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Source: *Direction*, vol.6, no.2 (April 1977): 36-38.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/647>

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HEARING THE WORD

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT I READ – THE PILGRIMAGE OF A BIBLE SCHOLAR

Devon Wiens*

The Bible has been very much a part of my life since earliest days. Particularly at the encouragement and example of my mother I read through the Bible several times during my early teen-age years. Memorizing verses and chapters was also stressed at home, in Sunday School and in Vacation Bible School. For this I am grateful to the small rural Mennonite Brethren church in which I grew up. A bit later, I recall winning a “Sword Drill” in the Hillsboro church when Elmo Warkentin was the visiting evangelist.

I recall also some of the discussions (arguments?) and attempts at “witnessing” in which I became involved. For every verse which I pulled out of my arsenal to fortify a personal position, it seemed that my opposite number could summon another verse to offset mine. I was led to the conclusion that there must be a better way. What I obviously was searching for, without knowing what this meant, was another way to read the Bible.

My initial exposure to scholarly study of the Bible, at Friends University, left me somewhat befuddled. The devout character of the men under whom I studied attracted me, but the subject matter dealt with in some courses tended to repel me. I recall, for instance, the alarm with which I viewed certain facets of Harvie Branscomb’s *The Teachings of Jesus* (e.g., the Synoptic Problem), which we used as a text in “Life of Christ.” I suppose that ambivalence characterized my outlook in those days.

In seminary, where I experienced personal renaissance both spiritually and intellectually, some old myths that had never worn very well anyway, such as the exegetical methods of fundamentalism and dispensationalism, were shattered. In a more positive vein, what I imbibed there was a sense of the propriety (indeed, the necessity) of

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becoming conversant with critical modes of enquiry, but also of the need to engage these *critically*.

My realization that the Bible is simultaneously the Word of God and the Word of Man was a liberating experience. For if God spoke in concrete, datable, historical events in days of old, this implied that our awareness of his continuing to do so could be enhanced. Perhaps this insight was “burned” into my being because I was forced to work nights in a creamery to maintain my family and myself during both seminary and graduate school.

During my six years on this job I learned to endure personal deprivation so that I could pursue the goal that God had fixed firmly in my mind — that of becoming a college teacher. I became somewhat accustomed to going sleepless to class and I learned to budget my time. This, in turn, made it possible to identify with the working-person a bit more, to meet him as he was, “warts and all.” This informal “industrial chaplaincy” helped me to get more closely in touch with people than I could have if I had pastored prior to becoming a teacher. Ultimately, the experience fostered a humanizing of my theology and forced the question upon me: How is the Word of God to be conveyed in the words of man? How is it possible for the Bible to speak to a person who finds himself trapped in a work-a-day, apparently meaningless world (except for the annual paid vacation!).

At the same time, I was heading up a college program in a large American Baptist church. This made possible something of a balanced focus, so that the hallowed halls of Academe seemed more like tunnels than *culs de sac*, ends in themselves. In the Sunday School program, in which there were collegians representing some dozen colleges and universities, we made a deliberate choice to scrap the usual quarterlies and sat in a circle, informally discussing issues which the students were confronting on their campuses. Issues such as Situation Ethics and the “God is Dead” movement were then coming into prominence. The response was quite gratifying. Furthermore, my effort to put these issues into biblical perspective required considerable homework of me.

In the doctoral program, I gained considerable appreciation for Bultmannian theology and hermeneutics. Since those days, however, I have become somewhat less enamoured of this existentialist thrust (one comes sooner or later to realize that Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich were only human after all!) and have settled an urgent need to “re-mythologize” it in accordance with a “modern” scientific *Geist*.

What this has brought with it, for me, is a return to a contemplative engagement with the biblical text. In part, the very act of teaching has had this (salutary) effect, I am pleased to say, inasmuch as the challenges posed by questioning students has led necessarily to personal introspection in regard to how I really do view the Word. Is it true

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that the personal “I” even roughly approximates the professorial “I”? With this chastened self-image, I have resolutely decided not to traipse down every primrose path of hermeneutical dalliance, with its assorted delights of structural, rhetorical, Gattung— criticism, etc., to which the contemporary scene beckons us.

My present perspective has, I suppose, been largely informed by a reaction to opposing tendencies in today’s evangelical world.

In response to a traditionalist ham-stringing of the Word with its carefully-structured, predictable, ways and with “old-fashioned” ethical mores and doctrinal stances remaining inviolate, the Reformation / anabaptist stress upon allowing the Spirit to break forth new meanings from his Word has taken on significantly new dimensions for me. The contemporary charismatic renewal has also spoken effectively to this point.

In reaction to an evangelical lay existentialism which impugns the historicity of the Word and therefore disdains historical-critical study and the “wisdom of the ages” by egotistically arrogating to itself a liberating of the Word from traditionalist trappings, I have felt it necessary to underscore the historical, time-related nature of the Bible. Whereas it is clearly the case that the Holy Spirit speaks today as much as ever, it is true that the medium which he has chosen is the historical Word.

How it is possible to chart a suitable course between these extremes of enchantment with the old and preoccupation with the new is not easy to say, but I am convinced that it must be done.