

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 2

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Volume 2 • Number 2 • October 1978 p. 160a

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## Acknowledgements

The articles in this issue of the EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY are reprinted with permission from the following journals:

'The Bible in the WCC', *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

'Controversy at Culture Gap', *Eternity*, Vol. 27, No. 5.

'East African Revival', *Churchman*, Vol. 1, 1978.

'Survey of Recent Literature on Islam', *International Review of Mission*, LXVII, No. 265.

'Who are the Poor' and 'Responses', *Theological Forum of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod*, No. 1, Feb. 1978.

'The Great Commission of [Matthew 28](#): 18-20', *Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3.

'A Glimpse of Christian Community Life in China', *Tenth*, Jan. 1977.

'TEE: Service or Subversion?', *Extension Seminary Quarterly Bulletin*, No. 4.

'TEE in Zaire: Mission or Movement?', *Ministerial Formation*, No. 2.

'Theology for the People' and 'Para-Education: Isolation or Integration?' are printed with the permission of the authors. p. 161

# Editorial

For an increasing number of Christians the message of the Bible is no longer self-evident. The cultural gap between the ancient world and our secular technological world continues to grow. From the standpoint of a Christian caught in poverty, social injustice and political oppression, commentaries on the Bible written by scholars living in an academic atmosphere of middle and upper class society often seem flat and barely relevant. They fail to deal with what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the central problem of hermeneutics, the problem of application.

While we have good reasons to seriously question the new hermeneutic of Bultmann and his successors in their use of the dialectical method and the existentialism that rejects the concept of propositional revelation, the new hermeneutic does seek to uncover the hidden and unexamined presuppositions with which all of us come to the Scriptures. Reflection on our pre-understandings can be a purifying and creative activity for those within the circle of faith of the believing community and in a humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

This number of the *Evangelical Review of Theology* calls our attention to several issues for which sound hermeneutical methods are needed: the authority of the Bible in the midst of the contemporary ecumenical debate, the exegesis of key passages of Scripture using the hermeneutical principle of distancing and fusing of our horizons and the analysis of the spiritual resources of African and Asian churches living under social and political pressure. The awareness of the culture gap and the conditioning influences on our pre-understanding of the Gospel is reflected in the articles that deal with poverty, the relationship of evangelism to the needs of the total human community and in our understanding of the task of training Christians.

Comments of readers from the first two issues of ERT have been very encouraging. We trust you find this third issue equally challenging. But we need your help in suggesting articles and reviews, especially those originating from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Bruce J. Nicholls  
*General Editor*

## The Bible in the World Council of Churches

*by* PAUL G. SCHROTENBOER

FEW TOPICS have greater importance for the World Council of Churches than the use of the Bible in its deliberations and pronouncements. And few topics have generated more discussion during the thirty years of the Council's history. Both from within the Council and from without there has been criticism and praise of its views on and its use, misuse, or lack of use of the Bible.

Several papers have been written of recent time on how the World Council of Churches uses and views the Bible, both from ecumenical insiders, such as James Barr,<sup>1</sup> Hans Ruedi Weber,<sup>2</sup> and Ellen Flesseman van Leer,<sup>3</sup> as well as from evangelicals critical of the Council, such as Roger Beckwith<sup>4</sup> and Michael Sadgrove.<sup>5</sup> Little, to our knowledge, has been written on this subject in North America, and nothing, as yet, after the Fifth Assembly of the WCC in Nairobi. It is hoped that this paper will attract wider attention to what is a crucial issue, not just for the WCC, the most comprehensive ecumenical organization in the world of churches today, but for all other ecumenical organizations as well.

We may expect that in the next years the WCC will continue its study of the Bible in its own programs and in its churches, p. 163 especially in its portfolio on Biblical Studies. Until now this study has been done with little or no input from evangelicals, except those who are members of churches which belong to the Council. Only recently<sup>6</sup> has there been any conversation between the WCC and evangelicals on the use of the Bible.

It would be presumptuous to think that this paper will make a great contribution to a dialogue between evangelical associations of Christians and the WCC. Nevertheless there is real need for such dialogue and we do cherish the more modest hope that in giving attention now to this subject we will spur evangelicals to speak out in the ecumenical forum.

## I. THE MARCHING ORDERS

The Bible has had a significant place in the World Council of Churches since it was established in 1948. Although the words, 'according to the Scriptures' were not added to the Basis until 1961, the intention of the founding churches was not to neglect the Bible, but to find in it the foundation for the ecumenical movement. The original basis of the WCC was, largely for convenience sake and to avoid controversy, simply taken over verbatim from the Faith and Order movement which joined with the Life and Works movement to form the WCC. It was thought best in those early days of uncertainty, as David P. Gaines expressed it, to 'leave well enough alone', and not propose a new untried basis.<sup>7</sup>

It was at New Delhi (1961) that the then General Secretary, Dr. William Visser 't Hooft, made the claim that the Bible is the voice that gives the WCC its marching orders. In accordance therewith, the New Delhi documents speak repeatedly of the 'Biblical understanding' of such subjects as reconciliation and service. As Dr. Flesseman van Leer has stated, 'People spoke without hesitation about *the* Biblical message and *the* concept

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Authority of the Bible—A Study Outline', *The Ecumenical Review*, 21 (1969), pp. 135–49.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Bible in Today's Ecumenical Movement', *The Ecumenical Review*, 23 (1971), pp. 335–46.

<sup>3</sup> 'Biblical Interpretation in the World Council of Churches', *Study Encounter*, Vol. VIII, No. 2 (1972).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Use of the Bible in the World Council of Churches', *The Churchman: A Quarterly Journal of Anglican Theology*, 89 (1975), pp. 213–24.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Bible from New Delhi to Nairobi'. Mimeograph.

<sup>6</sup> In 1971 a consultation between the World Council of Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Synod in the Hague, the Netherlands, touched on the issue of the Bible. In September, 1976, there was a three-day meeting in Montreux, Switzerland, arranged by the World Council and endorsed by the World Evangelical Fellowship on the use of the Bible in *Salvation Today*. The author attended both events.

<sup>7</sup> *The World Council of Churches* (Peterborough, New Hampshire: Richard R. Smith Co., 1964), p. 882.

p. 164 of the Bible'.<sup>8</sup> It was at New Delhi that the Basis was expanded to include the trinitarian reference and the words 'according to the Scriptures'.

In Louvain, a mere ten years later, the Faith and Order report on 'The Authority of the Bible' flatly stated 'we are not to regard the Bible primarily as a standard to which we must conform in all the questions arising in our life'.<sup>9</sup> While this does not indicate an about face altogether, obviously deep changes occurred in ten years' time. It will be necessary to trace the course of events that brought about this basic change.

How the WCC in its early years looked at the Bible may be construed from a statement by Dr. John A. Mackay at the Second Assembly at Evanston, 1954, namely, that the theology of the report on the theme, 'Christ the Hope of the World', should be 'Biblically founded' and 'ecumenically unifying'.<sup>10</sup> This was undoubtedly the hope of many leaders of the ecumenical movement in that era. However, the question soon loomed large whether these two criteria could be met, and, if they should prove to be in conflict, which one would give way to the other.

After the Evanston Assembly a survey was taken which showed that 'the divided church heard only dimly the Word of God through the Bible'.<sup>11</sup> The Bible conveyed to equally devout and conscientious students different meanings. There were literalists, neo-orthodox, and theological liberals. Later (in 1961) the Orthodox churches with their inflexible views on the teaching of the early Church joined the Council.<sup>12</sup> Thus both among the common members as well as among theologians and churches there appeared deep-going divergences on the meaning of the Bible. Rather than bringing people and churches together, the Bible seemed to be driving a wedge between them. p. 165

The result was an increasing uncertainty as to the authority and meaning of the Bible, especially when the churches attempted to apply the Bible to the problems of modern life. Here, especially in the application of Biblical ideas, a modern life crisis developed. The crisis was best expressed in the Louvain report:

The automatic acceptance of the Bible as basis and standard has in many places been severely shaken of late. Many Christians find the Bible alien to them and to their daily life; they find it increasingly difficult to hear God addressing them directly in the words of the Bible. This difficulty is even felt by many churches. It is only with considerable difficulty that they are able to find in the Bible and its authority a clear basis for their witness and action in the contemporary world. But even in the ecumenical movement a certain perplexity has arisen over the Bible. It turns out that the Bible is read in different ways in the different churches. The Bible is used to justify divergent positions and thus even an appeal to Scripture can itself lead to fresh differences. Above all, difficulties have cropped up as churches have tried to speak and act together on the basis of the Bible. Occasional attempts to call the Christian answer to a specific problem more or less directly from the Bible have proved unsatisfactory. As a result the tendency has been more and more to

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<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain 1971* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1971), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 594.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 837.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that the influence of Orthodox theology upon the ecumenical debate began only in 1961. From the very beginning Orthodox theologians were vocal in Faith and Order discussions and during the 40s and 50s they contributed to studies on the Bible. Two Orthodox theologians contributed papers to the volume *Biblical Authority for Today*, Alan Richardson and W. Schweitzer, eds. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951).

abandon the appeal to Biblical grounds altogether. Thus the problem simply is avoided, which is not a satisfactory course either.<sup>13</sup>

The Louvain Report further localized the causes for this unsatisfactory state of affairs in three areas: (1) the confessional differences among the churches, especially concerning the role of tradition of the church, (2) the influence of historical criticism, and (3) the historical remoteness of the Biblical witness.<sup>14</sup>

We should add to this list of causes the crisis that arose within the 'Biblical Theology' which played such a strong role in the formation of the WCC. Actually this was perhaps the most unsettling factor of all. It is to this that we would turn as we trace the development from the early view that in the Bible we find our marching orders (New Delhi) via the crisis in the churches to the p. 166 present situation, where, as Gaines expresses it, 'The honest person who was competent in the Scripture knew he could not say responsibly that the Bible taught this or that solution to any complex modern problem.'<sup>15</sup>

## II. THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY APPROACH

When one thinks of the so-called Biblical Theology in the ecumenical movement, he thinks of such men as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Hendrik Kraemes and W. A. Visser 't Hooft. All of them made an impact on the WCC, especially during the first decades. As Hans Ruedi Weber puts it, 'the Biblical theology movement is marked by the combination of a critical approach on the Bible and its witness to the history of salvation.'<sup>16</sup> The ecumenical document which best expresses the movement is the Wadham College statement on 'Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible'.<sup>17</sup> It was assumed by proponents of Biblical Theology that one could both hold the critical approach and retain the Bible's unity. Great stress was also placed on the salvation history in the 'mighty acts of God' performed in Israel, of which Jesus Christ forms the center and fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> The Bible was seen as a faithful and uncorrupted testimony to this salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*).

Biblical Theology was very Christo-centric and harmonizing. The Old Testament, it held, should be read in the perspective of the New Testament. Further, the proponents of Biblical Theology held that the Bible addresses men of all ages as contemporaries.

In the New Delhi Report one can find clear evidence of the influence of this Biblical Theology. Thus in the report on witness we read,

God is his own witness, that is to say, God has been and is at work authenticating his own message to men. When we speak of witness we mean testimony to the whole activity of God in the creation and preservation of the world, but especially in his mighty acts in

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<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-1.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 876.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 341.

<sup>17</sup> *The Ecumenical Review*, 2 (1949-1950), pp. 81-6.

<sup>18</sup> Flesseman van Leer, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Israel's history and in the redemption of the p. 167 world by Jesus Christ. To this testimony the Holy Spirit in the church bears witness.<sup>19</sup>

The same report states: 'In the apostolic witness, coming to us in Scripture in the Spirit-filled church, God gives us the foundation of all subsequent witness.'<sup>20</sup>

A clear statement of the unifying and normative force of the Bible for the ecumenical movement was given by Edmund Schlink: 'Unless the norm of the Word of God, standing above all our seeking and self-questioning, is taken seriously, our quest for the church in other confessions, and the self-questioning in our own, must end in the dissolution of the church and in disobedience to the Lord of the Church.'<sup>21</sup>

Entirely in line with this, Visser 't Hooft could say: 'our studies begin with the Bible—that is, with hearing the Word of God; they move to evangelism—that is, to proclaiming the Word of God; they pass beyond to Christian action—that is, to doing the Word of God.'<sup>22</sup>

The study on 'The Bible and the Church's Message to the World Today', claimed that the inquiry had as its chief object to 'provide a solid Biblical grounding' for two other studies, one on evangelism and the other on Christian action. This was the consistent pattern up to and through New Delhi in 1961. The view is well expressed in the New Delhi report on Unity: 'The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament witness to the apostolic faith. This is nothing else than those events which constitute God's call of a people to be His people. The heart of the Gospel (*kerygma*) is Jesus Christ himself, his life and teaching, his death, resurrection, coming (*parousia*) and the justification and sanctification which He brings and offers to all men.'<sup>23</sup>

### III. MONTREAL, A WATERSHED

When the Faith and Order Commission met in Montreal in 1966 there was a change. It appeared not so much in the reports P. 168 adopted by the Commission as in the address of Dr. Ernst Käsemann. It was more an undercurrent than a surface phenomenon. While its effect was not apparent immediately, in the next decade its results would be unavoidable.

Käsemann claimed in his address that 'no romantic postulate, dressed up as a salvation history, can relativize the sober fact that the historian simply cannot speak of an unbroken unity of New Testament ecclesiology'.<sup>24</sup>

The immediate reaction of W. A. Visser 't Hooft, the General Secretary of the WCC was that if the ideas of Käsemann gained acceptance, the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches would be doomed. In the opinion of Flesseman van Leer, herself a member of the Faith and Order Commission, Visser 't Hooft expressed the general mood of the meeting. For if it was necessary to recognize an irreconcilable diversity in the Canon, the words 'according to the Scriptures' adopted just two years earlier, would lose

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<sup>19</sup> *The New Delhi Report* (New York: Association Press, 1962), p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> 'The Church and the Churches', *The Ecumenical Review*, 1 (1948–1949), pp. 156–57.

<sup>22</sup> Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

<sup>23</sup> *The New Delhi Report*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Flesseman van Leer, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

much of their force. If the reports could not be Biblically grounded they could not be ecumenically unifying either.

Käsemann was not alone in his view of a 'theological' pluralism in the Scripture itself. Others (such as Gerhard von Rad) claimed for the Old Testament what Käsemann had claimed for the New. Soon there were claims not just of a diversity in ecclesiology, but in other teachings as well.

There were other factors besides the view of a theological diversity within the New Testament Canon which caused the WCC to question the validity and usefulness of the Biblical Theology approach. Inherent in the very approach itself was the sanctioning of the critical method which allowed the scholar to sit in judgment upon the text and from that stance determine whether a passage in the text was or was not a witness to the Word of God. Then also, as the historical character of the text of the Bible was accentuated, the method of harmonizing fell more and more into disfavor.

An experience within WCC circles also greatly accelerated the trend away from the Biblical Theology approach to a pluralistic view. At Wadham (1949) there developed a '*cul de sac* from p. 169 which there seemed to be no way out. We simply discovered how widely separated we were from one another.' However, the atmosphere began to clear up immediately when the participants opened the Old Testament itself and began to interpret it in fellowship with one another. 'Divisions then appeared to be almost non-existent.'<sup>25</sup> Similarly at the Lund Conference (1952) when the delegates could not make further progress towards unity by talking about doctrinal differences, they found it a relief to read the Bible together.<sup>26</sup>

The effect of these incidents was to raise doubt whether the Bible was indeed a unifying element in the ecumenical movement. At least the question arose concerning the unifying force of the then current *ideas* about Biblical authority.

The 'experiences' of Wadham and Lund showed that what dogmatic theology, including that of the Biblical Theology sort, could not do, the ecumenical experience was able to accomplish. The effect on the WCC of experiencing how important *experience* is was deep and lasting. To trace this development we should consider further the effects of the Montreal 1963 assembly of the Faith and Order Commission.

The Montreal Conference did more than allow the yeast of a critical approach issuing in a diversity of theologies in the Bible to enter the ecumenical discussion. It also placed greater stress upon tradition in the Church. Thus, while at the same time affirming the once-for-all directives of the Bible and appealing to the revealed truth, the report brought the Bible into direct relation with the Church's teaching.

At the same meeting the question of the Church's interpretation of the Bible was broached, and it was recognized that there is a hermeneutical problem. Montreal asked, 'How (can we) reach an adequate interpretation of the Scriptures so that the Word of God addresses us, and Scripture is safe-guarded from subjective or arbitrary exegesis?'<sup>27</sup> Here it was recognized that only in the tradition (*paradosis*) of the proclamation (*kerygma*) do Christians have access to the redeeming acts of God, that is p. 170 to say, through and in human thought and interpretation. Thus the Bible is the written form of tradition and has to be interpreted by the Church in ever new situations.

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<sup>25</sup> *Minutes of the Central Committee*, p. 96; quoted by Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

<sup>26</sup> Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 732.

<sup>27</sup> *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Rodger, P. C. and Lukas Vischer, eds. (New York: Association Press, 1964), p. 54.



Montreal struggled with the question: What is the criterion by which to evaluate the various traditions of the churches? It answered this question by saying that it is 'the Holy Scriptures rightly interpreted'.<sup>28</sup> But then the question followed, What is right interpretation? To this there was no immediate answer, for:

In some confessional traditions the accepted hermeneutical principle has been that any portion of Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of Scripture as a whole. In others the key has been sought in what is considered to be the center of Holy Scripture, and the emphasis has been primarily on the Incarnation, or on the Atonement and Redemption, or on justification by faith, or again on the message of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, or on the ethical teachings of Jesus. In yet others, all emphasis is laid upon what Scripture says to the individual conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the Orthodox Church the hermeneutical key is found in the mind of the Church, especially as expressed in the Fathers of the Church and in the Ecumenical Councils. In the Roman Catholic Church the key is found in the deposit of faith, of which the Church's *magisterium* is the guardian. In other traditions again the creeds, complemented by confessional documents or by the definitions of Ecumenical Councils and the witness of the Fathers, are considered to give the right key to the understanding of Scripture. In none of these cases where the principle of interpretation is found elsewhere than in Scripture is the authority thought to be alien to the central concept of Holy Scripture. On the contrary, it is considered as providing just a key to the understanding of what is said in Scripture.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the quest for a 'hermeneutical' principle by which to determine what right interpretation is was started. This quest would lead to the report of Bristol (1967) and Louvain (1971). It would result, further, in the sanctioning of diverging theologies in the p. 171 Bible and in stressing the idea of a functional authority in human experience, and in emphasizing the continuity of the Bible's interpretation with the on-going interpretation in the Church.

#### IV. BIBLICAL PLURALISM

The new climate initiated at Montreal appeared clearly in the 1964 Bristol Conference of the Faith and Order Commission. A report at this conference on 'The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement' questioned whether the Bible can any longer be regarded as a unity. While some passages may be considered complementary, others (such as the future of Israel in [1 Thessalonians 2:14-16](#) and [Romans 11:25ff.](#)) can only be viewed as contradictory.<sup>30</sup> Bristol made the admission that there are confessional divisions within the canonical books themselves.

Nevertheless the Bristol conference held that 'the Bible is a given fact in the church'.<sup>31</sup> The conference was not ready to face, or did not see the full consequences of, the 'new direction' that Montreal had instigated. However, in the time following, these consequences would soon appear, in fact within very few years.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol 1967* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1967), p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.



Commenting on the Bristol report, Dr. Flesseman van Leer observed that its thought process was dominated by the fact that the Bible is a collection of documents written by men.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, then, the accent fell on the diversity of the Bible.

James Barr submitted to the conference at Louvain four years later a study outline on the authority of the Bible. His outline was based on the consultation arranged by the Faith and Order Commission in Boldern near Zurich in 1968. In this outline he too raised the possibility of basic theological disagreement within the Bible itself.<sup>33</sup> Thus the Church was faced with making a choice 'within the totality of the Bible'. He admitted that there was disagreement about the degree of finality that could be expected to attach to the Bible, *even if rightly interpreted*, as a source p. 172 of Christian truth.<sup>34</sup> He granted, further, in a palpable understatement, that the historical-critical method is not necessarily committed to a recognition of the canonical documents as a special group.<sup>35</sup> His conclusion was that the Bible can no longer be assumed to be the uniquely unifying element in the ecumenical movement.<sup>36</sup>

The upshot of Barr's outline was that a new method of approaching the question of Biblical authority was started. The study groups 'should approach the study of Biblical authority *not* by a general consideration of Biblical authority abstracted from the exegetical situation, but *by the interpretation of particular Biblical passages in their relation to a chosen theme*' (italics in original).<sup>37</sup> The reasons given for this far-reaching change in approach were that it would allow the study on hermeneutics to go on, would less likely result in passing by the problem of the diversity in the Bible, and would enable a study in which a 'double line' of considering questions arising from the text as well as questions coming from our situation.<sup>38</sup> All this reflected the growing conviction that the 'secure authority which the Old Testament appeared to have during the "Biblical theology" period has largely dissolved in some areas in the more recent change of climate'.<sup>39</sup>

The meeting of Faith and Order in Louvain, 1971, in response to Barr's outline, took a position that more explicitly than Bristol held that the Bible, which both records events and interprets these events, has in it a great variety of interpretations. 'Application of the methods of historical criticism has also brought out more clearly than ever the diversity of the Biblical witness. The individual passages and traditions of the Bible are all aligned to specific historical situations and the Bible is the collection of these diverse testimonies'.<sup>40</sup>

Since the Bible is both event and interpretation, the criterion by which one evaluates the divergent interpretations within the Bible is 'to what extent an interpretation interprets a central p. 173 saving event attested in the Scripture and is rooted in that

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<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> *New Directions in Faith and Order*, p. 136.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain 1971*, p. 11.

saving event'.<sup>41</sup> At this point one can see that the central events still had decisive significance.

A new element closely related to the central events was the reference made to the Bible's 'relational centers' (*Beziehungsmitten*). These are decisive centers in Scripture to which the Biblical witness is related. Examples are the love of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But no one relational center is exclusive of others, and not all of them can be considered complementary. Therefore 'it is often impossible to adopt the Biblical interpretation today without qualification'.<sup>42</sup>

Louvain sought to allay certain misgivings and stated that the fear that historical criticism would destroy the authority of the Bible and with it the Christian faith itself is 'ultimately baseless'. For 'When we speak of the "authority" of the Bible in the strict sense, we mean that it makes the Word of God audible and is therefore able to lead men to faith'.<sup>43</sup> Here an appeal was made to the Bible's *function and to human experience*. These we should now examine in somewhat greater detail.

## V. AUTHORITY AND EXPERIENCE

The Louvain Conference asked the question: 'How are we to approach the Bible so that, through the Biblical text, God may speak to us authoritatively today?'<sup>44</sup> In the question itself is the assumption that for the Scripture to be authoritative something more is needed than the fact that God caused it to be written. Scripture *must prove* itself in experience to be authoritative. Scripture must speak to us today in our experience to have force upon our lives.

This was understood at Louvain to mean that the Bible needs no external basis, but must prove itself by the impact of its message.<sup>45</sup> This led to the idea of a functional, non-*a priori* view of Biblical authority, and of a situation-conditioned hermeneutic p. 174 perspective.<sup>46</sup> This was the answer Louvain gave to the question it posed.

James Barr, whose influence at this stage was considerable, observed that in modern times the majority view is that the Bible functions primarily as a mode of access to primitive revelation given in past history.<sup>47</sup> It is what the Bible does that is important. The functional use of the Bible, he explains, means not to work out from authority in the sense of what things ought to be, but rather to start from things as they are, to observe the modes in which texts are actually used in and in what ways they actually affect Church life.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, Flesseman van Leer stated that only if the Biblical testimonies have proved themselves to be authoritative can we confess in faith that they are inspired.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain*, pp. 16–7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Flesseman van Leer, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 7. Ellen Flesseman van Leer, 'freelance theologian', as she calls herself never tires of stressing that the Bible must be experienced as having authority in order to be authoritative. Authority by itself just

Reflecting the views of Barr and Flesseman van Leer, the Louvain report states, 'Authority is therefore a present reality only when men experience it as authority; at the same time, it transcends human experience.'<sup>50</sup>

There is one additional element to emphasize, namely, that in the Bible we deal with interpretation itself no less than we do in the Church. Moreover there is a continuity between the Bible's interpretation and that of the Church.<sup>51</sup> The various interpretations contained in the Bible should be understood as an interpretative process into which we must enter in our own way. At this point the distinction between a basic normative interpretation, as given in the canonical books, and a lesser, derived normative interpretation by Church and theology either does not function or fades into the background. In other words, the emphasis upon continuity between Biblical interpretation and post-Biblical interpretation p. 175 is not balanced with a stress upon the discontinuity between them.

That human experience, then, is not an incidental element in the WCC's view of the Bible's authority but a constitutive component will be seen when one pulls together the various elements, namely, that if authority is to be such it must function in human experience, that there is continuity between interpretation in the Bible and in the Church in post-Biblical times, and that we should work out, not from things as they ought to be, but from things as they are. Little wonder that following this extensive discussion at Wadham and Louvain the great stress in the WCC has fallen far more upon the situation or context of the Bible than on the text of the Bible itself. For it is in the current context that our experience occurs. It should therefore be no surprise that Philip Potter should state that to appeal to what the Bible says has become out of date.

One should not conclude at this point, however, that for the WCC the Bible has been abandoned as a source and standard of authority. To the contrary, the widespread phenomenon of Bible study at WCC assemblies gives some warrant for proponents of the new view of the Bible to claim that the actual text of the Bible is being taken more seriously today than it was, e.g., during the 'Biblical Theology' period. Gone, they say, is the tendency to superimpose a dogmatic strait jacket on all Biblical texts and as a result the specific wordings, structure and message are being taken much more seriously. While there is less stress upon the Bible's teaching of Biblical authority, there is greater emphasis upon the practice of Bible study.

Nor should it be overlooked, as has been done by some evangelicals, that the same passage that states that authority must be experienced, also states that the Bible transcends authority. The Bible is still a court of appeal.

One may perhaps summarize the role of experience and the Bible in the WCC's view of Biblical authority by comparing them with a set of mutually supporting rafters. It is not the Bible apart from experience, nor experience apart from the Bible, but experience in correlation to the Bible. If the rafters on the one p. 176 side give way, so do the ones on the other side and the roof collapses.<sup>52</sup>

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does not exist, or, if it does, has no meaning for us. Her attack is especially strong against the evangelical view which she calls *a priori*; that is, prior to one's having experienced that the Bible speaks authoritatively in this life, one affirms that the Bible is authoritative simply because the Bible claims authority. That passages such as [II Timothy 3:16](#) and [II Peter 1:20, 21](#) should be used to settle the matter of Biblical authority must, in her view, be rejected out of hand.

<sup>50</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain* 1971, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> The figure of mutually supporting rafters may be misleading. It should not convey the idea of complementary ideas of equal significance, for while they are mutually interdependent, the idea of human

#### IV. CONSEQUENCES OF THE WCC'S USE OF THE BIBLE

The World Council of Churches has as its aim the promotion of the unity of the churches of the world. It was thought at one stage that the Bible was a unifying factor in this process of promoting church unity. The ecumenical movement in the beginning emphasized the unity of the Biblical message as a rallying-point for uniting a divided Christendom. But what happens when it is admitted that there are differences and conflicts *within the canonical books themselves* similar to that among the churches? It would appear at first blush that a divided Bible would lead to a divided Church. However, if one listens to advocates of the new view, the opposite is the case and the new view of the Bible abets rather than hinders the ecumenical movement.

James Barr observed in 1969 that, whereas in the older discussions unity was thought of as the theologically positive factor and diversity as negative, in more recent time there came a wider recognition that the study of the diversity of the Bible would provide fresh positive insights into the authority of the Bible.<sup>53</sup>

Already at Bristol (1967) it was stated that 'the awareness of the differences in the Bible will lead us toward a deeper understanding of our divisions and will help us to interpret them more readily as possible and legitimate interpretations of one and the same Gospel'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as Flesseman van Leer expressed it, what was thought to be an obstacle actually proved to be a gain. The gain was that *the theological differences in the Bible legitimated the theological differences among the churches*. In order to promote the unity of the Church, it would be very helpful to recognize that there is a plurality even within the canonical writings which may not be harmonized away. p. 177

A second consequence of the 'new direction' regarding the Bible was that, since authority must be experienced in order to be recognized, there should continue to be much Bible study. For it is in the process of Bible study that the experience occurs in which the Bible *functions as authoritative*. Not wanting to relinquish the hold of the Bible on the churches, and given the theological diversity of the Canon itself, the stress must fall upon the study experience of the ecumenical assembly, preferably in small groups, in which the Bible gives access to the primitive witness to revelation, and, hopefully, a shared experience of what God is saying.

A third consequence is the great openness to dialogue in which the churches give account of what is held in common in their faith. Since experience is such a prominent component, it is in the experience of giving account of one's faith and hope that the meaning of the Bible's authority is best understood.

Louvain sums up the consequences of the new direction in four points: (1) We should not regard the Bible as a standard to which we must conform in all the questions in our life. (2) We should read the Bible in the expectation that it can disclose the truth to us. That is, we should read it in anticipation of its disclosure. (3) The Bible is a critical book. It is impossible to fit it into the prevailing thought of the day. It is a court of appeal to which the Church must constantly defer. (4) The nexus between event and interpretation means that we should abandon the restricted form of inquiry as to the historicity of the

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experience takes on far greater significance in the current debate than does the idea of the Bible's transcendence over human experience.

<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> *New Directions in Faith and Order*, p. 41.

Biblically attested events and the meaning of the Biblical witness.<sup>55</sup> Due account must be given to the context, especially the cultural context today.

At Louvain, a committee in its evaluation of the Report on the authority of the Bible called for abandoning the static concept of authority and a mechanistic understanding of inspiration. This, in the committee's opinion, does not undermine the authority of Scripture, since that is grounded in the authority of God who once revealed himself in Jesus Christ and who is today active in the exposition and proclamation of the witness of the primitive church.<sup>56</sup> p. 178

The events in the WCC since Louvain clearly show that World Council hermeneutics have been dominated by Louvain. This means an emphasis on situational hermeneutics in which the tendency is to give more emphasis to the context than the text, to lay more stress on the diversity than the unity, and to give more attention to the collation of various human experiences of salvation than to the exposition of a body of Biblical truth concerning the nature and extent of, e.g. salvation today.

Thus the study of *Salvation Today* at the Bangkok (1972/3) Conference 'concentrated on ways in which the theme (salvation) could be approached in close relation to one's actual experience. In the experience of the early Christians (who surely did not choose an ancient text and then apply it to their experience of the Lord's living among them) the usual procedure of selecting Bible texts and then applying them to contemporary experience (at Bangkok) was deliberately reversed'.<sup>57</sup> This, however, is not to deny that there were several lengthy Biblical preparations before and at the conference, some of which were not published in English. It is to say that experience has become the heavy side of the scale.

In Bangkok and Nairobi it was not so much what the WCC said about the Bible, but what it did with the Bible. At both there were many small Bible study groups. For both, Bible study outlines had been included in the preparatory documents. Thus when an evangelical makes the observation that the WCC ignores the Bible in its deliberations, the prompt and legitimate response from the WCC devotee is to refer to the extensive Bible study actually going on in the conferences and assemblies.

In reading through the reports from the six sections at Nairobi, one is struck by the fact that references to the authority of the Bible are scant, but references to the text of the Bible, at least in some of the reports, especially 'Confessing Christ Today', are many.

Therefore one cannot conclude that the regnant ideas about Biblical authority in the studies conducted by the World Council of Churches tell the whole story, for these ideas have not become legal tender for the entire WCC membership. So, when these churches assemble to prepare reports on the basis of preparatory p. 179 documents, the finished products are a mixture of the regnant ideas of the study department and the views that the delegates bring along from their churches, culture and convictions. The results, therefore, cannot be predicted ahead of time and each document must be judged on its own merit. One thing is sure, one should not ignore the effect of the study documents on the Bible's authority.

Nairobi decided that higher priority should be given to the portfolio on Biblical Studies and that particular attention should be given to developing liaison with Bible fellowships, societies and movements. It requested that a distinct effort should be made 'to achieve an

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<sup>55</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain* 1971, pp. 21–2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>57</sup> *Uppsala to Nairobi*, 1968–1975, Johnson, David E., ed. (New York: Friendship Press, 1975), p. 83.

inter-cultural awareness of how the Bible is understood, reckoning that such a cross-fertilization may facilitate a better ecumenical understanding among Christians'.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, while the hope that the decisions of the Council will be 'Biblically grounded' has been severely shaken, the expectation that the study of the Bible will be 'ecumenically unifying' lives on. 'Above all, how is the Bible to be so interpreted that there may be a genuine unity in Christ?'<sup>59</sup>

## VII. THE EVANGELICAL CONTRIBUTION

Before concluding this paper, we should return to a matter we broached at the beginning, namely, the evangelical contribution to the debate on the Bible in the WCC. Evangelicals within the WCC have (understandably) made a larger contribution to the discussion on Biblical authority than those who belong to churches which are not affiliated with the Council. That the latter have not done more is to be regretted, for on such an important topic all evangelicals should want their voice to be heard.

To attempt such a contribution in the current debate would be meaningful because of the *de facto* appeal that is still being made in WCC assemblies and documents to the message of the Bible. It is still a source book for the statements of ecumenical gatherings. The WCC still claims to operate 'according to the Scriptures'. The evangelical voice can still be heard and its impact can easily be seen, especially in those areas of study (such as p. 180 in evangelism and dialogue) where the evangelicals have concentrated their efforts.

Such a contribution, as well from evangelicals outside the WCC as from those within, is said to be welcome by WCC officials, even though evangelicals within have often felt neglected. To make an input, at least in the discussion on the printed page, will be especially important in the next few years in which the WCC study of the Bible will be given extensive attention.

Evangelicals still maintain that declarations can be both Biblically true and ecumenically unifying and that 'in the unity of the true faith' one can meaningfully seek to manifest the oneness of the Church, the people of God. This is the time for them to authenticate this claim.

Evangelicals have long affirmed that when the Church condones historical criticism of the Bible that allows one to sit in judgment upon the Scriptures to determine whether they do or do not witness to the Word of God, the Church has condoned within its midst a disruptive, disunifying force. There has perhaps never been a better opportunity for evangelicals to show that their view of *sola Scriptura* can be a unifying force than today in the ecumenical forum.

*Further comments on this subject will be included in the next issue of ERT—Editor*

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<sup>58</sup> *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975*, Paton, David M., ed. (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 313.

<sup>59</sup> *Faith and Order: Louvain 1971*, p. 23.