

"THE CULTURAL CHURCH"

(by F. LaGard Smith) Roy H. Enoch 9-12-94

PART ONE: The Thorny Problem of Interpreting the Bible--Some Folks Call It "Hermeneutics"

Chapter 1: "At the Crossroads"

The first chapter is an introduction to the book.

The book is in response to some who are calling for change in the church.

Many calling for change criticize the "old hermeneutic" of command, example, and necessary inference.

Many of the changes call for a new hermeneutic.

He uses the term "cultural church" as a "mindset of a particular perspective" rather than referring to any individuals or churches.

He decided early in the plans for the book to not name any particular persons or refer to any specific publication, although it would weaken his positions by not giving specific evidence.

Chapter 2: "When Hermeneutics First Hit Home"

He describes his background as the son of an "ultra-conservative preacher":

"(the non-cooperation or anti-institutional congregations, as they were variously known.)"

He said that he honestly questioned some of the ways "commands, examples, and inferences" were applied and rejected by the conservatives for even questioning honestly, while accepted by liberals who also had questions. (But he later found that the liberals who would allow the questioning would not take a committed stand for Biblical truth.) p.29

He suggests that whatever "hermeneutic" we claim, we must focus on the authority of God's word for our standard and guide.

Chapter 3: "In Praise of the Old Hermeneutic"

He says that "that the fundamental basis for 'our hermeneutic' is found in the NT itself, being the very approach used by the apostles and Jesus himself in interpreting OT Scriptures." p. 34

"As much as being a tool of biblical interpretation and application, even more so is our hermeneutic a statement of faith in God's revelation to man and, therefore, in the importance of the written word." p. 35

He suggests that rather than being a creed, "command, example and inference" embodies "a compelling rejection of ALL human creeds" to focus on the authority of God's word alone and that is its greatest appeal.

He identifies the nickname for our hermeneutic as "Pattern", but insists that it is a focus on "the biblical pattern which we attempt to follow.

He says that the NT is not only a "pattern" of doctrine and church organization, but of "individual faith and righteousness." Phil. 3:17

He suggests that we can see where we would be with our the hermeneutic of "command, example and inference" because almost all other fellowships do not have this and we can see where they are. p. 40

Chapter 4: "Book, Chapter, and Verse"

Long before anyone mentioned a "new hermeneutic" he had observed abuses of taking out of context, ignoring historical setting and other misuses of Scripture at times.

In the past, "we have tended to elevate the CHURCH of Christ over the CHRIST of the church"... and at times, "baptized into the church rather than baptized into Christ." p. 48

But in spite of extremes, of that abuse, it still focused on God's word rather than man's will.

The bashing of "proof-texting" is often popular, but the apostle Paul often quotes extensively from a wide variety of OT passages to establish the points that he is making.

The major use of "proof-texting" has been in combating denominationalism but we must also avoid trying to

establish a similar set of traditions.

Chapter 5: "Changing Times, Changing Issues"

He begins the chapter by reviewing some of the issues of our times: abortion, euthanasia, drugs, homosexual rights, fetal experimentation, dysfunctional families, homelessness, teen suicides, gang violence, pornography, riots, telecommunication's shrinking of the world, Islam's growing influence, New Age redefinitions, etc.

How does our hermeneutic of "command, example, and inference" deal w/these and other issues?

He refers us to how the apostles used Scripture when dealing with God-fearing Jews, as an example of how we might reason with our Baptist friends.

But we may need to look at Paul's line of reasoning w/the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill for help with modern evolutionists. He focused on a "natural hermeneutic" by asking them to observe the world around them and ask if their gods could have done that. He argued that the vastness, orderliness and harmony of nature required the existence of an omnipotent God of creation.

Rather than appealing to Scripture, he appealed to their own poets and sources they respected.

If the world sees that we can abandon Scripture for something that we do not like, they see a green light to ignore it altogether, whether for denominationalism, the New Age, scientific rationalism or personal pleasure of hedonism.

But the Bible does give us standards of sexual morality, a structure for a stable home, the principle of male leadership, respect for authority guidelines for how God wants us to worship.

Will we select a hermeneutic that focuses on God's authority or on man's wants?

PART TWO: The Risk of Becoming a Culture-Captive Church-- Is There More to the Call for a New Hermeneutic Than We Realize?

Chapter 6: "'New Hermeneutic'--A Ship Without Anchor?"

Dr. Smith teaches a "Law and Morality Seminar" and asks "What is morality?" "What works, what most people think, or what those w/ the most power want."

"Is there a universal, absolute standard of right and wrong?" "Absolutely not"

"Was the Holocaust inherently evil?" "No" Even Jewish students say that it was personally offensive, but "we can't impose our morality on anyone else."

"Political correctness" seems to tolerate anything except absolute standards and especially moral standards and religious conviction.

It is alarming to see "political correctness" enforced among non-Xians, but it is chilling to see it practiced among ourselves.

He sees the call for a new hermeneutic as a desire to be politically correct in the denominational world.

He keeps looking for "a definitive model or fully-articulated statement of what everyone is calling the 'new hermeneutic'" and is convinced that there is a tie between the "new morality" and the "new hermeneutic". Thus, he calls it a "Utilitarian Hermeneutic."

As an example, he cites the argument for instrumental music as our declining attendance figures rather than the teachings of the Scriptures: a matter of practicality rather than doctrine.

But how can we claim to serve God, if our goal is to please men?

If the focus on the Scriptures point us to pleasing God, then change the focus if you want to please men.

Chapter 7: "Rationalizing The Irrational"

The New Age teaches that "rational thought is hopelessly outdated, one-dimensional and there for limiting." Left brain rational thinking is to be abandoned for right brain intuition. The New Age calls for people to leave "masculine rationality" in favor of "feminine intuition".

Its effect on the church is that "faith need not be rational in any sense at any point." It is shown in the questioning, What would Jesus do today? for example, regarding the role of women, as though we could somehow know intuitively what a "loving" answer would be and that it should be our religious practice. It would have us abandon a logical hermeneutic based on the Scriptures w/the illogic of either the PSYCHO-logical (subjectivism) or the SOCIO-logical (culturalism). This replaces the modernism which appealed to logic, with a postmodernism which appeals to feeling and perceptions.

Chapter 8: "Looking At Others To See Ourselves"

Bro. Smith cites several news items about other churches and concludes:

Current shifts in doctrinal thinking are not limited to us.

The so-called "hermeneutic issue" is principally one of culture and not of abstract theology.

Our hermeneutic has become an unjust victim of a secularist culture and is not deserving of the current criticism being leveled against it.

He speaks of the "pitfalls of a Pluralistic Hermeneutic" as "the spirit of gratuitous accommodation."

(That means going out of our way to please for the sake of pleasing, regardless of moral or doctrinal implications.) Some "tend to concentrate negatively on how embarrassingly DIFFERENT we are rather than on how commendably DISTINCTIVE we are.

He compares how the Reformed Jews in Germany tried to become like German culture rather than Jewish heritage, and lost both. We may do the same if we accept a hermeneutic that is cultural and pluralistic.

Chapter 9: "Enlightenment Rationality--An Unlikely Bogeyman"

On almost every front, those calling for a new hermeneutic make vicious assaults against 17th and 18th century "Enlightenment rationality" as of faith and reason were victims of reason. Some seem to consider John Locke a greater enemy than Satan. Locke did introduce reasoning from specific evidence and Alexander Campbell did use this in countering denominational tradition that largely ignored Scripture as the basis of authority and doctrine.

Locke did believe that common people could grasp the meaning of the Scriptures and understand them well enough to live by them.

"It is the cultural church's 'new hermeneutic' mentality, not the 'old hermeneutic' which is representative of Enlightenment thinking."

The Enlightenment's focus is on subjective, personal choices of what one wants to believe and do, where the "old hermeneutic" focus on the objective standard of God's word for doctrine and practice.

pp. 126,7

Chapter 10: "Narrative, Myth, and Metaphor"

"'Narrative theology' (in contrast to 'narrative hermeneutics') is about getting to the reality behind 'book, chapter and verse.'" "...It's context. It's meat. It's substance. It's true meaning!"

But "narrative hermeneutic" warrants great caution, because the point of the stories must always be inferred. If "necessary inference" is as weak in a hermeneutic as claimed, "narrative hermeneutic is a risk.

But not all of the Scriptures can be reduced to stories as metaphors. The Laws of Moses were part of the covenant story about God and Israel, but they were still LAWS.

A weakness of narrative is that some people think that any "story" is fiction. Another weakness is that the application of a story is much more subjective than a command or clear statement of doctrine.

A "story" may give meaning to the background of the Lord's Supper by focusing on the cross, but it does not show when and how it is remembered.

Smith sums up the dangers of "narrative hermeneutics": "'Metaphor' and 'poetry' permit the personalized

story--each in his own heart, each in his own way. 'Proposition' and 'prose' tell it like it is. And none of us wants the literal truth. Give us stories instead." pp. 142-3.

PART THREE: Toward A Better Understanding of God's Word.

Chapter 11: "Purpose, Principle, and Precedent"

He suggests as a "not-so-new hermeneutic" a consideration of "purpose, principle, and precedent."

"Purpose" seeks to establish the Who, What, When, Where and Why of a Bible passage. It tries to establish the meaning that was originally intended by inspiration. To whom was it given, and what was the intent, if any, for any other application?

He then proposes that we move from a focus on "commands" to a focus on "principles." This may help us to understand that not every imperative is a command, and that we do not treat all commands the same. Sometimes the specific "command" is a focus on a greater principle. (The "command" to wear a veil in 1Cor. 11 is given as an example of focusing on the principle of male leadership.) Sometimes there is "principle" where there is no command given as when Jesus spoke of giving a cup of water in His name, no command was given but a principle was stated. But we need to observe commands given.

He may reflect his law background when he suggests that "example" may be better thought of as "precedent". When we speak of "binding" and "non-binding" examples, we really reflect whether the example is a precedent for our guidance or an incidental detail of an event.

"The beauty of focusing on principles and precedents rather than commands and examples is that we no longer need be haunted by the controversies which too often have surrounded "necessary inference". This "not-so-new hermeneutic" continues to build on a commitment to the Scripture for authority rather than man's feelings or wishes.

Chapter 12: "Applying the Not-So-New Hermeneutic"

The "precedence" of examples are followed as long as they appear consistent with the guiding principles that are found in the Bible.

We might be able to follow principles alone, but it helps to have examples to help clarify the way He divides principle into two kinds: "aspirational" principles such as love, faith, unity, justice, and truth; and "directive" principles which are more like rules. It is never "loving" or "just" to reject a rule or specific command, regardless of how hard it is for us to accept it. (He gives many examples that I do not have time to cover.)

We cannot overrule principle because it is not culturally popular.

Chapter 13: "The Deafening Roar of Biblical Silence"

"Silence, when specifically intended, can be as guiding and authoritative as any other form of expression."

"Whenever any document is held to be authoritative, respect for its silence must exist.

Paul referred to the principle of silence when he told the Corinthians, "...that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written..." 1Cor. 4:6

There are many examples from the Law of Moses and OT in general that God does not want us to add to or take from His word.

But the principle of silence works only if it is intended, this indicates the importance of studying "purpose, principle and precedent".

Chapter 14: "Cultural Church, Or Church In Culture?"

He describes many different services he has attended in different countries which reflect their culture, but were not "trendy" or different-to-be-different.

There is a great difference between cultural differences, and trying to please or entertain. Perhaps the lack of specific instructions show that God intended to allow for cultural differences. Yet, Paul warned the Romans to "not be conformed to this world..." (12:2). He closes with a fervent wish that he is proved wrong in his concerns about what he has described as the "cultural church."