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Biblical Theology and Non-Western Theology

Some Observations on the Contribution of Biblical Theology for Christianity in the So-called Two Thirds World

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During my 37 years of college and university teaching I have taught both Biblical and Systematic Theology.[1] For more than the past quarter of a century, my primary, but not exclusive, attention has been on biblical theology, especially that of the New Testament. I have no desire to debate here the relative merits of the two approaches. My thesis is that, in this time in history, biblical, rather than systematic, theology is probably the best place to start 'doing' theology in and for the non-western, Two Thirds World. This thesis also includes many groups outside of the mainstream of technical, academic theology in the western world, such as ethnic and cultural minorities and those living in small town and rural settings.

Many aspects of the essence of this thesis have been considered extensively by missiologists and scholars of the Two Thirds World. They have produced an impressive body of literature dealing with both corporate and individual attempts to address the need and possible structures for theological statements appropriate to their many geographical and cul-

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[1] Several friends and colleagues have assisted me with this paper. I must mention Dr Lonna Dickerson, Dr John Gration, and my wife, Florence, who have made major contributions to the content and editing. My appreciation also goes to Doug Milford, Director of Distance Learning at Wheaton College, for pointing me to helpful information and to Dr Scott Moreau for computer help.

tural areas.[2] My concern is with inter-theology methodological approaches.

1. Personal experiences in cross-cultural settings

Three experiences have been significant in bringing me to think about issues inherent in the title of this paper. First, a conversation with a just-graduated student centred around the work he would soon be taking up in his native East Africa. I asked what were some of the important issues that theology should address there that were not a part of the focus of his education at Wheaton College Graduate School. The content[3] and quickness of his answer shocked me and I realized just how provincial we can be, both in our views of international political-social issues, and in choice of curriculum.

Second, as students were leaving the final examination of a course dealing with the biblical theology of a particular New Testament book, a minority student said, in effect, that this [biblical theological] approach would 'preach' in his churches but systematic theology would not. Finally, on the evening of the day in which I had concluded teaching a three-week course in Nigeria on 'The Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament', a delegation of students came to see me. After the traditional expressions of gratitude the leader said, 'We do not believe you understand what you have done for us. Before this class our study of the New Testament required our going

[2] E.g. John Gration, 'Willowbank to Zaire: The Doing of Theology', *Missiology* 12:3 (July, 1984), pp. 227-309; K. Gordon Molyneux, *African Christian Theology: The Quest for Selfhood* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993); 'The Contribution to African Theology of the Faculty Faculté de Théologie Catholique in Kinshasa, Zaire,' *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 11:2 (1992), pp. 58-89; and Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur, eds. *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984). See also review of Molyneux, *African Christian Theology* by A. Scott Moreau, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 36:1 (January 2000), pp. 109-112. Insight into another area is provided in the series of essays edited by Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

[3] It included (1) attitudes toward ancestors; (2) circumcision, (3) polygamy, (4) issues related to charismatic theology and experience, (5) diviners, spiritualists, and demonism, (6) the nature of the Christian family, (7) poverty, (8) development in such areas as economics and education, (9) tribalism, (10) Islam, (11) traditional African religions, and (12) AIDS. I could have added more, but this was his list.

Another student, from another part of the world, listed (1) how to present the gospel in an area that has three other main religions and a government that will not permit proselytizing, (2) what should be the Christian response in a society in which bribery is the only way to get things done, (3) the dilemma faced by a Christian running a business in a country in which, by law, 10% of all employees must be Muslims and every corporation must have at least one Muslim on its board of directors, (4) what is a Christian to do when there are national, cultural festivals held in temples, (5) ancestor worship, and (6) the problems inherent in a society in which all marriages are 'arranged' and the family determines that a Christian woman must marry someone of another religion.

from the African world to the western to that of the Bible and then back through the western world to ours. As a result of our study in this course we are now able to go directly to the biblical world.' Another added, 'You know, our world is much closer to that of the New Testament than is yours.'

2. Describing Biblical and Systematic Theology

Both the definition and function of biblical and systematic theologies are controversial. Most contemporary systematicians want to distinguish between 'Biblical Doctrines' and 'Constructive Systematic Theology'. The former involves arranging biblical teachings under a topical outline such as Prolegomena, Revelation, God, Human Persons, Christ, Salvation, The Christian Life, the Church, and Eschatology. The primary structure and methodology for this enterprise usually begins with the study of the Bible, and often includes gathering proof-texts for each category. 'Biblical Doctrines' also draws from philosophy.

'Constructive Theology' attempts to apply religious truth to the contemporary historical-cultural situation by translating its message into the conceptual world-view and framework of the modern world. Its objective includes meaningfully extending and applying both the content and intent of religious teachings to the target society. This requires careful analysis of all religious issues involving human persons and those cultures in which the message is stated. In making these analyses, the theologian draws from biblical studies, history (both world history in general and that of Christian theology and experience), philosophy, literature, the social sciences, the arts, natural sciences, and any other areas that are helpful in understanding human nature and the environment of the society and/or the individual being addressed. The organization and presentation of this form of systematic theology are then heavily influenced by one or more of the areas used in making the analysis. Thus method and structure of both the study and presentation are different from that of the Bible itself.

In 'Biblical Theology' all statements about God, human beings, Christ, righteousness, and salvation derive their meaning and connotation in terms of their function within the plan and on the plane of the history of the Bible and its times. It seeks to understand biblical truth within the conceptual world-view and historical-cultural framework of the biblical world. Biblical theology derives its content by steadily focusing attention upon the Bible in its original setting. It employs the (critical) tools of linguistic, historical-cultural, and literary investigation.

In addition to ideological ones (such as liberal versus traditional viewpoints), numerous controversies surround virtually every feature of biblical theology. We will mention only two: those involving its organization and its objective.

One has only to look at the table of contents of a number of different books on biblical theology to realize how diverse are the organizational

structures employed by the authors. In general, they are organized along the lines of either an analytic or thematic (synthetic) approach.[4] The former investigates the various units (such as the Pentateuch, prophets, writings, synoptic gospels, the writings of John, those of Paul, and other divisions) to determine the teachings and emphases of each. Synthetic structures look for common themes and the distinct ways they are dealt with throughout the Bible or in the particular testament under consideration. At times a writer may combine one of these approaches with some of the divisions usually found in systematic theology.[5] Other approaches include investigations which seek the implications of the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament [6]or the so-called word-study method.[7]

Disagreements involving the objective of biblical theology focus upon whether it is a legitimate study in itself or a step in a greater enterprise; that is, is biblical theology merely descriptive or can it be normative as well? G. E. Ladd is quite clear, 'Biblical theology is primarily a descriptive discipline. It is not initially concerned with the final meaning of the teachings of the Bible or their relevance for today. This is the task of systematic theology.'[8] On the other hand, Donald Guthrie eloquently sets forth the case for biblical theology as normative.[9] This is so, he says, because of the sinful nature of all human beings whose need of a favourable relationship with God does not change, regardless of time and place. Guthrie also argues that the Bible must speak to each generation on its own terms.

The distinction between biblical and systematic theology is not always easy to grasp. Not infrequently, students come to me a year or more after taking a class with me

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[4] The thematic or synthetic approach is less often used than the analytic structure. Donald Guthrie in his massive study, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), uses a more-or-less synthetic approach. George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), uses an analytic approach.

A. M. Hunter, *The Message of the New Testament* (1944), expressed the hope that all future textbooks in New Testament theology be written from the synthetic point of view. This is a largely unfulfilled desire.

[5] E.g., Guthrie, *NT Theology*.

[6] E.g., C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (1952); *The Old Testament in the New* (1952; reprinted 1963); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* [British title: *This is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes*], (1968) and *The Time is Fulfilled: Five Aspects of the Fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New* (1978).

[7] E.g., G. Johannes Botterweck, and Helmer Ringgren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*; John T. Williams, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974 and foll.); Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967-1985) 3 vols. plus Index; G. Kittel and Gerhard Friedreich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); Ernst Jenni, and K. Westermann, eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Mark E. Biddle, trans. (1971; E.T., Peabody, MAS: Hendrickson, 1997) 3 vols.; W. Van Gameren, ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 5 vols.

[8] Ladd, *Theology of the NT*, p. 25.

[9] Guthrie, *NT Theology*, pp. 32-34.

and say, 'I'm finally understanding the difference between biblical and systematic theology.' Once, when I was trying to explain the difference to an engineer friend, he commented that biblical theology also has its systematic elements. He was, of course, correct. The line between the two is not sharply defined. The major differences, I believe, lie in their starting points, methodologies, and organizational models. The points addressed, and emphases placed upon them, may also be diverse.

3. The Traditional Gateway to Theology

The beginning point for formal theological training of those who will become pastors, teachers, missionaries, and informed laypersons is frequently through the study of 'Biblical Doctrines' or some other form of systematic theology. This has the advantage of quickly and neatly presenting the essential teachings of the Christian faith. It is a strategy I sometimes employ myself when working with new Christians or beginning students. Nevertheless, I have several questions and disagreements associated with this method.

One question is: which orientation and organization (or structural outline) will be used – Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed-Calvinistic, Anglican, Anabaptist, Wesleyan, Charismatic, or some other? Which philosophical, sociological, or other grid will determine the methodology, assumptions, and structure for the study? Into which cultural framework will the presentation of Christian doctrines be placed?

One of my concerns is that biblical and theological study must always begin with the biblical text in its own context. If other settings and methodologies are permitted to drive the study, there is the danger, possibly an inevitable one, that it will be founded upon, and continue without, a real biblical base — external elements may become the controlling influences. To say it another way, failure to begin with and continue investigating the biblical text in its own world while studying the Christian faith leaves us without much needed 'control'. Consequently, the chosen contemporary cultural or intellectual scheme may become tyrannical and impose extra-biblical influences and criteria upon understanding the biblical message while it is simply meant to be a framework for making applications for the modern writer's audience.

This may lead to a major problem if potential leaders have met only one form of systematic theology in their training, especially if the learning has been in an 'indoctrination' environment. If these people then take up work in another culture, either in their homeland or abroad, they have no option but to teach or preach what has been taught to them. More than likely the two cultures will not 'fit' and the structure will be 'foreign'. No help has been given to understand the need for or means of cultural adaptation without compromising 'the faith revealed once and for all' in Jesus Christ.

4. Forgotten Factors Influencing the Biblical Student

4.1 Internal-subjective factors which influence the student/theologian

Less obvious than the type of theology with which to begin are differences stemming from subjective factors within the individual student/theologian. All of us come to our studies with personal preferences, commitments, experiences, and presuppositions. Complete objectivity in the theological enterprise is unobtainable.[10] We must acknowledge our presuppositions and note their influence upon the way we work and the results which come from it. We must learn to deal with our presuppositions lest they become 'blinders'[11] which narrow our field of vision and force us to go straight ahead without even considering other options, methods, or needs.

Furthermore, individuals respond in various ways to intellectual/academic approaches to a subject. The same philosophical, historical, social-scientific, or aesthetic handlings will not appeal equally to all. Such matters are deeply involved in complex matrixes including psychological, intellectual, societal, cultural, and many other factors.

Biblical theology is also influenced by the personality, cultural-economic situation, the intellectual environment of the student, and more. A survey of the history of the discipline is sufficient to demonstrate the strong influence of the dominant philosophy and methodologies of any given historical period upon biblical and theological studies.

4.2 Societal-cultural Factors Influencing the 'doing' of Theology

In addition to individual, personality, philosophical, and environmental differences, diverse cultural factors have a major influence on the way people think and learn. A missionary physician, a veteran of work in a number of locations, and I were discussing different educational styles. She observed, 'Half the world memorizes, the other half learns to think.'

Even more significant is the fact that although all humans share a store of commonalities, individuals and people groups have different thought patterns, ways of evaluating evidence, and means of problem solving. Bernie Harder, teacher of linguistics, medieval literature, and international literature at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, offers a perceptive study of the effect of culture on thought processes, social customs, beliefs and rituals, language, and especially upon the learning of a language other than one's mother-tongue.[12] Even

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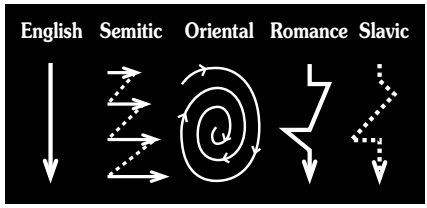
[10] In a well-known essay Rudolf Bultmann asked, 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?', and then demonstrated how influential his own presuppositions were in his work.

[11] I fear many readers may be too urban and/or young to understand this allusion. Pieces of leather were sometimes sewn to the bridle of a horse or mule in such a position as to obscure vision to either side. These pieces of leather were called 'blinders.'

[12] 'Weaving Cultural Values on the Loom of Language,' *Media Development* 3 (1989), pp. 25-28.

sentence structure and syntax can be affected. In some cases a statement or question made to a speaker of English as a second language may be misunderstood and taken in a way exactly the opposite from that intended by the speaker.

Harder also cites observations, confirmed by others,[13] of Robert B. Kaplan of the University of Southern California. Kaplan describes several patterns of logic employed in the English essays written by foreign students in his courses. He explains that the structure of English is like a straight line because of its linear development, Semitic structure is a series of parallel arrows connected with a broken line, the Oriental pattern is like a spiral moving inward, and the Romance pattern is a zigzagged arrow. The Slavic, or Russian, structure is more difficult to explain.[14] Kaplan diagrams five thought patterns as follows:[15]



He states, 'Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word), which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture; it is not universal . . . but varies from culture to culture and even then from time to time within a given culture.'[16]

Many of these conclusions from the field of linguistics have their corollary in theology in a cross-cultural setting. They show that different people-groups think differently. Therefore we must not assume that the forms of theologies which appeal to and are relevant to one group will necessarily be so for another.

Even more to the point are some issues raised by Orlando Costas.[17] Although he is not directly concerned with our topic, Costas makes a direct, positive contribution to our study by his insistence that western theology, even among evangelical Christians, is 'too obsessed with the Enlightenment' and that preoccupation with 'the reasonableness of faith' is not necessarily a primary concern in the Two Thirds World. Furthermore, he insists that western and other parts of the world have different primary agendas. The West seems predisposed to address 'the skeptic, atheist, rationalistic-heathen – the non-religious person'.[18] In the Two Thirds World major concerns are more likely to be poverty, powerlessness, oppression, and religious pluralism.[19]

[13] E.g. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[14] Bernie Harder 'Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education', *Language Learning* 16:1 (1966), pp. 4-14; Kaplan provides illustrations for each type of thought pattern.

[15] Harder, 'Cultural Thought Patterns,' p. 15.

[16] Harder, 'Cultural Thought Patterns,' p. 2.

[17] 'Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World,' in Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla, *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas- A Report on the Context and Hermeneutics in Americas Conference, sponsored by Theological Students Fellowship and the Latin American Theological Fraternity, Tlayacapan, Mexico, November 24-29 1983* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 311-323.

[18] Costas, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 320.

[19] Costas, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 321.

5. Potential Problems of Western Systematic Theology in the Two Thirds World

Most systematic theologies are western constructions using western methodologies, systems, and logic. They produce answers for western peoples, and are often directed toward the academically oriented. What happens too often is that the methods, tools, conclusions and even the controversies of western systematic theology are simply transported into locations and cultures foreign to it. Issues raised in one environment frequently will be of little or no significance in the new setting. Concerns important in the target society may not even be recognized by the western import. Even if they are, they may not receive proper consideration because to 'outsiders' they seem of little significance. Proposed solutions from outside the culture, without full awareness of what is at stake, may be superficial, legalistic, or unworkable; [20]they are likely to be patchwork at best and dangerous at worst.[21]

There are some theological statements, interpretations, or demands which are strictly western in their origin and implementation. Some of us have either read about or personally encountered some of these which are vigorously contested or made tests of orthodoxy in countries or cultures where combatants neither know nor understand the background, history, or what was really at stake. Need I go on? The problem to which I allude is well documented by most contemporary studies in missiology.

One fact already raised illustrates an important issue which runs deep. western theologians usually assume the validity of logic as an unassailable methodological tool. But Enlightenment-style logic, which considers sacrosanct such principles as non-contradiction, is not necessarily appropriate in all societies. Remember Kaplan's distinction of different thought patterns and Costas' complaint about the West's obsession with reason and reasonableness.[22] Yet, we must stress that

[20] The question of what should be done about polygamy by Christians spurred a vigourous class discussion in one of my courses. American students proposed relatively simplistic answers. Eventually a Two Thirds World student arose to say he was the youngest child of his father's fourth and youngest wife. If his father had followed most of the advice given in the discussion, he said, either he and his mother would have starved to death or she would have been forced to become a prostitute.

[21] In response to a plenary session paper, 'The Role of Evangelicals in American Society' by Martin E. Marty, read before the National Meeting of Evangelical Theological Society, Chicago, 1984, Irving Hexham demonstrated that Christians, either led to Christ or renewed by the revivals in South Africa in which Andrew Murray played a dominant role, divided into two distinct groups after Murray's death. One self-destructed into radical self-centred religious subjectivism, the other, with no native expression of Christian theology, imported Dutch Calvinism and tried to force it to fit their own culture. This latter group became the forefathers of the later apartheid society which reaped bitter and shameful fruits for decades.

[22] Note also Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

although the logical process in each non-western society may be different from ours, it works for and makes sense to them.

Let me dare to go a step further. Familiarity with some of the literature from the same locales and time of biblical books suggests that we are probably making a major mistake in attempting to fit biblical thought into such schemes as those available in Aristotelian or other western forms of logic. Semitic thought forms did not, and often still do not, operate that way. Can the western mind really adequately describe and give the rationale for the chronological or logical scheme of the Book of Jeremiah?

Two Thirds World systematic theologies should reflect familiarity with and sensitivity to the religious customs and traditions and the cultural and social issues of the target areas. Writers should be those with first hand knowledge of the group, preferably nationals, not those with mainly a western point of view. They should reflect the ways of thinking and expression indigenous to the area being addressed. At best, western systematic theologies might be studied merely as examples, but even then with a careful effort to explain the kinds of societies, cultures, and issues of the environments within which they arose and the types of and reasons for the methods used.

6. Biblical Theology and the Two Thirds World

We have already sought to demonstrate that all biblical theologies are not of the same kind. Contemporary biblical theological studies are influenced by the same types of prior commitments and agendas as are systematics. Nevertheless, we are concerned here with context and methods of approach, not with the final results of various practitioners of a method. Biblical theology, at least initially, is not concerned with western, or any other contemporary structures. Biblical theology starts with the Bible in its own historical-cultural environment and this is its distinct advantage. It begins and, at its best, stays very close to the setting from which Two Thirds World scholars, like those in the West, can work directly in seeking to state theology for their communities.

6.1 The Inherent Nature of Biblical Theology

Biblical theology begins by seeking to determine the message of the biblical writers in their culture. These cultures are not subject to change for they are now 'frozen' in time and place. Biblical cultures are 'foreign' to all modern peoples and cultures. Thus theological work, which begins by seeking biblical truth as it came in its original context, places all participants on a level playing field since it is foreign and neutral to all members of all contemporary societies.

Even an elementary awareness of the situations within which the Bible was written and the world-views of its characters challenges interpreters in subsequent ages to ask the question, 'What did it mean to its original writers and hearer/readers?' before asking, 'What does it mean in our very different time and setting?' It forces all Christians to come together in the

house of the interpreter, each from multi-cultural viewpoints, to seek the meaning of the message initially revealed in another time and place, before proclaiming its words of salvation, life, and hope in the diverse settings of our world.

Secondly, with a biblical theological approach, those from cultures of the Two Thirds world may actually be better equipped to see issues in the text in its original context. western approaches, especially systematic theology, may be heavily influenced by the outlook and interests of the educated, privileged classes, from which much academic theology comes. The western view of the text may be too easily glossed over by familiarity with traditional exegesis and theological formularies. Starting from the biblical context also makes it much easier for us to hear our non-First World sisters and brothers when they raise, as a part of the Bible's own agendas, such issues as truth and justice, slavery and oppression, poverty and wealth, religious pluralism and idolatry, nationalism and tribalism, sexism, classism, exploitation, governmental and business ethics, and many more. Scholars from the Two Thirds World are also able to help us see the blotches on our own societies, attitudes, and personal lives to which we have become blind or desensitized but which are exposed by the text.

6.2 Is Biblical Theology Normative Theology?

The essence of the Christian faith is not primarily assent to doctrine, shared religious experiences or feelings, or the quest for authentic existence. It is a personal relationship with God. This relationship is made available through Jesus Christ, and continued through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. The facts about this relationship and their implications are the major concern of the Bible.

With the possible exception of two or three books, the Bible does not resemble any particular type or system of theology. It reveals God by showing his person and his will, by recounting his words and works, his actions and reactions over a long period of time, in numerous places and cultures. It relates how many human persons and groups have acted and reacted as God so revealed himself.

The biblical accounts of the past can be immediately relevant to the present because they are not primarily concerned with presenting knowledge in and of itself, not laws nor liturgy, not human ideals, nor any other kind of 'programme.' Rather, the Bible presents a person, one who 'is the same yesterday, today, and forever' (Heb. 13:8).

How was the message applied by the original writer and reader? By revealing, not a theology nor concepts, but the person of whom they spoke and the nature and implications of the relationship with him. Problems arise when persons and groups living after the biblical period are unable or unwilling to see and hear the message in its original setting before seeking to move it into theirs. The abstract, technical language of philosophy or other modern disciplines is not sufficient for

presenting and bringing one into a relationship with another person, let alone the ultimate One.

The prophet Micah asserts that it is through remembering events of God at work in the past that one 'may know the saving acts of the Lord' (6:5). Throughout Scripture it is assumed that its narrative is normative revelation. True, there are also the messages of prophets and apostles, words of worship and wisdom, and more, but all these are within or cognate to the narrative. I maintain that biblical theology at its best focuses upon the person and will of God and upon the flow and lessons of that narrative within which he works. Interestingly enough, a narrative framework is one within which much of the Two Thirds World is most comfortable. The same is true of many, especially the less erudite, in the First World.

All forms of biblical interpretations, including theologies, are concerned with understanding and applying revelation in ways that are useful for faith and practice in our world. However, it seems to me that it is at least an open question how far the biblical message must be removed from its original form and setting to see its relevance. This becomes evident when we recognize that the biblical message has a subjective aspect which must affect the inner, the spiritual, emotional, and volitional components of persons as well as an objective, cognitive one aspect.

The biblical writers themselves considered their message to be more than merely descriptive. God seemed to think that the type of presentation we find in the Bible was both understandable and normative. A form of theology which stays as close as possible to that method will not stray too far afield.

7. 'There and Back Again' – A Paradigm for Beginning Theology

7.1 The Goal

My Nigerian friends, probably subconsciously, put their finger on a series of issues about preparing theological students and the way to 'do' theology in a variety of cultural settings. The sentiments they expressed beneath trees overlooking the African savannah echo the task of the biblical interpreter once described by Professor C. H. Dodd:

> The ideal interpreter would be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, has felt its whole strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came, and who will then return into our world, and give to the truth he has discerned a body out of the stuff of our own thought.[23]

Recent decades have witnessed a growing realization of the close connection between all forms of theological studies and hermeneutics – the study of theory and procedures of interpretation. A major part of hermeneutics, at least in the world of traditional biblical and theological

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[23] *The Present Task in New Testament Studies: An Inaugural Lecture delivered in the Divinity School on Tuesday, 2 June 1936* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1936), pp. 40-41. Cf. the title of his book of children's stories, *There and Back Again* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932).

studies, is the attempt to bridge what is called the 'gap' separating our time and culture from the world of the Bible,[24] how to go 'there' and 'back again.'[25]

The journey is essential because biblical theology must begin with the assumption that (with the possible exception of predictive prophecy) no interpretation is likely to be correct which could not have been intended by the original author nor understood by the original recipients. Thus, interpretation begins by seeking the intent of the authors.

This authorial intent is the revelation of the person, will and acts of the eternal, unchangeable God.[26] It also demonstrates that there are spiritual and moral principles which are rooted in, and gain authority from the fact that they reflect the nature and will of God himself; living in harmony with them pleases God. Sometimes these principles are presented abstractly and at other time they are in absolute form. More often they are revealed as they are applied specifically to culturally-controlled situations over many centuries. Both of these modes are valid and relevant, although they must be interpreted and applied in different, appropriate ways.

The presentation of these basic moral and spiritual principles in the absolute form has a trans-historical, trans-cultural character. The other form of presentation is closely wedded to specific circumstances, those arising out of cultural, social, and historical situations. Both the books of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament epistles are 'problem centred'. The writers were frequently applying basic theological principles to specific problems faced by those to whom they were originally writing. In such cases, the biblical text must be carefully examined to recognize these problems and to identify the general principles which lie behind the application made by the prophet or apostle. The methods by which the principles for life and conduct were applied to the situations faced by the first readers are also important. The interpreter must be aware of these methods, for they will provide guidelines for applying the same principles in different times and places. Each piece of this biblical data in its own way is a part of the whole which is normative and relevant for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness which is designed to bring the people of God to maturity and equip them for every good work (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

We journey into the biblical world to learn of God, reflect on his nature through the principles of which we have spoken, and to see how they were applied in the biblical world. One of our main concerns in this

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[24] Such differences as (1) time, (2) culture, (3) language, (4) geography, (5) literature, (6) institutions, including political, social, etc., (7) philosophy (8) world-and-life view, and the like.

[25] Note Karl Barth's description of John Calvin's interpretative method. It might be called 'going there and back again.' 'See how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century [Calvin's day] from the first become transparent.' *Epistle to the Romans* (Eng. trans; London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 7.

[26] Cf. John 8:29; 1 Cor. 7:32; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Tim. 2:4; Heb. 11:4.

study is to insist that, regardless of which country or culture one begins the journey, the destination is the same – the biblical world. God, spiritual and moral principles, and the guidelines for employing them remain the same. Differences come when we apply them in our diverse situations after we have come 'back again.'

7.2 The Means

Such is the purpose and goal of the interpreter's journey. But is it really possible to go to, what Professor Dodd called, 'there . . . that "strange world of the Bible?"' The answer, first of all, is that of course it is impossible to completely enter some other time and place. Yet, through seeking evidences of situations, including events, personalities, social institutions, cultural phenomena, and the rest, historians do, with some success, enter past places and societies all the time. They focus upon the study of documents, both primary and secondary, and archaeological evidence. Historians work forward from the past and backwards from the present. Their primary objectives include offering reconstructions of ancient societies, determining what caused their distinctive characters, and seeking to identify the intermediate developmental steps between then and now.

The vehicles to bear us to the biblical world are, in one form or another, the elements of biblical studies. Textual work begins with the evaluation of manuscripts now available. Whenever possible it involves working in the original biblical languages and an understanding of the genre and other literary and rhetorical features within the texts. It is learning about the biblical world that my African friends found so helpful. The study of the historical-cultural situation can begin by asking what seems to be the nature of the times – daily life, customs, attitudes, and aspirations assumed in the text. But then one may go to cognate literature contemporary with the biblical period and other remains for additional historical-cultural evidence (and let me note the growing recognition of the importance of archaeology, not only for apologetics, but also as a major contributor to rediscovering the ancient context[27]).

The more often we enter that other world in order to become acquainted with the context of the Bible, the more we become familiar with the main ways of getting into it. In addition there are also secondary 'roads' and byways which go there. These less travelled ways pass through different terrain, hamlets, and scenery. By occasionally taking one of these, we see the biblical world from other angles. The distinctive view offered by alternative 'approaches' provides a fuller understanding of the nature of the goal of our trip once we are 'there'.[28] Likewise, we sometimes gain insights into the biblical text in surprising ways and places when we

[27] Cf. John Gray, 'Toward A Theology of the Old Testament: The Contribution of Archaeology', *Expository Times* 74:11 (August 1963), pp. 847-351.

[28] A study of, and travelling along, the approaches to Jerusalem from various directions vastly helped my understanding of the city and its history.

look at its context from different vantage points.[29] (One misses a lot by travelling only by air or on the interstate highways!)

Of course it helps to have companions along on such a journey. Without the company of fellow students/travellers who have gone before, especially those who have left the records of their 'journeys' (i.e., their research), each generation of theologians would have to start from scratch. From contemporary travellers we can benefit from expertise they may possess; theologians travel in pilgrim bands, they must not be 'lone rangers'!

Now, all this is 'old hat' to most of us. It is relevant precisely because the various elements involved in biblical studies are at least one valid starting point for those who would found their theology upon the Bible, regardless of their ethnic or cultural origin.[30] These are the time-tested elements of making an exegesis of specific parts or passages of the Bible which must be fitted into the over-arching whole of the biblical panorama.

To those who object that such a journey is too rigorous, I reply only that the theological discipline requires discipline. Too often I see students from this (USA) as well as other countries gravitate toward what appears to be more simple, more practical, the more immediately applicable courses of study. They then leave the formal phase of their education without a sound biblical and theological foundation upon which to build. They have little of that kind of maturity which the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says is 'for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:14).[31]

I have implied that there are foundational steps from a western a perspective. That is my cultural orientation. Those who can identify better equipment and way-stations for the

[29] My understanding of the content and setting of the Book of Jeremiah was enhanced by the novel, *Harken to the Voice*, by Franz Werfel. There is much to be gained with familiarity with the methods and interpretations of the Bible by the so-called 'Church Fathers', writers from the Reformation and earlier periods, e.g. the series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

See also Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature and Get more Out of It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). Reading the Bible just as literature (which is not what Ryken proposes) has its limitations. See Krister Stendahl, 'The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103:1 (1984), pp. 3-10.

[30] For summaries of traditional interpretative procedures from a western point of view see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); H. A. Virkler. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Process of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

[31] I am haunted by a report given to me by a colleague who had been a long-time missionary. He told of a bright young student from another continent who earned a Master's degree in the U.S. in a 'practically oriented' area. He avoided taking all but the absolutely required minimum courses in Bible and theology. He then returned to his homeland and, because he did not know the difference, led a denomination of three million into liberalism.

trip into the biblical world in ways more appropriate to other cultures should do so.

Such is the equipment to bear the biblical student-theologian 'there.' The requirements for coming 'back again' are not so easily identified. They vary from culture to culture and from time to time. But we must realize that on this return leg of the journey the students are coming home to their own world, the place and culture they know best. Here, however, biblical students need to learn from the systematic theologian that there is more to our culture than meets the eye; careful analysis to see what is beyond the surface is a requirement if we are to be most helpful and relevant.

Sometimes the what we bring with us as we return to our own 'world' may take the form of systematic theology, while at other times it may be story. Personally I have found helpful the process of seeking to identify the broad questions, either stated or implied, which were in the minds of the writers. The form must be determined by the culture; the content must never be compromised.

8. Some Concluding Observations

The task of the biblical theologian in any culture is first to assert the existence and nature of the One sought in virtually every culture, through whom 'the world was created . . . [so that] . . . that what is seen was made of things which do not appear' (cf. Heb. 11:3). Then it is a matter of moving to identify both the questions implied in the text itself, the divine principles, and their implications as they were worked out in the biblical world. This means that students of the Bible will seek to pierce to the very heart of its message to find its concepts and principles about God, the universe and their relationship and then apply that message in appropriate forms to their modern world.

The very nature of systems frequently makes the transportation of their methods and statements from one culture to another potentially inappropriate, dangerous, and tyrannical. On the other hand, biblical theology, when properly done, should be the foundational discipline to be used by various peoples and cultures as they seek statements of their own biblically based theologies. It will be an assuramce that such formularies will be wedded to the message of Scripture in its own day and that applications in all modern settings will be relevant.

Perhaps it may appear that I have strayed from my stated topic, 'Some observations on the contribution of biblical theology for Christianity in the so-called *Two Thirds World'*. I think not. These observations assume that 'from all peoples, nations and languages' (cf. Dan. 7:14) Christians who stand within the traditional spectrum of the faith regard the Bible as God's authoritative word for faith and life. The fact that it was given at specific times and places must be taken seriously. Of equal import is its eternal, unchanging message.

These observations also come from a conviction on my part that,

although I appreciate the value of systematic theology, all systems are created by human beings, are temporal, culturally bound, and become obsolete. They are always incomplete, for God is greater than any system. And, ultimately, all theology must not seek ideas about God, but God himself, his person and will. As Alfred Lord Tennyson said,

> Our little systems have their day;
> They have their day and cease to be.
> They are but broken lights of Thee;
> And thou, O Lord, art more than they.
>
> 'In Memoriam'