Historical-Critical Methods of Bible Study: Too Academically-Minded to be of Any Pastoral Use?

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I first encountered this problem on a practical level as a student in ministerial education, still attending the local United Reformed Church congregation from which my call to the ministry had been recognised. Members of the congregation would ask me what I was learning in college. Wanting to share something they knew about, I would reply that I was studying the Bible. What had I found out? Here I was faced with a difficulty. Historical-critical approaches to study of the Bible – the mainstream hermeneutical approach where I was studying – seemed remote from the lives of people in my congregation. If I could give them a date at which a biblical book was written – a date, moreover, likely to be disputed in academic circles – what use would it be in their devotional lives? I had not found it a resource for my own faith. The same applied to authorship. Questions of genre or redaction would involve lecturing my unfortunate interlocutor for half an hour to unravel what I meant, leaving them with the impression either that nothing of use was taught in academic theology or that I was losing my faith. The safest thing was to smile sweetly and say I was studying the Bible in great detail. That usually stopped them asking again.

Some Reasons for the Knowledge Gap

There are reasons why ministers might wish to keep the conclusions of historical criticism from their congregation. To start with, such conclusions challenge traditional formulations of Christian faith. Historical-critical studies of the Bible have suggested, for example, that the religious experience of the early Christians was much less homogenous – and more conflictual – than was previously thought (Wiles 1994, 41). Parts of the biblical tradition have been found to have parallels within other faith communities (von Rad 1972, 4). Such

findings challenge traditional understandings of the Bible's unity and its unique witness to God; historical-critical analysis has been inimical to those who hold the Bible as inerrant or verbally inspired. The traditional understanding of the authority of Scripture has also been undermined. Hebrew Bible texts previously regarded as contemporaneous with their subject matter have been reframed as projections into the past, thus removing their authority as witnesses to the events presented as historical within them (for example, the book of Daniel; see Hartman and Di Lella 1990, 406-409). Traditional ascriptions of apostolic (and therefore eyewitness) authorship to the Gospels have been doubted (see for example Sanders and Davies 1989, 14-15). Summarising, critics have concluded not only that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life have been recorded in theological as much as chronological order, but also that multiple layers of confessional material obscure the claims to historicity of the events under discussion.

Overall, conclusions drawn from the historical-critical approach have underlined the gap between the worldviews to be found in the biblical texts, especially those relating to miraculous events, and those of their Christian readers today (see Nineham 1990, 155-59). Many clergy have considered that gap too wide for their congregations to bridge. Whereof they dare not speak (to parody Wittgenstein), thereof they remain silent, operating out of a modern or postmodern perspective themselves but leaving their congregations in premodernity.

However understandable their fear, it is hard to justify this sin of omission, particularly within the Reformed context, where Bible reading by members of the congregation, as much as by ministers, has traditionally been deemed an essential facet of personal commitment. Yet clerical fear of weakening the faith of the faithful may cover a less reputable qualm. If such church leaders consider the conclusions of historical criticism too dangerous for their congregations to handle, how much more the methods of historical-critical study, promulgation of which might encourage their congregations to dispute their own authority! As Francis Bacon first stated, knowledge is power: in a world where clerical authority is on the wane but professionalism

on the increase, the attraction of retaining theological expertise within clerical ranks is evident, but also evidently flawed in terms of congregational development.

It must be added that the knowledge gap is not all attributable to leadership. John Hull cogently presents a picture of the 'unlearning' Christian adult. According to Hull, this apparent flight from learning is 'defensive, in the sense that it would be painful and unsettling to question the things which are the source and ground for the rest of our life and its activities' (Hull 1991, 55). He argues that bafflement results 'when you do know or believe that you know what you think and you become aware that what you know simply will not do in the present crisis' (57-58). For those who do not reject Christianity altogether, bafflement may be avoided by a group collectively drawing in its horns and separating itself from the outside world, hardening its ideological stance. Adults in this situation may well desire to learn, but may be put off by fear and anxiety about transgressing the tenets of the belief structure, lest they become unacceptable to the group. Others may retreat into spiritual passivity and lack of responsibility.

How can this vicious circle of fearful leadership and reluctant membership be broken? Using as my research context the arena of small-group Bible study, my fieldwork, sharing interpretative responsibility within the whole group, has demonstrated some fruitful uses of historical-critical methods of biblical exegesis in local-church study of the Bible. Specifically concentrating on the Gospels, since these books are a major focus of local-church interpretation, I have drawn on aspects of three major hermeneutical approaches adopting, in varying degrees, a historical approach to the Bible. The *historical-critical* approach itself concerns itself with authorship and dating of the biblical books, the sources of which they are composed, and the historical contexts both of the texts' original formation and their redactors' compilation. The *literary* approach uses an overtly theological hermeneutic, sometimes within the context of church tradition, and also draws on the concept of narrative as a foundational aspect of human experience. The *liberationist* approach, while using

history as the arena for God's saving acts as its theological background, stresses the role of the grassroots church community in interpretation, emphasising the experience of the oppressed and the necessity for liberative praxis.

Models of Congregational Bible Study

Practical models of small-group local-church Bible study drawing on historical-critical, literary or liberationist approaches have been offered to the churches in large numbers, each demonstrating the deficiencies as well as the advantages of its methodology of origin. Historical-critical versions generally follow the 'banking' model of information transfer – a term developed by Paulo Freire to denote education in which information is transmitted from learned scholar to ignorant pupil. *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, exemplifies this classical historical-critical emphasis. Fee and Stuart divide the task of interpretation into exegesis: 'what was said to them back *then* and *there*' and hermeneutics: 'that same Word in the *here* and *now*' (p. 20, authors' emphasis). The first involves asking questions relating to historical and literary context and 'author's actual content' (p. 24). The second relies on the first, in that '*The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text*' (p. 26, authors' emphasis). Though their disclosure of historical-critical methods is praiseworthy, their underlying assumption, that anyone following the correct exegetical procedures on the same text will produce the same Academy-approved results, to be 'translated' into different contexts, cannot be borne out by appeal to a supposed consensus of biblical scholars. Moreover, control of the texts' meaning remains with the Academy rather than the churches.

Literary approaches to the text, majoring on hermeneutics rather than exegesis, are a less represented side of attempts to aid local-church study groups in biblical interpretation. One of the few examples of a literarily rather than historically based approach to lay hermeneutics,

Perry B. Yoder's *Toward Understanding the Bible: Hermeneutics for Lay People*, arises from a background of linguistic semantics and philosophical hermeneutics.

Its first chapter, 'Games People Play with the Bible', gives a wry account of different techniques of distortion employed by Christians in studying the Bible. The Pope Game (an appeal to an infallible source of authority); the Caveman Game (the use of proof texts as weapons); and the Priesthood of All Believers Game (the idea that academic study of the Bible is an attack on the laity and should be avoided) are all sadly familiar to aficionados of Bible study groups. By uncovering such ploys Yoder makes the power structures inherent in any group more transparent. However, when he claims the possibility of 'game-free' Bible study, liberationist suspicion comes into play. He admits that 'In the end, people will pick and choose what they consider appropriate to practice' (p. 65). Given that such biases cannot easily be eradicated, a liberationist hermeneutic, which explicitly begins from the interpreters' own location and declares their interests, appears a more honest way to study the Bible than the smuggling of our own assumptions under cover of expressed neutrality into the hermeneutical endeavour.

One such endeavour is John D. Davies and John J. Vincent's *Mark At Work*. They offer three discoveries for sharing with the book's readership:

> *It's best to start where we are – not where we might imagine New Testament people were. If Mark is to work on us, we have to be honest about who we are, and why we do what we do…*
>
> *Through us, Mark will get to work in our world, our churches and our local communities, with some revolutionary ways of doing everything…*
>
> *The gospel has to be learned from each other. Our testimony is that everyone is a Bible interpreter. (p. 12)*

Davies and Vincent's method is threefold. In the first step the leader identifies experiences within the group which tally with the theme of a specified passage in Mark's Gospel; what appears to be an open-ended question is, however, followed by a summary giving the 'right' answers. The second step offers parallels from the time of Jesus to each point of the summary, which explains why the experience elicited is so rigidly codified. The last step focusses back on the community from which the group comes, asking questions, tying in with the previous two steps, about what action can be taken on the topic concerned.

In this method of Bible study not much specialist knowledge is required of the group leader. Yet the power of leadership seems to have been withdrawn one step, making the book rather than the leader into an ungainsayable authority figure, one which cannot be challenged in the flesh. Moreover, as with Fee and Gordon, the biblical material presented is given through a 'banking format', presenting information rather than asking questions. In the final action section, the authors honour the specificity of the local context, but the method as a whole gives an uneasy feeling of dialogic study being imposed by 'banking' means.

Dialogue Between Congregation and Academy?

Efforts made by believing theoreticians in hermeneutics to enter into dialogue with local-church biblical interpreters have been surprisingly few. In the case of historical-critical approaches, this may partly be due to their academic origins. Though developed by believing as well as unbelieving scholars, historical-critical interpretation has not felt the need to justify itself in a church context and indeed historically has defined itself over against the magisterium. Moreover, apart from that of the disaffected Walter Wink, the methodological work of historical-critical scholars has not generally been extended to the context of lay Christians.

Some literary interpreters, such as Frei, in spite of the theological emphasis of their work and their narratological stress on interpreting

one's life experience by reference to the life of Jesus, make little mention of either the community or the experiential aspects of biblical interpretation. Others, such as Stroup, Fowl, or Watson, have involved 'the church' in their methodologies; have given it, indeed, a key hermeneutical role through their invocation of Christian tradition as an interpretative lens through which to classify the biblical genre as holy scripture. However, this emphasis has not extended to the consideration of how – in more detail than purely being church through worship and praxis – such interpretation should or does take place in local church communities. Such scholars appear to be uninterested in groups formed specifically for Bible study – though it is unclear where, if not in such groups, Fowl's suggested vigilant and virtuous communities of interpretation may be located.

Liberationists should have an advantage in connecting with local-church Bible study, given that their theorising is based on the hermeneutical experience of base Christian communities. However, analytical descriptions of liberationist biblical interpretation in a First World congregational context are also rare. This may partly be due to the difficulties of transplantation of methods between contexts, in a methodology for which context is all-important. Moreover, oppressed groups involved in such Bible study may wish to avoid the publicity of academic analysis, or may have insufficient resources to consider theoretical reflection on their praxis a high priority.

One exception to this disinterest in the theoretical aspects of local-church biblical hermeneutics or their relationship with academic biblical interpretation rules is to be found in the work of Gerald West, writing in South Africa. West's book *Contextual Bible Study* (1993) straddles theory and practice from a liberationist perspective. His threefold division of the methodologies employed in contextual theology, focussing on questions 'behind the text' (historical/sociological); 'the text itself' (literary/narrative); and 'in front of the text' (thematic/symbolical) (p. 27ff.) parallels historical-critical, literary and liberationist methodologies. However, trying to transpose South African insights to the British context is no easy task, as those trying to use liberation theology in the First World have frequently

discovered. I therefore decided to explore the usefulness of historical-critical methods of Bible study in British local-church study groups first-hand through the medium of fieldwork. Using a hermeneutical model based on the work of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Habermas and Freire, I offered historical-critical methods of studying the Gospels to nine study groups of United Reformed Church, Church of Scotland and ecumenical origins. Participants in the groups studied – eight groups in all – were interviewed about their experiences of Bible study in general and of the fieldwork groups in particular.

Study procedure

The initial session was used for each group to decide on its own theme of study drawn from the group's own life experiences, divided into sufficient sub-themes for a weekly focus on one aspect of the topic. After this session, the same pattern was followed week by week:

- discussion on group members' experience of the sub-theme
- in the first two sessions newspaper work (see below) – in subsequent weeks, this time was used for exegesis of the texts
- exegesis of a text previously selected by the group leader to have relevance to the sub-theme of the week, focussing on comparing Gospel parallels or on the text's form and context within its Gospel setting
- discussion on connections/discrepancies between experience and text
- discussion on possible action arising from the group's work (in practice groups generally used this to make more connections rather than to suggest action)

Newspaper work

In order to introduce historical-critical methods of studying the Gospels to people for whom textual analysis was new, two techniques were employed, both focussing on newspapers as analogous to the biblical texts.

Source/redaction criticism

Three newspapers of that day were purchased; one tabloid and two broadsheets from different social perspectives (for example left-wing/right-wing or Scottish/English). The front page of each was displayed with identifying marks removed, and participants were invited to identify each, giving reasons for identification in terms of political slant, style and vocabulary. Once the papers were identified, one story appearing in all three papers was compared for differences in editorial presentation, and a story unique to each paper was analysed for the clues it gave about its expected target audience. Analogies were then drawn with questions of source and redaction criticism as applied to the Gospels; the passages studied that evening would come from two Gospel parallels.

Form criticism

Again, three newspapers were purchased, one tabloid and two broadsheets. In this exercise the object was to demonstrate the participants' knowledge of genre as applied to newspapers. Pairs of cuttings were compared:

- A death notice and an obituary
- A problem page letter and a letter to the editor
- A political cartoon and a 'funny'
- A list of stocks and shares and a list of races

- An overt advertisement and an oblique one relying on cultural knowledge

- A crossword and a weather map, each with legend removed

Participants were asked to explain how these pairs were similar and how they differed; thereby demonstrating their knowledge of genre conventions as applied to newspapers. Links were made with the different forms to be found in the Gospels (controversy, miracle and so on). The passage studied that evening would be interpreted in terms of its genre and context rather than with parallels.

Interviews with participants were transcribed and analysed according to grounded theory, a social-science methodology which aims to 'identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 13). The resulting theory differentiated study participants in terms of their goal in studying the Bible. The same differentiation gave insight into how different aspects of historical-critical Bible study can help people engaged in these various modes of study.

- Thinkers are satisfied with Bible study through which they are stimulated by new ideas. They will find interest in the background history behind the text and look to historical-critical methods for analysis.

- Relaters want to deepen their faith and relationships within the group as a result of study. Conservative Relaters, focussing on the unity of the text, will look to historical-critical methods for literary insight into how the narrative is patterned. Liberal Relaters, empathising with the characters within the text and the communities behind it, will look to historical-critical methods to give more insight into the latter.

- Changers want to be inspired to change the world. Different aspects of historical criticism will satisfy the needs of these different groups. Focussing on their own experience in front of the

text, Changers will use that diversity of experience to appreciate diversity and recognise oppression and liberation within the texts.

It is evident that while homogeneous groups of Thinkers, Relaters or Changers will be as one in their study goals, serious tensions can arise within mixed groups where leader and/or participants are unaware of their own study priorities or unconvinced of the legitimacy of others' preferred modes of study.

Here are three such cases, in descriptions condensed from recordings of group study:

- While a study group is trying to differentiate between Matthew's 'poor in spirit' and Luke's 'poor' in the Beatitudes, a Thinker mounts a sustained attack on the use of historical criticism as follows: The differences between the same story in different Gospels are minuscule. The same semantic field in the original Aramaic would probably cover both versions. Interviewing two people about the same incident always results in different wording. The process of crystallising tradition is necessarily influenced by the Gospellers' personalities, sources and communities; is it not then the sense of the story rather than the variations on which one should focus? During the subsequent interview with them it emerges that the person concerned, a highly competent and highly paid expert in their own field, did not feel sufficiently briefed on the whole process to be confident with it and also felt uncomfortable with the use of personal experience within this group. Moreover, they had been looking for a demonstration of hermeneutical competence from the group (largely consisting of academically trained ministers) rather than an invitation to expose their own supposed inadequacies by joining in the process.

- A group in the second stage of community hermeneutics, divided into two smaller groups, is using historical-critical methods to study the infancy narratives from Matthew and Luke. In one small group a liberal Relater is already making connections with

present-day church life. In the other group a Thinker and a more Catholic Relater become embroiled in the historicity or otherwise of the Virgin Birth. One wants to know how it correlates with known historical dates; the other finds it offensive to question the tradition. In plenary, the two Relaters come to verbal blows, silencing the Thinker. The liberal Relater insists that the Thinker's focus on history is irrelevant, as all we need to know about Jesus comes from our own experience. The Catholic Relater holds that we only know God through the biblical texts as they are, not through differentiation between Gospels. This contretemps occurs within a group where relationships are shaky: the Thinker is in the group for the first time; the liberal Relater has missed two sessions; the Catholic Relater frequently arrives late. A subsequent interview with the Catholic Relater makes it clear that, having missed the first session, through the whole course the individual concerned has had no idea that a specific pattern of group study has been on offer.

- A long-term group I study last, when my theory is already in process of crystallisation, is largely composed of members with Changing aspects to their study modes. By prior agreement, group leadership is out of my hands. Partly because it would complete my theory and partly because I identify Changing aspects within my own study mode, I am hoping that this group, if any, will have the resources and the motivation to turn Bible study into action beyond the group. On the evening of the Action stage of community hermeneutics, one of the strongest Changers is absent, Relaters are thin on the ground and the leadership is in the hands of a Thinker who has already admitted in interview to finding the overt use of personal experience problematic. The evening's discussion is almost completely theoretical, and the question of action is left unaddressed. The following week, during feedback, I tearfully express my disappointment.

What is happening at these points of tension within the study process? The same answer can be given in all three situations: people who appropriate the texts in one way assume, incorrectly, that everyone

else shares or should share their own mode of appropriation. In consequence, communication within the group is disrupted, or its absence is highlighted.

In the first example, a perceived hierarchy of understanding within a heavily ministerial group has left this particular Thinker self-positioned at the bottom of the 'expert' pecking order, yet the study method used has entailed the leader's conscious avoidance of 'depositing' in participants the information wherewith to become expert. This has frustrated the Thinker concerned. As someone drawing a good salary they are also vulnerable to the potentially Changing thematic focus on riches and poverty, a focus chosen without their agreement. Their only defence is attack: an attack as coherent and sustained as one would expect from a competent Thinker.

In the second case, no group consensus on what study mode is appropriate has developed; nor has individuals' ability – even that of the two Relaters concerned, more liberal and more Catholic respectively – to discuss within the group the divergence of their aims of textual appropriation. The historical-critical section of the study has been hijacked by the personal experience of the former, while the faith understanding of the latter has left no room for manoeuvre. The Thinker, penalised for expressing that thirst for historical knowledge which Relaters find unimportant, does not return to the group in subsequent weeks. Ironically, this is an ecumenical group drawn from churches in the process of agreeing to covenant together. Though the overall group theme is unity and the subtheme of that week is 'unity in diversity', it is the *dis*unity of appropriative modes between group members which has scuppered the group's hermeneutical chances.

The last case highlights a group in which diversity is welcomed and group process is well practised. What has gone wrong here? The first point to make is that the group as constituted on that evening is no longer the same group which, during interview, three months earlier, stressed its habitual practice of sharing and reflecting together on personal experience. Apart from my own alien presence, since the end of the interviewing process two participants have rejoined the

group after years elsewhere; two more new members also attend on a sporadic basis. As its communal identity has altered, the group's Relating ability has inevitably been disrupted – temporarily, one hopes – by these changes.

The leader's role also comes into focus: not only that of the Thinker who – doubtless unconsciously – has avoided the necessity of discussing personal experience with a view to action, but also, in the following week, my own. Conducting the feedback session, I am angry with myself for not having foreseen the problem and asked another group member to lead the session on action. Unreasonably, I am also angry with the group for not having lived up to my Changing expectations. Yet again, the failure to take into account the preferred interpretative modes of other group members has resulted in a breakdown in communication, and hence in hermeneutical competence.

In contrast to such fiascos, a group leader who is aware of their own and group members' hermeneutical preferences and group members who are sensitised to differences in appropriation start out with a major study advantage, reducing the likelihood of mutual misunderstanding. How can these preferred modes of study be diagnosed within a group? Here the work of David Kelsey, categorising academic theologians according to their use of the Bible, is of help:

> *What underlies a theologian's decision to construe the scripture to which he* (sic) *appeals in a certain way rather than another and his decision to use the scripture he construes in certain roles and not others in theological argument?… [O]ur suggestion is that these decisions are decisively shaped by a theologian's prior judgment about how best to construe the mode in which God's presence among the faithful correlates with the use of scripture in the common life of the church.* (Kelsey 1975, 167)

Following Kelsey, I should like to use the question of group members' understanding of 'God's presence among the faithful' as a diagnostic tool for their study preferences. A summary answering this question with reference to my fieldwork produces the threefold schema:

- For Thinkers, God is to be found within the concepts of the biblical text – though they may disagree profoundly on how these are to be defined – and problematically, if at all, in everyday life.

- For Relaters, God is to be found in the characters and narratives of the text, and within the fellowship of the group.

- For Changers, God is to be found in the texts through the lens of liberation; outside the texts, God is present in those who work for the Kingdom's coming, and in the poor and marginalised.

Of course, individuals may well understand God's presence in more than one of these ways, as they may well opt for a multi-faceted approach to interpretation involving Thinking, Relating and Changing modes of study as part of their hermeneutical toolbox. Indeed, a balanced group needs Thinkers for their analytical gifts, Relaters to form community and enable sharing, and Changers who provide the impetus to transformation. Over time, a group studying the Bible together and learning from one another's differences can grow together as the body of Christ, in which each part depends on the others (1 Corinthians 12); a goal even more devoutly to be desired than being able to make pastoral use of historical-critical approaches to Bible study.

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