

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 28 · Number 4 · October 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Scripture and Hermeneutics: Reflections over 30 years

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KEYWORDS: *Inerrancy, women in ministry, authority, homosexuality, megachurch, Orthodoxy, paradigms*

Introduction

It is a challenge to reflect on the developments of the past thirty years as we celebrate this milestone in the life of the WEA Theological Commission. So much has happened in the world, so much has happened in the church, that these last years have been explosive in terms of change. To survey the entire world would require several volumes! These are personal impressions of the scene in North America.

Scripture and Hermeneutics

When I was in seminary the big issue was the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. Books were written on the topic defending the full authority of an inerrant Bible. Other books were written on the impossibility of such a position and the need to speak of the authority of the Bible in a restricted

sense. One example will suffice to explain the intensity of the debate. In an apparent error of judgment by the school that issued the invitation and also by the speaker who chose his topic, a well-known evangelical seminary which held strongly to inerrancy too late learned their commencement speaker was from 'the other side'. He used the occasion to chastise his hosts and the graduating class for their foolish adherence to the position of an inerrant Bible. While like most commencement speeches this one has no doubt been long forgotten, the story serves to indicate the theological climate at the time.

Of course, our friends in Europe were not fighting this battle; they were busy fighting other challenges to the faith. In subsequent conversations with European theologians, I found they seemed genuinely intrigued and perhaps a little puzzled by the American preoccupation with inerrancy and infallibility. There were notable exceptions among the European evangeli-

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cals who followed the battles, but for most part this was an American war.

Theologians from the developing churches also were above the fray because they had no inherent difficulty with a holy book. Some international students returning to their home countries developed the themes of inerrancy learned during their graduate studies in North America. Back home they found themselves answering questions their people had never thought to ask. Unfortunately their training did not always equip them to answer the real questions in their society, such as ancestor worship.

In the midst of the debate in America, when it was ranging the hottest, a wise professor from whom I learned much warned us that the future debate would not be over inerrancy but over hermeneutics. How correct his prophecy has proven to be. Without referring to inerrancy or infallibility, we hear theologians citing Scripture as their authority to justify any number of departures from generally accepted norms. The justification of openly gay clergy and hierarchy is done on the basis of Biblical texts, interpreted according to their hermeneutic.

Recent battles within the Evangelical Theological Society, which has a strong statement on the authority of Scripture,¹ have revolved around

hermeneutic considerations. At their last annual meeting (November 2003), the ETS debated whether those holding to the 'openness of God' theology had violated the doctrinal basis.²

These conflicts should not surprise us since we have in Luke 4 and Matthew 4, an example of different hermeneutical approaches to the Biblical text. While the phrase, 'the devil can quote the scriptures for his own purposes' does not appear in the Bible, certainly the sentiment of that expression does. In the deconstructionalist reading of a text, the author's intent is not as important as what the text 'says' to the reader.

There is, however, a corresponding Scylla to the Charybdis of hermeneutic interpretation. If we posit that there is only one correct understanding of a text, whose understanding do we accept? The early church's understanding? The Reformation understanding? Western Christianity (however defined) against the insights of the emerging churches? Francis Schaeffer's concept of a circle helps us here as we perhaps can agree on a circle of hermeneutical interpretation rather than a defined point.

The problem of selecting the correct interpretation of a text will not go away. Theologians must assist the church in understanding the range of possible meanings, especially as the text relates to the changing environment the church finds herself in. The hermeneutical challenge to the church will only increase in the coming years.

1 The Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Theological Society to which all members must yearly sign their agreement to is: 'The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.'

2 'Evangelical Theological Society Moves Against Open Theists' www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/145/54.0.html

There is, however, a bright side to this as the focus has returned again to the Scriptures as an authority to be considered.

Women in ministry

Thirty years ago women in evangelical seminaries faced some discrimination if they chose to pursue pastoral ministries. On the whole women were welcomed to study biblical and theological subjects with the implicit understanding that they would not seek ordination nor would they, in denominational traditions that restricted it, teach men. A woman's place teaching other women and children was never questioned. Of course, seminaries with a broader understanding of the Bible or a different view on certain texts were admitting women to pastoral studies. And some denominations were ordaining women to pastoral ministry.

It is only in the last thirty years that the Anglican Communion has ordained women to the priesthood. Along that note, it is interesting to read Michael Harper's reasons for leaving the Anglican Communion.³ While Harper defends his earlier decision to remain Anglican, in spite of some Anglican bishops denying basic tenets of the faith such as the Incarnation and the Resurrection, he could not agree to the ordination of women. His argument is

that the opinions of bishops, however heretical, are just that opinions. But as a clergyman, he was compelled to agree to the ordination of women.

Some readers of this article will no doubt feel sympathetic to Harper's conviction, while others might find the denial of basic tenets of the faith by those sworn to uphold it more troubling. The point here is not to argue for the validity of women's ordination, but to demonstrate the hardening of opinion in the last thirty years. When I was Graduate Dean at Wheaton College, one of my highly esteemed colleagues was Dr. Lois McKinney. She had been a church worker and then missionary to Brazil before returning to the USA to teach. Lois's comment to me was that when she graduated from seminary, she was allowed to do more as a woman in ministry than women entering her denomination would be allowed to do today. What was not a watershed issue in terms of ministry then, has become a defining one today.

Again, I would say this controversy is over hermeneutics, rather than authority. Both those who favour women in all aspects of ministry and those who would limit women to certain restricted roles appeal to the authority of Scripture to prove their point. It will be certainly be interesting to observe thirty years from now where evangelical churches stand on these issues.

Worth noting is that even in denominations which are heavily male-dominated, women missionaries carried on pastoral functions that they would never have been permitted to undertake in the churches that sent them out. This phenomena, well documented in any standard history of mission,

3 The acceptance of women's ordination by the Anglican Church is the reason Michael Harper gives for leaving and converting to Eastern Orthodoxy. See his *A Faith Fulfilled: Why Are Christians across Great Britain Embracing Orthodoxy?* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1998).

demonstrates there has been a disconnect between what are perceived to be the clear instructions of Scripture in the sending country versus the actual needs of the mission field. Some of this disconnect can be attributed to racial prejudice, the nationals on the field being seen as 'children' in need of instruction and not men and women capable of leadership. But regardless, the position of teaching and authority that women carried out most capably is the reason (on the human level) for the church existing in many places today. The women got the job done.

Another side note is the issue of giftedness, both natural and spiritual. Many churches have been capably led by women. In particular, churches in the Pentecostal and Holiness traditions have been served well by women. A capable woman, General Eva Burrows, has led the Salvation Army in this generation, as was done in past generations.⁴ The hermeneutical issue of what the Scriptures actually mean about women in ministry will continue to provide employment for writers, editors, publishers and printers for at least another generation.

Homosexuality

While this issue would seem to fall outside the hermeneutical debate, with the Bible speaking clearly on the subject in several places (e.g. Lev. 18:22, Rom. 1:26-27), yet the proponents who

allow homosexual behaviour also use Scripture to buttress their position.

The consecration of the first openly homosexual bishop of the Episcopal Church sparked no small controversy. Parishes spoke of withdrawing and actively withdrew to form another Episcopal denomination. Bishops in Africa threatened to sever relationships with the Episcopal Church USA and possibly the Anglican Communion.⁵ Yet New Hampshire's Bishop Vicki Gene Robinson, the bishop at the heart of the controversy, was shown on national television citing Scripture as justification for allowing his consecration to proceed. No doubt the last chapter has yet to be written on this conflict. At the time of this writing, the donations to the Episcopal Church USA are down by \$3 million. It is generally assumed this is the result of local dioceses withholding or redirecting contributions to protest against the church's first openly homosexual bishop.⁶

My purpose here is not to argue this point; others have done so in numerous places. Rather, I am attempting to demonstrate that the issues that marked the battlefield thirty years ago have shifted from the question of authority to the question of interpretation. This is a great change and the significance of this dramatic shift cannot be lost on the church. The battleground has changed and the call for biblical literacy and a historical understanding of the wisdom of the church in 2000 years

⁴ Henry Garipey, *General of God's Army: the Authorized Biography of General Eva Burrows* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993). One is reminded of the often-repeated quote of the Salvation Army's founder, William Booth: 'Some of my best men are women.'

⁵ See <http://www.americananglican.org/>

⁶ 'ECUSA's Financial Shortfall Suggests Member Disapproval' by Jim Brown <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/religion-today/1247592.html>

has intensified. We must not, however, quote the Fathers, neither of the Early Church nor of the Reformation, without understanding the context and questions they were facing. Just as we need to use a historical, grammatical, exegetical (and some would add, theological) approach to Scripture, so we need an approach to history that understands the context of history. May God raise up interpreters of his Word and his work, through the Holy Spirit providing living and historical understanding, which can reveal to the church God's specific and whole truth found in Scripture.

Growth of megachurches

Thirty years ago, there were a handful of large churches built around charismatic personalities. One is tempted to think that like the growth of megacities in the last thirty years there is a direct link to the proliferation of megachurches. Certainly, megachurches can only exist in population centers. But it is not the appearance of megachurches that interests me as much as the impact these churches have on the face of Christianity in the United States.⁷ The average size of a church in the USA is under 150 members. What does the phenomena of megachurches mean for religious life? In some sense these large churches become a standard of comparison for

how church should be. The bigger the church, the larger a staff it can afford to serve the attendees. It is a fact noted by Lyle E. Schaller, guru of American church life, that there are fewer volunteers proportionately in the larger churches. There is a greater reliance on paid staff and reluctance on the part of laity to assume roles for which they are not as qualified as the professionals on the staff. The level of commitment to the fellowship is also less because there is not the corresponding investment in working in the church.

In smaller churches, there is more involvement and investment because the members see themselves as the permanent element in the church. 'A large church is not simply a small church with more people. It is, as Schaller says, an entirely different kind of animal. He suggests that one of the greatest sources of frustration for denominational leaders, pastors and church members is their failure to recognize these qualitative differences. Ministers who have successfully led a small church often fail in a large church because they try to repeat the strategies that were successful in the small church.'⁸

This factor needs to be taken into consideration in the preparation of students for ministry. While thirty years ago, seminarians could expect to serve a church much like that which they grew up in, today's students and the

⁷ I am well aware that the biggest churches are not in the USA. Reputedly the biggest church in the world is Paul Yonggi Cho in Seoul, Korea which has over 700,000 members with another 700,000 in regional churches.

⁸ Daniel V. A. Olson, 'Learning from Lyle Schaller: Social Aspects of Congregations', *The Christian Century*, January 27, 1993, pp. 83-84. This article is available online at http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=323

churches they serve have different expectations. It is not clear, however, that theological education has kept up with the expectations. Overall, the theological curriculum has been slow to change and incorporate new paradigms for training. In the past seminaries fought hard to be accepted by the academy and in most places the professors have achieved recognition in their fields.

The question that needs to be asked is whether the seminaries are adequately preparing students to be pastors. There is the imitation factor at play, which leads students to model themselves after their professors, striving to be scholars.⁹ Those who cannot attain this standard are content to accept the credentials the seminary hands them at graduation, which permits them to occupy a pulpit. Seminary becomes the way to get a 'union card' to be admitted to the trade. Formal learning stops at the last exam.

There is another dimension to the phenomena of the megachurch, which is the effect these churches are having on expectations of church life. The programming seen in megachurches is viewed as a standard for church life, even in smaller churches without adequate resources, both human and financial. The desire to have more creates a consumer mentality where a family will shop around for the best children's program, the best youth program, and the best worship experience,

sometimes settling on multiple churches that provide these services.

The megachurches are service oriented and since theological education in most seminaries generally has a more traditional focus, the megachurches train their own staff. Because, seminary training is seen to be irrelevant, in a greater or lesser measure, megachurches create educational opportunities for their own staff. This of course has economic consequences for traditional seminaries as they see their student enrolment decline.

It is not my purpose, nor should the reader suppose, that I am critical of megachurches or the trends in church development. It is my conviction that the Holy Spirit has blown and continues to blow throughout church history, raising up movements that he is able to work through for the purpose of human redemption. After all, that is what God desires. He 'wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4).

We need to be like the men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what to do (1 Chronicles 12:32). What are the signs of the times?

Defining new paradigms

It is difficult to condense the last thirty years of theological development into one relatively short article. There has been so much that has happened and at the same time there is a sense of *déjà vu*. I had experience of that the other day when I opened my mail and saw an advertisement for a reissue of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in quality paperback format. When I was a theological student, I worked hard to find a set of

⁹ See my article on leadership training in which I give suggestions on how to improve what we are doing. James J. Stamoolis, 'How are We Doing at Training National Leaders?' *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 37, no. 4: 488-495 (October 2001).

Church Dogmatics. Over the years, there did not seem to be as much demand or interest in Barth; other thinkers such as Moltmann and Panenberg commanded more attention from evangelicals.

The same seems to be true of trends in the churches. Thirty years ago we were given some recordings of Roman Catholic groups singing new worship songs, departures from traditional hymnody, both Catholic and Protestant. It is interesting to see how worship songs and hymns have come to be shared by both Protestants and Catholics.

Not everyone, however, likes new music. Here in North America we seem to be in the midst of worship wars or at least worship skirmishes in many of our congregations. The battle is not a simple divide between traditionalists and those who favour contemporary music. The younger generation, defined by an attitude toward post-modernism, rather than chronological age, is starting to favour traditional forms and set liturgies. Many congregations have all three groups present: traditional non-liturgical types, contemporary praise song types, and the new traditionalists who are returning to set types of worship. The common theme is that Christians are seeking a meaningful experience of worship. But this is precisely where we were thirty years when new hymnody revived the experience of worship for many of us. What we are seeing is a hunger and thirst for reality. Where that reality is found seems to be different for different people. One size no longer fits all.

This longing to return to ancient ways may in part explain another trend I have noticed, an interest in the East-

ern Orthodox Church. Having grown up in the Orthodox Church and become an evangelical because of a conversion experience during my university days, I knew a lot about the Eastern churches and researched them during my theological studies. But thirty years ago these churches were not on the radar screens of many evangelicals. Knowledge of the Eastern Orthodox was spotty and most tended to lump them in with Roman Catholics with whom they appeared to share many similarities. Not many were interested in my research.

Yet in recent years there has been a rush toward conversion to the Orthodox Church. A group of former Campus Crusade Staff workers embarked on a search for the true form of the Christian faith. Their search led them to develop the Evangelical Orthodox Church. As the name sounds, they adopted the forms and theological content of the Eastern Orthodox Church while maintaining an 'evangelical fervor'. Having been denied admission into The Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA)¹⁰ as a regular

10 'The Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) established in 1960, brings together the canonical hierarchs of the Orthodox jurisdictions in America. The purpose of the Conference is to make the ties of unity among the canonical Orthodox Churches and their administrations stronger and more visible.' http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Orthodox-Churches/scoba/index.html This is necessary because in traditional Orthodox countries there is only one 'national' Orthodox Church. However the Orthodox Diaspora has produced ethnic churches instead of a national church.

Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Orthodox Church eventually became a part of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. There are active converts witnessing to the truth of Orthodoxy on several Christian college campuses. Many students, drawn by what I described above as return to liturgical worship, are joining various Orthodox churches. Not only individuals, but also often an entire congregation will convert with their pastor. There are several cases of entire Episcopal parishes turning Orthodox.

Whether or not there is actual conversion, a tremendous interest in the forms of worship of the Eastern Orthodoxy and a corresponding interest in the theology of the early Fathers has

become apparent. I have lectured on Orthodox spirituality in several settings. Some of those in attendance seemed hungry for a more meaningful worship experience, even while remaining in their own churches.

The challenges before us as theologians are great, but the resources that God provides are inexhaustible. May the next thirty years see a great awakening in nominal Christian lands and great turning to Christ in lands where other systems hold people captive to false ideologies. Thanks be to God who has given us the Living Word, the Lord Jesus, the written Word, the Scriptures, and the source of life and teacher, the Holy Spirit so that we can be witnesses to the truth of God.



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