issue of biblical interpretation, since one of the issues we must face is the tension or dilemma confronted in accepting a historically-culturally conditioned document as the word or revelation of God.

1. The Text

I believe that in biblical interpretation the primary locus of meaning is in the text and that the cornerstone and first task of biblical interpretation, which must not be neglected in spite of the difficulties we will note, is to ascertain the meaning of biblical texts.⁸ This affirmation, of course, needs to be explained—dare

⁷ Grant Wacker, *Augustus A. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

⁸ Here and in section 4 I am heavily dependent for both ideas and wording on my earlier article, 'Unseasonable Thoughts on the State of Biblical Hermeneutics: Reflections of a New Testament Exegete', *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983) 134–41, especially 135–36 and 139–40.

we say interpreted—and expanded as well as balanced by what will be said in the second major section of this paper.

In an earlier article on biblical interpretation published in the *American Baptist Quarterly*⁹ I stated my conviction that the ‘meaning’ of a text was its so-called original meaning, i.e., the meaning intended by the author. This commitment to authorial intent as the ‘meaning’ of a text is often linked to the important work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who argued with reference to all literature that the proper meaning of any text is that meaning (or meanings) which the author intended and that it is possible to recover such meaning(s) with reasonable success.¹⁰

Today I believe I am less naive about the attainability and significance of authorial intent *per se*, but I am still thoroughly committed to the conviction and understanding that the foundational and primary determinative meaning of a text is to be found or located in its original or plain sense within its particular historical-cultural setting.

I have found G. B. Caird’s discussion of ‘The Meaning of Meaning’, in which he delineates five meanings of the term ‘meaning’, to be helpful.¹¹ Two of these meanings Caird regards as spurious claimants to a proper understanding of the original meaning of a text. Thus, he rejects ‘meaning^V (value)’, which is only an expression of preference, and ‘meaning^E (entailment)’, which refers to the implications which others understand or infer at a later time. Caird understands ‘proper meaning’ of a text to be comprised of three shades of the term ‘meaning’: ‘meaning^R (referent)’, which involves what is being spoken about; ‘meaning^S (sense)’, which involves what is being said about it; and ‘meaning^I (intention)’, which involves the author’s goals with respect to the referent and sense of what is said or written.

This meaning, the combination of referent, sense and intention, is the meaning of the biblical text which is to be ascertained in responsible biblical interpretation. Such an approach in no way is meant to deny or lose sight of the role of the interpreter in determining meaning, to which we will return in the next section of this paper. It is, however, meant to call into question any hermeneutical approach—existential, devotional, experiential, psychological, literary, structuralist, post-structuralist, or theo-

⁹ See the previous entry.

¹⁰ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1967) and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

¹¹ This is the second chapter in his book *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 37–61.

logical—which would argue that the primary locus of meaning for a biblical text is other than in the text itself.

I recognize, I hope fully and honestly, that there is no such thing as a completely objective interpretation of a biblical text. All interpreters do bring to their task their own presuppositions, biases, experiences and misconceptions. This recognition, especially in the last quarter century of hermeneutical history, has led some to so emphasize the role of the interpreter as virtually to negate the value of finding the locus of the meaning in the text itself. I would hope that it is clear here that the case for finding the meaning of a text in the text itself is not meant to be a naive or simplistic call to impossible objectivity.

How do we get at the so-called original meaning (referent, sense and intention) of a biblical text? In recognition of the fact that all biblical texts were written in and to particular historical-cultural contexts and communities, it is essential that we engage in what I prefer to call historical-contextual interpretation or exegesis. This approach has been traditionally known as the historical-critical method, quite nicely described, for example, by Edgar Krentz in *The Historical-Critical Method*.¹²

I am aware, of course, that the historical-critical method has fallen on hard times. It has been subjected, both from the 'right' and the 'left' to various critiques, denunciations and renunciations. Willard Swartley has provided a helpful and convenient summary, based on Krentz, of such critiques, but has also noted the positive features of the historical-critical method.¹³ The more sophisticated and appropriate critiques of the traditional historical-critical method, such as those of Swartley and Peter Stuhlmacher,¹⁴ do not reject the necessity of critical, historical exegesis at all, but rather reject its arid excesses, its too narrow limits and understanding of history and context and, especially, its divorce from interpreting the Bible within the theological context of the Christian faith and community.

I will return to issues of theological context and community in the third and fourth sections of this paper, but here wish to pursue a little further what I perceive as appropriate historical-contextual exegesis. Such an approach must seek to understand the meaning of any biblical text within the following contexts:

¹² (Guides to Biblical Scholarship.) Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.

¹³ 'Beyond the Historical-Critical Method', *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Text-Reader Series No. 1; Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984) 237–64; see especially 240–43.

¹⁴ *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutic of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

(1). its lexical and grammatical particulars in the original language; (2). its immediate sense unit (i.e., the paragraph); (3). its particular literary whole, including a recognition of its literary genre and its literary structure or 'flow'; (4). its place in the author's life and writings, when possible; (5). its place within its cultural milieu, especially settings within the ancient Near East, Judaism and Graeco-Roman society; and (6). its place within the histories of Israel and the early Church.

Such fairly traditional, but too often neglected, historical-cultural exegesis can well be augmented and enriched by the newer, more recent emphases on literary and/or sociological analysis, as Swartley rightly points out.¹⁵ In my understanding, good, responsible historical analysis, which is not narrowly conceived, has always intended to include relevant literary analysis and sociological understanding. In my judgment, significant gains have been made in both areas in recent scholarship, particularly in the field of careful sociological analysis of biblical texts such as that carried out by Wayne A. Meeks in his major book, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*.¹⁶ It is important, however, to carry some caution into these new explorations since some of them, both literary and sociological, have tended to seek explanations and analogies which, in fact, depart so far from the text and its historical setting as to become ahistorical. Edwin A. Judge, himself the modern pioneer¹⁷ of sociological study of the early Church and one who continues significant sociological work on the Church in the Roman Empire, has observed: 'Sociological theory may have its explanatory uses, provided it survives the discipline of documented facts.'¹⁸

I recently heard Brevard Childs use the expression 'the coercion of the text'¹⁹ to express the conviction that proper biblical interpretation must begin with and be in a significant sense determined and guided by the so-called original, historical, contextual meaning of the text. Without ever losing the humble

¹⁵ 'Beyond the Historical-Critical Method' 252-60.

¹⁶ New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1983.

¹⁷ See his *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale, 1960), published more than a decade before most biblical scholars actively engaged in sociological exegesis.

¹⁸ *Rank and Status in the World of the Caesars and St Paul* (The Broadhead Memorial Lecture 1981; University of Canterbury Publications No. 29; Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1982) 31.

¹⁹ In a public lecture at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, IL, on November 8, 1985.

sense that objective interpretation is never possible and that incorrect interpretation is always possible, commitment to the recovery of meaning (Caird's referent, sense, intention) through historical-cultural exegesis does provide both the community of faith and the community of scholars with significant controls on theological, ecclesiastical, cultural and personal presuppositions and biases in biblical interpretation.

2. The Interpreter

I once wrote that 'all [biblical] interpretation is socially located, individually skewed and ecclesiastically/theologically conditioned.'²⁰ At the time, I perceived this statement as somewhat adventurous for a traditional historical-critical exegete like myself and, indeed, some colleagues told me my statement was too strong. I have since come to understand more clearly, I think, that my earlier statement is actually not strong or precise enough.

Interpreters, both individuals and communities, are like biblical texts, thoroughly embedded in particular and conditioned historical-cultural places or moments. We may have only begun to comprehend how deeply and completely our theological, ecclesiastical, social, economic and cultural locations have shaped our biblical interpretations and theological reflections. Those of us who have shaped most of the modern history of biblical interpretation and the historical-critical method have been, predominantly, white, male, middle class Europeans, Americans and Britishers, albeit of rather diverse ecclesiastical and theological traditions. A common critique that the dominant group has made against all so-called 'liberation theologies', whether Black, feminist or Third World, is that they reflect only one particular perspective and ought to be more 'objective'. Perhaps this critique is true enough in some cases, but the lessons that ought to be learned are quite staggering.

First, such so-called 'liberation theologies' in their uses of the Bible and biblical interpretation should make the dominant group aware, even painfully aware, that it, too, reflects only one particular perspective. Second, the insights of such differently located interpreters have proven to expand the abilities of all to interpret biblical texts more adequately, even in the terms indicated for the primacy of the original, historical meaning of a text. In my own experience I have traced the history of exegesis on Lukan texts concerning poor and marginalized individuals and

²⁰ 'Unseasonable Thoughts . . .' 140.

recognize that one's socio-economic location has been an important factor in which one could 'see' in the Gospel of Luke.

Even more profound for me has been the whole matter of my active concern for nearly two decades in the interpretation of biblical texts concerning women in the life and ministry of the early Church. I see in myself and in my theological and ecclesiastical traditions powerful currents which have shaped, or determined, the way in which such texts have been read or misread. As I have become an advocate within the Church for equal participation in all ministries by both women and men and have engaged in debate and dialogue in many different ecclesiastical and cultural settings in this country and others, I believe I have seen with dramatic clarity the significant degree to which the interpretation of numerous biblical texts has been determined more by the interpreters than by the texts. It is my judgement that feminist biblical hermeneutics of varying typologies have been perhaps the most powerful forces in our own time challenging the myth of interpretive objectivity and demonstrating that all interpretation is skewed, located and conditioned.

What I have said so far in this section of this paper addresses my sense that the opening statement may not have been strong enough. Further, however, I suspect that the statement failed to be precise or bold enough with respect to the relationship between the text and the interpreter with respect to meaning. I argued in the previous section that meaning should be primarily and determinatively set, or coerced, by the text. I do not wish to abandon that conviction or intent.

However, the fact is that the Bible is appropriated only and always by us and other persons, claim whatever insight we may claim. The hope of some, exemplified most clearly perhaps by some strong biblical inerrantists, is that strong commitment to the 'absolute' authority of the Bible and to the location of meaning in the text somehow guarantees objective, correct, even authoritative interpretations. But, all interpreters stand at the same hermeneutical juxtaposition of the 'two horizons'. There is no 'first horizon' place of refuge.

Ultimately, meaning is found in the inextricable interplay between the coercion of the text itself and the significance or function of the text accorded to it by the interpreter or interpreting community. Although from both a theological and historical perspective I understand the locus of meaning to be in the biblical texts themselves, the locus of meaning as experienced or practiced is found in an individual interpreter, a particular community or a specific ecclesiastical or theological tradition.

This complex interplay between the original meaning (Caird's referent, sense and intention) of historically and culturally conditioned and particular texts and the meaning as understood and given significance and function, always and necessarily, by interpreters who are also historically and culturally conditioned is a hermeneutical reality and predicament from which there is no escape.

How does one prevent the 'subjectivity' of interpreters from overwhelming the 'objectivity' of historically located precedent texts? There is, of course, no absolute control which can prevent this. Within the inextricable interplay of the 'two horizons', however, it is possible to monitor and discipline the presuppositions, biases and conditionedness of interpreters.

First, we must take seriously the coercion of the text. To understand that the historical givenness of the text is the primary and determinative locus of meaning commits us to the task of historical-contextual exegesis. The struggle and results of this undertaking, although fraught with difficulties and tentativeness, provide a control over interpreter-imputed meanings which could otherwise face no critique or boundaries from the text itself.

Second, we must take seriously the contributions which come from our two basic communities: the community of understanding and perspective found in the history of traditions and interpretations within the Church and the community in which we live and nourish our faith and practice. The interplay of these two communities and their impact on interpretation, especially on individual interpretations and on traditions of scholarship developed outside the commitment of living faith and discipleship, provide significant grids by which to evaluate specifically located and conditioned interpreters and interpretations.

Third, the very recognition of the fact that biblical interpretation is shaped by specific historical, theological, sociological and ecclesiastical factors in the experience of the interpreters provides the opportunity to identify such factors and the ways in which they either help us respect the integrity of biblical texts or cause us to misread and misuse the parameters of meaning inherent in biblical texts.

Fourth, we must be committed to the ongoing task of continuous exegesis and understanding of biblical texts in the life of the Church. The fact that the meaning of biblical texts is ultimately known in the interplay of text and interpreter indicates that each generation or segment of the Church must ascertain afresh its understanding of the biblical texts. Without this commitment interpretation is already skewed by and bound to

the uncritical acceptance and undue influence of particular past traditions which soon become more coercive than the biblical texts themselves.

3. Unity and Diversity in Scripture

So far we have discussed the interpretation of biblical texts viewed primarily in their individuality and their place within a particular literary work or single author. However, given our commitments to biblical authority and the significance of the whole Bible to the thought and practice of the Church, we must address the pluralism or diversity within the Bible as a major issue in biblical interpretation.

The diversity or pluralism within the Bible presents us with two basic issues or concerns. First, there is the matter of accepting or understanding the nature of the diversity itself. Here we need to speak both to the so-called 'left', which so often is prone to understand diversity as contradiction, and to the so-called 'right', which so often is prone to obliterate diversity by predetermined theological harmonizations. In either case parts of the Bible are ignored or even rejected, in one case rather openly and in the other case rather subtly or even unconsciously.

The second issue is the quest for a hermeneutical or interpretive centre within the biblical canon. Since the Bible reflects diversity or pluralism, how does one determine a starting point and/or organizing principle or structure for interpreting and appropriating the wholeness of biblical pluralism? Or, might a hermeneutical or interpretive centre be found outside the biblical canon? Or, is such a centre found in a combination of items both within and without the biblical canon?

To begin consideration of the matter of accepting and understanding the nature of biblical diversity, I would like to share a story from my teaching. One day after a lecture on the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) in which I noted the situation of similarities and differences among them and suggested guidelines for interpreting diverse, yet similar gospels, a student approached me in the hallway. Before he spoke I knew I was in trouble! With his Bible in one hand, in fact, and shaking his other hand in my face, he declared: 'God would have never given us four gospels!' Of course, God did.

To generalize, biblical diversity seems to have become a bane to biblical 'conservatives', while at the same time it has been touted with almost pernicious pleasure by critical 'liberals'

against monolithic and rationalistic constructs of biblical authority. John H. Yoder has aptly observed, however, that:

if one perceives and conceives of Scriptures as documenting the life and the norming process of a particular community, then it would be preposterous to assume that the documentation arising from that process would be one of total propositional coherence.²¹

Although the book can be subjected to various criticisms, James D. G. Dunn's *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry Into the Character of Earliest Christianity*²² is an important book which has played a significant role in our own time in forcing the issue of recognizing diversity within the New Testament and eliciting attempts to respond to the issue of biblical pluralism.

Diversity in the Bible, then, is a given and is to be expected as a normal concomitant of a collection of texts which are located in historical-cultural particularity. Such diversity of historical particularity is not a construct of grand contradictions except as those of the 'critical left' make assumptions, often in response to the rigidity and rationalism of many dogmatic constructs, that the biblical canon must reflect a certain type or level of rational or propositional coherence.

On the other hand, the unity of the Bible often presupposed by those who muffle or ignore the diversity is far too brittle or abstract for the actual historical-cultural particularized texts which comprise the biblical canon. I believe that such persons have likened the Bible, wrongly, to a quilt of one colour and one pattern throughout. Rather, the reality of the Bible should be likened to a patchwork quilt of many colours and individually patterned squares which displays its total beautiful unity by its very diversity.

Since the Bible represents, by its very nature, a degree of significant diversity and since we accept within the Church the Bible as authority and norm, then we must let its diversity speak. It should be recognized that part of the 'glory' of the Bible consists in its multifaceted diversity, which must be recognized fully in the processes of interpretation. All facile and falsely motivated attempts to 'harmonize' texts which violate their meaning and power must be rejected. The diversity of the Bible is certainly one of the means through which the Bible has the potential for

²¹ 'The Authority of the Canon', *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Text-Reader Series No. 1; Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984) 276.

²² Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.

continuous relevance and application to various times and situations. To resist this is, I fear, to resist the very mode in which God communicated in Scripture.

If, however, we are to appropriate Scripture in its diversity or pluralism, how can we find a unity, a wholeness, or an interpretive centre or starting point which is both true to the Bible's historical character and to our conviction that the biblical canon is one collective word and authoritative norm from God? This is the second basis concern of the issue of diversity within the Bible.

About AD 200 the Church theologian Tertullian observed: ' . . . I think I may say without fear of contradiction that by the will of God the Scriptures themselves were so arranged as to furnish matter for the heretics. For without Scripture there can be no heresy.'²³ Tertullian's intriguing observation does raise the issues of control, perspectives or unity. How do interpreters bring diverse texts together?

It has generally seemed prudent in the history of the Church to find a starting point or interpretive centre in seeking the unity and coherence of the biblical canon. It is my judgment that the only explicit interpretive centre or starting point *within* the *biblical content* itself is the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the final and full revelation of God (e.g., John 1:1-18; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18; Hebrews 1:1-4). Further, and related to this biblical affirmation, the only interpretive centre or starting point *related* to the *biblical canon* would be the Christian confession that the New Testament is the fulfillment, completion and even ultimate interpreter of the Old Testament.

Apart from these two related starting points or interpretive centres I find no implicit or explicit inherently biblical interpretive centres. This does not mean, of course, the two centres identified are not powerful and rich in implications for biblical interpretation; they certainly are. However, it does mean that much of what has passed and passes in the history of biblical interpretation depends upon starting points or interpretive centres which are not, in fact, biblically clear, but are derived from one's theological, cultural and/or social contexts.

Let me illustrate. According to the Bible, is it possible for a believer to lose salvation or not? Is it proper for women to exercise

²³ Tertullian, *De Praescriptionibus Haereticorum* 39. The translation is that of S. L. Greenslade, *Early Latin Theology: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose and Jerome* (Library of Christian Classics 5; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

the ministries of teaching and leadership within the Church? Is it God's intention that the use of force, coercion or participation in war is always wrong? Is a believer bound to sin or capable of never sinning? Should one renounce all one's material possessions or should one use one's riches generously? Responses to these questions, and a host of other moral, practical and theological issues, depend to a significant degree upon which text or set of texts is chosen as one's entry point or window through which to read other texts on the same issue. And, to reiterate my observation, the choice of starting points in these cases is not determined by a biblical text or texts, but by the interpreter and the interpreter's many contexts.

Often choices have been made by choosing consciously or unconsciously what has been called a 'canon within the canon'. This amounts to an interpreter selected biblical-theological grid through which other parts and perspectives of the Bible are read. To some degree such an approach is probably inevitable, but I would like to think that there are some ways to move toward what I would perceive as a better balance and consistency in biblical interpretation.

Brevard Childs has been and is, in my judgment, a powerful voice calling for a balanced, consistent wholeness in biblical interpretation. His approach, which he has called the canonical approach, has been presented most fully in his books *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979) and *The New Testament As Canon: An Introduction* (1985).²⁴ Here he makes a strong statement that the Bible should be interpreted with both critical awareness and Christian confession and that the interpretation of the Bible must ultimately rest with a theological context shaped or constituted by the biblical canon in its wholeness and its discreteness.

The details of Child's work do not concern me at this juncture. It is clear to me, however, that his proposal is a healthy one for facing the issue of biblical diversity. Childs does not negate either the historical particularity of texts or the reality of diversity. His call for canonical interpretation is not a forced unity or a predetermined interpretation, as I see it, but a serious Christian appeal that biblical interpretation take seriously a commitment to the wholeness and reality of the biblical canon as parameter for articulating unity.

It is clear, therefore, that the issue of biblical pluralism leads me to what inevitably must be seen as a form of theological

²⁴ Philadelphia: Westminster.

interpretation. This is the corrective to the historical-critical method called for by Peter Stuhlmacher, Willard Swartley and others noted earlier in this paper. One's approach should be as balanced and consistent as possible with respect to all biblical data understood, of course, in its own historically particular contexts.

I would draw the discussion of this issue, incorporating as well the first two issues, to a close by suggesting that what is needed in biblical interpretation is an orchestrated quartet. It is in the distinct contributions of each member of the quartet and in their harmony, which can take many forms, that diversity and unity are best heard. The quartet to which I refer consists of the following: the biblical texts and their historical meanings; the biblical canon as the Church's accepted norm or authority; the interpretive traditions of the Church as guides to both use and misuse of the Bible; and the living, nurturing communities of faith in which the Bible is studied and practiced. It is within this matrix that I believe the best resolutions to the issue of biblical diversity are found. The emphasis is not so much on normative content, although that is here in the affirmations concerning Jesus Christ and the function of the New Testament within the biblical canon, but on the responsible interplay of a methodology of theologically integrative interpretation.

4. The Dilemma of 'Historical Consciousness'

'The dilemma of historical consciousness' refers to the crisis that occurred within the Church, particularly near the end of the nineteenth century, over the nature of the Bible and biblical authority when Western intellectual and social thought

... became acutely conscious of the historical origin of culture ... that all ideas, values, institutions and behaviour patterns known to human beings are produced by human beings and therefore bear the imprint of the historical setting in which they emerge.²⁵

The crisis came in a context in which it was assumed that the Bible as the revelation and word of the eternal God had somehow been untouched by or delivered from any significant or fundamental shaping by contingent and particular historical processes. The flowering of historical consciousness thoroughly challenged any significant distinction between knowledge of divine matters and knowledge of human historical processes. Thus, the Bible

²⁵ Grant Wacker, *Augustus* ... 10.

could be explained within the context of historical processes, including the identification of human sources of ideas and causative factors in historical movement.²⁶

It is my conviction that even though most of the Church today which accepts 'the Scripture principle' endorses the historical-contextual study of biblical texts discussed in the first section of this paper, the reality is that 'the dilemma of historical consciousness' has not been squarely and deeply faced. Have we actually confronted the difficulties of the dual affirmations that the Bible as God's revelation presents timeless theological and moral truths and that the Bible is a completely human and historically particular and contingent book comprised of numerous documents with their own historical-cultural occasions and contexts?²⁷

Too often, I fear, we either have had, in fact, a docetic Bible, which somehow sees timeless truths apart from the historically conditioned texts, or we have collapsed or reduced the divine initiative and revelation into only cultural phenomena.

My concern about the issues of cultural relativity has led me to develop eight guidelines for distinguishing items which may be culturally relative from those which may have trans-cultural normativity for the Church.

(1). We must distinguish between the central core of the content of the Gospel and/or New Testament message and what is dependent upon and/or peripheral to it. The possibility of cultural relativity increases with the distance from the central core. (Contrast the holy kiss [periphery] and the resurrection of Jesus [central core].)

(2). Within the guidelines set by the central core, we must determine the relative amount of emphasis given to any topic. The possibility of cultural relativity increases as the amount of treatment decreases. (Compare the relative frequency of references to footwashing and to baptism.)

(3). We must distinguish between normative teachings and

²⁶ For additional analysis see Grant Wacker, 'The Demise of Biblical Civilization', *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (ed. N. O. Hatch and M. A. Noll; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 121-38.

²⁷ I do not pursue in this paper the clearly related issue of canon history and historical contingencies. The acceptance of the biblical canon as a particular collection of 66 documents—all these and no others—is itself not a given of any biblical text. Biblical canon is known to us through the histories of Israel and the early Church and is accepted as a normative collection by faith as a work of God within historical particularity. Canon history is certainly filled with its own ambiguities and uncertainties.

descriptive narratives. The latter have relevance for determining authoritative principles in the New Testament but must be carefully related to normative teachings. They may clarify or qualify a didactic statement. (Compare Lk. 12:33 and 19:8-9; 1 Cor. 14:34 and 11:5.) Descriptive narratives which cannot be related to didactic statements may indicate material that is culturally relative. However, descriptive narratives may contain implicit teaching, and not all didactic statements are necessarily 'universal'.

(4). It is important to note when the New Testament teaching on a particular point has a uniform and consistent witness and when there are differences. When there is different terminology or especially different emphases or different structures, the issue of cultural relativity becomes more relevant. (Illustrations of basically uniform witness are: Jesus' lordship and deity; love as a basic characteristic of behaviour; homosexuality; illustrations of a less uniform witness are: woman's role as teacher; retention of one's material wealth.)

(5). We must distinguish between principles and applications. I would contend that a writer may support a culturally relative application by an absolute principle and yet not make the application absolute. (Cf. 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Pet. 2:18-21; 1 Tim. 2:11-15.)

(6). Intra-canonical principles of reversal within the New Testament may well be indicators of cultural and/or historical relativity. (Cf. Mt. 10:5-6 and 28:16-20; 1 Tim. 2:13-14/1 Cor. 14:34 and 1 Cor. 11:11-12/Gal. 3:28.)

(7). The degree to which a writer agrees with a cultural situation in which there is only one option increases the possibility of the cultural relativity of such a position. (More than one option: resurrection, homosexuality; basically one option: slavery, status and the role of women.)

(8). We must compare the New Testament cultural setting with our own cultural setting. Significant differences may uncover culturally limited applications in the New Testament texts. (Contrast attitudes then and now to democracy [Rom. 13:1-7] and the education of women [1 Cor. 14:34-5].)

We may briefly explore further the issues involved 'in the dilemma of historical consciousness' by considering some aspects of New Testament christology. Hopefully this could lead towards a very modest 'resolution' or 'reconstruction'.

Does the historical-cultural process and context 'define or determine' christological perception or is it 'just' the external means by which the christological ontological reality is 'des-

cribed?' The historical context certainly describes. However, in my judgement, the context neither 'just describes' nor 'determines'. The 'just describes' view is unduly conservative and tends to ahistorical speculation and/or docetizing tendencies. Such a view makes a disjunction between what Jesus has to be and the description. The historical context does describe Jesus in culturally relative terms. But, the context does not 'just describe'; the context is in fact the very historical reality and locus in which Jesus lived and functioned, which we assume to have been God's intention. But I reject the view that this relative context 'determines' who Jesus is. The reality or objectivity of Jesus as the person in whom God was incarnate and in whom God was reconciling the world is in theory apart from such relative contexts in which the person functioned. Presumably the same reality could have functioned in another cultural context with other categories of description and have been the same reality. And yet, an isolated 'reality' is not only ahistorical, but also impossible. The reality or objectivity of Jesus is available to us *only through* the cultural contexts and categories, not above, under, around or without them.

Of course, such a hermeneutical 'resolution' presupposes the affirmation of faith that there is an eternal God who can be and indeed has been revealed in the historical process. Without doubt, this is a mystery the full dimensions of which are not recoverable within the historical-critical processes of hermeneutics and interpretation.

'The dilemma of historical consciousness' can be broached, if at all, through the paradoxical acceptance of the perceptions that the eternal God opted for self-revelation within the only setting we could comprehend: the historically conditioned particularity of human life. If it is not irreverent to say it, our hermeneutical dilemma is but a reflection of the eternal, transcendent God's revelatory dilemma.²⁸

As indicated in the previous section, there in relationship to biblical diversity, that which is historically particular can be seen as the 'glory' or strength of the biblical canon as God's revelation. Here the understanding that God spoke in and through historical particularities may be precisely what gives the Bible its perennial power and relevance. Leander Keck once observed, in connection with the letters of Paul, that

²⁸ This reflection had its first stimulus from the comments of John H. Yoder, 'Authority . . .' 282.

if the interpreter first finds the particularity of the original occasions to be an obstacle to appropriating Paul, it is probably because one expects the letters to articulate timeless truths and principles, rather than timely words to concrete situations which are prototypes of our own. In other words, in the long run it is precisely the particularity of the occasions that make Paul's letters perennially significant.²⁹

Conclusion

The issues in biblical interpretation which confront us as believers in the Church today are complex and challenging, but also exciting and rewarding. I am convinced that the intertwining of text and interpreter in the discovery of meaning, the challenges of biblical diversity and the 'dilemma of historical consciousness' all serve to make us more careful, more humble, more open persons to what we believe is the inherent power of God's word in Scripture.

The tensions of the paradox of the identity of a transcendent God's revelation and a historically-culturally conditioned Bible and the complex interplay of the hermeneutical quartet of the biblical texts, the biblical canon, the traditions of the Church and the living communities of faith point to the image that the Bible is '... living and active [and] sharper than any double-edged sword . . .' (Hebrews 4:12 *NIV*). The Bible is present to disturb, to excite, to challenge and to change the Church. No one should or ever can have a 'safe' hermeneutic which 'boxes' the Bible, and then God, into the categories we might choose for our theological security or personal comfort.

I believe it was Christopher F. Blumhardt (1842–1919) who once said about the resurrection of Jesus that he was not worried about the people who denied it, but was, rather, worried about the people who believed it, but for whom it made no difference in their lives. I would like to recast this profound comment: I am not concerned about those who deny the Bible and the importance of biblical interpretation; rather I am concerned about those who debate and discuss biblical authority and interpretation, but for whom it makes no impact of obedience in their lives.³⁰

²⁹ *Paul and His Letters* (Proclamation Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 17.

³⁰ See also D. M. Scholer, 'The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55): Reflections on its Hermeneutical History', in M. L. Branson and C. R. Padilla (eds.), *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 210–9; '1 Timothy 2:9–15 & The Place of Women in the Church's Ministry', in A. Mickelsen (ed.), *Women, Authority & the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 193–219, and 253 n. 87.