

# The Specificity of Christian Hermeneutics

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In an age such as ours, when the word *hermeneutics* can be used for any kind of knowledge and certainly for all religious writings and Scriptures of all faiths, it no more remains a technical word monopolised by Christians. When the same skills and tools of hermeneutics can be used for any area of knowledge, secular or sacred, it becomes exceedingly difficult and even presumptuous if one were to speak of the specificity of any particular hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup>

There may be much in common between Christian hermeneutics and other hermeneutics, both in methodology and in objectives. Thus, this paper only attempts to highlight a few things which may be called distinctively Christian without claiming any uniqueness for the Christian Scriptures or for their interpretation: the intention is far from polemical. But I want to encourage myself and my fellow-believers not to lose nerve or be overawed in the face of threats in a pluralistic and multi-religious country such as ours and not to be engaged in a back-to-the-wall fight against a more aggressive or numerically superior partner in inter-religious dialogue.

Since Christian hermeneutics essentially deals with the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures, the Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, it is inevitable that I refer to biblical hermeneutics and biblical theology now and then, and probably overlap with some of the earlier papers presented here.

The emergence of biblical theology as a distinct discipline, rescued from the ever lengthening and never loosening tentacles of scholastic and dogmatic theology, and the liberation of the Bible from the authoritative interpretation of the Church are facts for which students of the Bible have to be grateful. But the influence of systematic theology on biblical theology was not totally removed. Neo-orthodoxy, while being the cause for the interest in biblical theology, also became its new master. Little did we notice in the past how biblical theology came to depend on the strength of systematic theology, so much so

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<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl in his article on "Biblical Theology" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. I, p. 422, contends that the descriptive task which is the first stage in hermeneutics can be undertaken by the believer and agnostic alike.

that, for instance, Karl Barth's systematic theology was simply called biblical theology.

The renewed interest in the historical-critical method, created by the "new questers," augurs well for biblical hermeneutics though the definition of biblical hermeneutics seems to be an ever broadening one. Throughout its history the definition of biblical theology has swung back and forth between its characterization as a historical-descriptive discipline (Gabler-Wrede-Stendahl) and a theological discipline (Hoffman-Bultmann-Ebeling) and this tension expresses itself in the ongoing debate between "Jesus of history" and "Christ of faith."

It seems to me that what is crucially important today is not to choose between the two (biblical history or biblical theology), but to go beyond both to the biblical experience. This alone will revitalize the Bible. This is the fundamental task of biblical hermeneutics, and in this task the legitimacy of the Bible in its original setting (historical study) and the recognition of the Bible as verbalized experience (theology) are presupposed.

The importance of history in biblical hermeneutics has long been equated with biblical theology. As a result, instead of arriving at conclusions through rigorous and meticulous exegetical analysis of the text, certain theological abstractions or conceptualisations were read into Scripture, though an element of presupposition is inevitable on the part of the exegete and the biblical theologian. In this process the student of the Bible contracts the disease called "sloganitis," the tendency to create theological clichés which do not have sufficient correlation with the meaning of the biblical text nor reflect the experience of the biblical people. To quote J.C. Baker, "The crisis of biblical theology is exactly the crisis of condensed category which has lost its symbolic value and referent and thus becomes a verbal abstraction."<sup>2</sup>

The historical context of the *kerygma* is as important as the *kerygma* itself, just as the language in which the *kerygma* was expressed soon became part of the *kerygma*.<sup>3</sup> The Christ-event is an event which happened at a particular time and place in history and the response of the first believers to it also took place in history. This fact not only lends credibility to it but also opens the possibility of the same experience to other people in other generations. Thus the "revelatory-event" in Jesus, while being once and for all in one sense, becomes also a continuous process in history insofar as it is a real experience to people in every generation. While it is historical as a historical event of the past (*historie*), it is also suprahistorical because of its eternal

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Baker, "Reflections on Biblical Theology," *Interpretation*, 54 (1970), p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Robinson, "Kerygma and History in the New Testament" in *The Bible and Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. Philip Hyatt (Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 131. [This idea of Robinson is expressed by William G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation* (Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1972), p. 35.]

validity (*geschichte*). Thus the historical context of the kerygma transcends the first century Palestinian milieu as well as the twentieth century Indian milieu. In this sense, history is common to all peoples and cultures of all times, when it is understood as the realm where the Gospel becomes the eternal *now* of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2b).

The renewed interest in biblical history should lead to a reliving of the biblical experience rather than to a revival of interest in getting beyond the biblical text to the ancient Near East or to the Graeco-Roman world which the "History of Religions School" popularized. A return to biblical religion is not to "archaize" our experience, but to find the common factor in their experience expressed in their world-view and our own experience (the basis of experience being common to both, namely Christ) expressed in our world-view and in concepts native to our culture. Thus biblical history and biblical theology help us to see our own experience in the light of the biblical experience.

Another factor which has to be recognized and emphasized is the reality of the community (the Church) where this experience developed and continued through the centuries. It is a community of "like-minded" people (like-minded in their sharing the common faith), the community of faith to whom belongs the Scriptures. The fact that this community has continued through history (transhistorical), keeping fresh its faith, gives the legitimacy and particularity of its Scriptures. In this sense the Bible (Scripture) interprets itself and interprets the interpreter in every generation.<sup>4</sup> Thus the place of the community of faith (Church) and Tradition, which was the faith-experience of the primitive Church, and of Scripture, being the verbalized expression of the experience of the community, are crucial to one's understanding of the specificity of Christian hermeneutics. One has to guard against the temptation to equate one's own denomination or tradition with the "Church" and "Tradition," while the churches and traditions are continuous with the Church and the Tradition. If this distinction can be rightly understood, we can even say that the Church is the interpreter of the Christian Scriptures (making sure that we do not slip back into the notion of authoritative interpretation practised in the medieval Church).

### **Return to Biblical Religion (Experience)**

There is an enormous credibility gap in our time between the theological categories and our own life-style, with the result that the theological category, however biblical in origin, meets with increasing indifference. Therefore, the need of our time lies in a return to biblical religion, just as the authority of the Bible does not lie in a new formulation of its canonicity but in a trust that the biblical text has its own authority and can address my situation and the questions of my life.

<sup>4</sup> "The New Hermeneutic" contends that it is not the Word of God that is interpreted but that it is the Word of God that interprets.

The return to biblical religion should not be understood simply as a return to biblicism and pietism often verging on bibliolatry, where the Bible is equated with the Word of God in a literal sense and therefore historical-critical study is to be resisted. The living voice of the Gospel is not always exactly the same as the written word of the Bible, though the former can be discerned in the latter. The Reformation call for a return to the Bible as the sole source of Christian truth must be heard in our day in a radically different sense without dogmatic and allegorical trappings. It must be heard over against a dogmatic tradition which has encapsulated biblical truth with its dogmatic bands and has regarded the Bible too often as a historical source to legitimize a dogmatic tradition rather than as a religious source which enables religious experience to be born ever anew.

An easy return to biblical religion is impossible because there is no absolute dichotomy between "biblical religion" and "dogmatic tradition." The recognition of the fact that Scripture itself is a part of the Tradition makes the problem even more difficult. Moreover, the fact that the Bible itself is mostly a theological document, not simply a religious tract or a historical narrative, makes it even more complicated. The Bible is a mixture of religious experience and theological formulation. The situation gets totally out of control when the biblical theologian transmits only the theological conceptuality without its experiential base.

The increasing gap between religious experience and its interpretation is the reason for the increasing mistrust and "irrelevance" of biblical assertions, the more so because the biblical theologian allows himself to be carried away by the variety of theological interpretations and categories rather than to be exposed to the religious experience behind such conceptualisations. The description of Jesus' life, words, deeds, death and resurrection becomes meaningless to me unless I have experienced that experience which people like me have experienced before. The conviction and experience of others can become revelatory events to me only if the One who had the revelatory authority exercises the same authority over me now.

The relation between experience and interpretation is the key to Christian (biblical) hermeneutics. The problem of hermeneutics is felt more acutely in New Testament than Old Testament interpretation because its conceptual world is more speculative, abstract and supernatural (apocalypticism, mystery cults, etc.). It is also the problem of continuity and discontinuity, the problem of abiding experience within changing categories.<sup>5</sup> Bultmann tried to locate the continuity in the "kerygma." Yet the hermeneutical problem is not essentially an intellectual problem but an experiential problem. If the "kerygma," "the word" is to be explained in conceptual categories without its correlation with the experience of the primitive Christians, then "God's act in Christ" is no more a continuous reality linking

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth refers to *die Sache* which remains the same notwithstanding the variety of its linguistic expressions.

the New Testament world and my world: the link is no more essential than that between the New Testament message and the gnostic or apocalyptic speculations. For his "existential" interpretation Bultmann tried to "demythologise" the kerygma and thereby moved to the point of over-emphasizing his (modern) world-view (a kind of re-mything). One tends to get the impression that just as a dehistoricized kerygma is lifeless, a demythologised kerygma is an impossibility. A kerygmatic conceptuality which is not grounded in the actual life of the historical Jesus is not convincing. The perennial "quest for the historical Jesus" is a quest for a religious experience within the world of human reality. Once we recognize the relation between the primitive Christian experience and its apocalyptic conceptuality, the conceptual framework ceases to be a problem in Christian hermeneutics. If the original conceptual garb of the kerygma is found irrelevant, I have to derobe it and clothe it with my world-view (a new myth), probably the Indian garb, lest it become *gummos* (naked) and lifeless.

A return to biblical religion is possible when I can trace the relation between biblical experience and its conceptuality on the one hand, and the correspondence between that relationship and my experience in my world of experience on the other. I must also refrain from ontological statements and categories that are prejudicial to the actualising of that experience in my world, and also avoid dictating in advance the nature my experience ought to take in a given world-view.

Return to biblical religion does not mean a revival of extreme individualism or an absolutizing of the experience of individual Christians—(There is always the danger of what Carl Michaelson called the "existentialist rape"<sup>6</sup>—the tendency to isolate the world's meaning in terms of one's own experience.) A return to New Testament religion is particularly significant when we speak of the specificity of Christian hermeneutics. The New Testament—in its understanding and misunderstanding, its clarity and incoherence—testifies to the experiences of people with Jesus which proved so decisive and crucial to them that they confessed him as Christ and Son of God. Only through the historical Jesus do we come to the lighted path which leads from experience to interpretation, from faith in Jesus to christological formulations which express that faith. What is common to the New Testament Christians and us is not the interpretation but the experience which interpretation verbalizes. Thus an encounter with the person, the author and perfecter of our faith highlights the specificity of Christian hermeneutics. He alone can, in the ultimate analysis, interpret the Scriptures to me. "Today the Scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk: 4:21). The risen Christ continues to interpret them to those who despair with the problem of hermeneutics (Lk: 24:25-27).

The ongoing task of hermeneutics which is the prerogative of the risen Christ is being carried out by the Holy Spirit whom the same Father sent to the world, as the Son was sent earlier, and who will

<sup>6</sup> W. G. Doty, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

interpret the very things that Jesus spoke of in his earthly life. Thus, the Holy Spirit is not only the *continuum Christi* but also the *hermēneutēs* (interpreter) (Jn. 14:25; 16:13). The Holy Spirit, while continuous with the Creator Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy and the Spirit which operated in the life and ministry of Jesus, is more than a divine power. He is the Christ of faith who continues to encounter the individual and who operates in the community of faith.

The fact that the Bible (Christian Scriptures) belongs to the community of faith (Church), makes it more than a sacred book of certain people called Christians. It is the testimony and testament of God's act in Jesus Christ (Christ-event) which rings true and fresh in every generation in the proclamation of the Word and in its faith-response, both made possible by the Holy Spirit who is the *hermēneutēs* and who sustains the community of faith (the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit is the endowment of God to the Church to which the Scripture also belongs. The Holy Spirit interprets the Scripture to the believer and it is appropriated by the very same Spirit working in him, though in a limited sense (the *arrabōn*—2 Cor. 1:22), but guaranteeing the fullness of interpretation and meaning in future to which the Scriptures also point.

Insofar as the Scriptures contain and testify to the eternal *now* of salvation, the interpretation (proclamation) of the Word creates a community of faith in every age which is continuous with the already existing community (Church). There is also a discontinuity between the earliest community and the new communities in every age because of the variation in culture, language and so on, though the language of faith is the same always. While we maintain the continuity between the first community and ours through our common faith and the Scriptures, we have to recognize the discontinuity in terms of the changing contexts, be they Palestinian, Graeco-Roman, western, oriental or Indian.

### **Integrity in Christian Hermeneutics**

In a multi-religious and pluralistic situation such as we have in India, we cannot claim any specificity for our Scriptures in an arrogant and dogmatic sense. We have to be humble enough to recognize the reality and genuineness of the religious experience of others who follow God differently and who have different Scriptures as well. But do those Scriptures address me in the way my own Scriptures do? I somehow lack the same faith-commitment that I have in relation to my Scriptures when I read the other Scriptures (just as I do not see my flesh and blood in other children, however much I try to love all children; I see myself in my own children). This is what I mean by integrity in hermeneutics which makes hermeneutics more than intellectual edification.

While I have to *understand* and *interpret* the Christian Scriptures (both are included in hermeneutics) in my Indian milieu to make them understood, as far as possible, to those who follow other religions or

have no faith, there is an unattainability in my attempt insofar as others lack my faith-response and faith-commitment. The Bible (Gospel) can attract as well as repel (the *scandalon*), and this factor cannot be ignored when we speak of the specificity of Christian Scriptures. While I have to decontextualise the Bible to suit my milieu, the Word of God, by its very nature, is decontextualised when it becomes a "Word-event" and a "faith-event." It is addressed to me as part of the whole of humanity, not just as a member of the Indian species of man. Here the cultural context is transcended, but not abolished. It is precisely because of the Gospel that I discover my humanity and not just my "Indianness." In the ultimate analysis Christian hermeneutics remains supra-cultural and supra-geographical, but peculiarly "Christian." It should not be undertaken by someone who may have all the hermeneutical skills and tools but who lacks faith in the One who interprets himself through the Scriptures. The specificity of the exegete and interpreter is integral to Christian hermeneutics.