

THE NEW TESTAMENT

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In theology, each of us has probably asked, "What reasons do we give for the options we choose? Why do I hold to this or that?" We all know we *can* give bad reasons for bad options. We *can* give good reasons for bad options. We *can* give bad reasons for good options, and we *can* give good reasons for good options. But as evangelicals, we ought to give good reasons for good options in theology.

I. Current Discussions on Constantly Recurring Themes

A constantly recurring theme today is the synoptic problem. Those of us who have studied the Gospels for awhile met the problem when we were young and it will still be there when we are old. The nature of the synoptic problem is discussed by William R. Farmer in his book *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Review of the Problem of the Literary Relationships between Matthew, Mark and Luke*. F. C. Grant in the magazine *Interpretation* discusses this in the July issue of 1965. Grant summarizes and evaluates Farmer's view that Mark is an abridgement of Luke and Matthew. For Farmer, Mark is not the earliest Gospel. Grant points out that Farmer argues *ad hominem*. I might add that *ad hominem* arguments are not confined to Farmer. Many others have used them as well. But Grant says some interesting things. He points out that the idea of saying that older scholars were prejudiced because of their scientific belief, or their conservatism, or their ready acceptance of received views is dangerous. He makes it clear that he, as a liberal scholar, was criticized on these grounds. One man said that his views of Luke were due to the fact that he was an Episcopalian and therefore naturally moved by aesthetic considerations! His answer simply was, "We scarcely expect to discover New Testament scholars advancing objections which are purely personal, subjective, political, social, scientific presuppositions." Some years ago I talked with Prof. Farmer about the Synoptic problem and Solage's *Harmony A Greek Synopsis of the Gospels*. I wanted to get a fair view of Farmer's work. I talked with him about his approach. He seemed quite indifferent to Solage's method as well as results. Solage at least has given us a graphic picture of the evidences. Hence the Synoptic problem is a crucial issue which is being restated today.

The matter of the Kingdom of God is another issue which is ever being restated. Norman F. Perrin reviewed the recent volume of George Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdoms The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*. His biggest objections to Ladd were in terms of Ladd's approach, his methodology, and finally his conclusions. He claims that Dr. Ladd takes

an uncritical view of the historical sources of the Gospels. But this is the crucial issue today. What do we mean by a critical view of historical sources? Does a good critical method rule out in advance the action of God in history? If it does, I'm not interested. However, you and I must face the task of telling what we mean by a *good* critical method. We must show how this method is able to differentiate between fact and fiction in records that come from the past. We are not opposed to a critical method. Our answer is, what kind? Is it good or bad? What makes it good or bad? This is a crucial issue. I think George Ladd has a good book on the Kingdom. Dr. Perrin does point out a few places where he thinks the larger context of Ladd's quotations do not support Ladd's stress. But Ladd's case does not depend on such supporting evidence.

II. Hermeneutics in the Middle of the Sixth Decade of the 20th Century.

I think that the whole matter of hermeneutics needs to be dealt with in depth. When many of us were in school, hermeneutics was to biblical study what homiletics was to preaching. Your theory of how you were to preach was homiletics; your theory of how you were to interpret consisted of hermeneutics. Today this is no longer true. Hermeneutics is both method and understanding. The entire fall issue (1965) of the magazine *Dialog* published by Luther Seminary in St. Paul was devoted to hermeneutics. The article by Samuel Laeuchli of Garrett Seminary entitled "Issues in the Quest of a Hermeneutic" focuses upon matters that touch all of us. One issue has to do with the levels of meaning in all that we say—in the whole or its parts. He takes as an example, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He points out that a word like "flesh" is always dynamic. That is, if we say there are Greek and Hebraic streams of thought behind the word "flesh," what is the proportion, and what is the creative power of the man inspired by God who handles this word? Laeuchli says that we must reckon with two possibilities when we ask these questions: that the meaning of a word cannot be clearly determined by one or another tradition, and that the word itself may elude final analysis. If a word rises out of historical confluence, it may be beyond linguistic precision.

Not only is a word dynamic, but it functions as a mystery. Laeuchli points out that Karl Barth in his Christocentric theology has talked about "The Word" (*Das Wort*) more than any other modern writer. And then he says, "Take the example of Karl Barth's concept of the 'Word of God.' In all his immense writings, he has not been able to explain satisfactorily what he means by *Das Wort*, and he becomes almost furious in rebuking people when they constantly ask him what he *really* means by it." When you and I lay hold of words that are genuinely foundational in the Bible, we will see their depth and get lost in them. I hope we'll get lost in a different way than Karl Barth, but nevertheless I don't think that either he or we will explain fully what is meant by "The Word."

Laeuchli points out that when it comes to the matter of issues of hermeneutics, we can hardly say, "the ancient world is there" and "the modern world is here." How about these terms—the ancient world and the modern world—that occur so often in hermeneutics today? Laeuchli says there is no such thing as the ancient world. He points out that Erathostenes set forth with great precision theories in ancient times that are still valid today. However, Plotinus 400 years later believed in a mystical, transcendental universe in which all matter was evil and non-existent. He points out that in our day in Chicago—the so-called modern world—you have Argonne scientists, but you also have the sect of Mohammed-X; you have the Arabic mythology of the first millennium A.D., and only 30 years ago you also had a group insisting that the earth was a solid disk standing at the center of the universe. We now live in a world in which people who are computer specialists fly in a jet but consult a horoscope before their departure. You see, the question of "What is the ancient world?" and "what is the modern world?" is not simple; it's complex.

What are the hermeneutical factors that deal with this dynamic and multileveled situation? Laeuchli lists a whole series of these, such as "coincidence." One value in my study of Qumran is that I may find a parallel for my work in Old Testament or New Testament. My finding this parallel is coincidental. When I make this discovery, I am not prepared for what I find. Yet such a discovery changes my view of history. To be sure, it must change the view of some of our friends as well. Laeuchli points out that where there is coincidence, there is also "play," (i.e. where I choose the best from a plurality of possibilities). Further, there is "intuition,"—an inward sense of meaning which afterward may be tested by various procedures. Finally, there is minimal or maximal "degree of involvement" in what one is studying. Now these factors are set against a rational analysis of the past and of historical knowledge. Rational analysis is coupled with historical knowledge and linguistic precision. Hence "rational analysis" must consist of a rigorous scientific dissection of historical data. Such an approach leads, according to Laeuchli, to a tension between the rational task and the intuitive approach. This brings men to an impasse: what I find in history limits me and what I find is not what I want to find. He deals with the whole matter of the approach to the past in terms of the interpreter. This stance of the interpreter is a crucial issue. Admittedly, you and I are living in the present, not in the past, but *how we* bridge the gap between the past and the present is of great importance.

Hence he insists that we should be secular in how we present the Gospel. (We are to use terminology that a secular man can understand.) But he raises the question "What do we do to confront the secularity of our day with the challenging message? How do we speak on a level which secularism can comprehend?" For example, we have just gone through a period called Christmas. You and I are aware of seculariza-

tion of Christmas and yet if we say, "Because Christmas was this, this, and this, I don't want to have anything to do with Christmas," we have lost another opportunity to communicate. We must deal with a secular age which has a secular Christmas in terms which confront that age with the true meaning of Christmas. But then, when we do it, is this a secular gospel? My answer, of course, is no. But you can see what the issue is here. Laeuchli points out that past performance shows that we are not sufficiently concerned about how to communicate to a secular age.

III. Lordship of Christ in Modern Theology.

Another issue is the matter of the Lordship of Christ in modern theology. If we analyze hermeneutically the words of Bultmann, Ebeling, Schubert Ogden, and John A. T. Robinson, you will find a curious omission. Little is said about the Lordship of Christ. And Carl E. Braaten in *Dialog* deals with this strange silence about the Lordship of Christ in modern theology. On pp. 262-263 he points out an unusual situation. How can a Christian scholar have a theology without the Lordship of Christ? The Lordship of Christ can thus become a positive criterion as to whether any modern theology is seriously approaching the matter of constructing theology or avoiding that task. An inadequate treatment of Christ's Lordship points to an inadequate theology. Failure to stress Lordship is found among men who are convinced that they must make the gospel relevant. Silence on Lordship may be because Lordship is conceived of as a myth which is difficult to translate. Myth, as you know, is a newly coined word. Formerly, the expression "figurative language" designated exalted realities expressed in earthly terms. But in Bultmann, "demythologizing" is simply re-mythologizing. He merely makes use of a new figurative language. For example, I always think how figurative we really are when we say "we stand on the brink of non-existence." This is a good, physically-orientated figure. Many of you have stood at Niagara Falls on a little brink and watched the water pour over. But if we stand on the brink of non-existence, this is not a physical experience at all. So the quarrel is not with the matter of figurative language. The question is simply whether we are using the best figurative language of our day, putting it beside the figurative language of the Bible so that both the new and the old become alive. We must do this if we are to make the message live.

IV. Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics.

Edward Long has an article in the magazine *Interpretation* (April, 1965) entitled "Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics" (April, 1965). He says the Bible in ethics has been used in a threefold way: (1) as a law book giving precepts; (2) as a source of principles for conduct, and (3) as a mirror to reflect a situational response. And he classifies modern thinkers in these three categories. In the first category he places John

Murray of Westminster Theological seminary. He says Murray is quite rigorous in his view of the Bible as precept. He also identifies Gordon H. Clark and Carl Henry as members of this first group, but he notes that they find some difficulty in applying the text to particular situations. He points out that Calvin belonged in this category, but without any trace of legalism. He also classifies C. H. Dodd as among those who look at the Bible as a law book giving precepts.

Among those who see the Bible as a source of principles for conduct he includes Adolf Harnack, Andrew R. Osborne, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Among those who see the Bible as a mirror reflecting a situational response he places Paul Lehman, T. W. Manson, and Joseph Sitler.

At the close of his article he shows the value of all three procedures. With this I would concur. We need the precept, we need the principle, we need the situational response. But we need all three with a true sense of authority.

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