

David W. F. Wong

The Loss of the Christian Mind in Biblical Scholarship

Mr Wong, who is pastor of Mount Carmel Bible Presbyterian Church in Singapore, takes up the same general topic from the specific angle of Christians in the Third World.

I. Introduction

Nothing nobler can engage the Christian mind than to think God's thoughts after him. The mind is undoubtedly God's supreme creation, endowed with the capacity to know its creator. Should not its first response, indeed its chief end, be to seek after and know God?

Yet knowledge—in particular, the knowledge of God—is not without its pitfalls. To embark on a quest for such knowledge is to embark on a perilous journey. With knowledge comes accountability. In knowledge there are the dangers of pride and self-gratification. In seeking after knowledge we may mistake falsehood for truth, illusion for reality, the peripheral for the essential. We may be successful in our enterprise, but successful in what ultimately does not matter.

This paper examines one such course in the pursuit of knowledge. It is the study of the Bible in the field of biblical scholarship. More specifically, we are concerned with what is commonly called historical biblical criticism, the study of the biblical documents in their historical context with a critical mind. Our study is prompted by two observations.

The first is made by James D. Smart who speaks of the 'strange silence' of the Bible in the church today. He observes '... Strangely, the steady progress of scholarship, constantly perfecting its methodology for dealing with the problems that the text of Scripture provides for it, has been paralleled by this equally steady recession in the attention that the church and Christians give to the Bible.'¹ As the Bible is studied more and more by

¹ James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 18.

scholars, it is studied less and less by the church and ordinary people.

The second observation is made by Walter Wink who declares, 'Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt'. He goes on to explain that while biblical criticism has produced thousands of studies by hundreds of scholars, it is bankrupt because 'it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past become alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation'.² As the Bible is studied more and more, it seems to make less and less difference to the people studying it.

These observations strike a chord in the heart of someone like myself who comes from the Two-Thirds World. We cannot help but be impressed by the vigorous and meticulous attention given to the study of the Bible in the seminaries and universities in the West. Yet, when we visit the churches, we are amazed that most of them are half empty. By contrast, in many Two-Thirds World countries, the Bible is read in all simplicity, and the congregations are vibrant and the churches bursting at their seams.³

Surely, the question may be asked: Is there something amiss in the way we are studying the Bible? This paper looks at some dimensions that have been lost in the field of biblical studies, and makes a modest proposal for the recovery of the Christian mind in biblical scholarship.

II. The Loss of Authority

Most evident in today's scholarship is the absence of a ring of authority from the Bible. The advent of the historical critical approach to the Bible, commendable in itself, has unfortunately resulted in the erosion of this authority. What was once revered as sacred scriptures is now viewed as a collection of human documents.

A Subtle Shift

James Barr is a well-known critic of what he calls 'fundamentalism'. He acknowledges that fundamentalists love the Scriptures deeply.

² Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 1, 2.

³ Singapore is a case in point. A recent survey shows the number of Christians to have grown 8% over 8 years since 1980. If the survey is correct, this means 25,000 conversions every year in a city of 2.5 million! The major problem of the churches is the lack of space.

But he argues that their approach to the Bible is wrong. He charges that the fundamentalist view of the inspiration of the Scriptures 'does not start from the factual realities of the Bible: it begins as a *dogmatic position* which was formed in the past and is *imposed upon Scripture*.' As a result, Scripture is stifled and not allowed to express itself freely.⁴

In another critique of the inspiration of the Scriptures as held by fundamentalist, Barr asks the question, 'Has the Bible any authority?' To it, he answers with a vigorous yes. Yet from the elaboration of his answer, it is clear that he does not understand this authority to reside in the Scriptures itself. He explains that 'authority of the Bible does not operate inductively, that is, we do not derive from the bible information that in itself [underline mine] authorizes or gives the foundation for such and such a doctrinal or ethical position'. Rather, such positions 'have as their point of origin a total vision, a conception of what the Christian life, action and society should be like'. Further, such visions 'come from Christian men, influenced by the Bible but also informed by all sorts of influences which play upon their lives'.⁵

The terms Barr uses, such as 'information', 'a total vision' and 'all sorts of influences', are vague. But it is clear that, to him, Scripture itself has no absolute authority. In due course he states it plainly, 'Authority resides in the people of God, or perhaps more correctly in the central leadership of the people of God. . . .' Then almost as an afterthought, he adds that authority also resides in the Scriptures the people formed and passed down the generations.⁶

It seems that Barr's position proceeds from a misleading distinction he makes between faith in the Bible and faith in Christ. 'Christian faith is not faith in the Bible, not primarily: it is faith in Christ as the one through whom one comes to God', he claims.⁷ This is true, if by that we mean no one becomes a child of God merely by placing a copy of the Bible on an altar and worshipping it. But it is not true, if we mean that the Word of God can be divorced from God himself. Why drive a wedge between Scriptures and the God who speaks in and through it? We would know nothing of Christ and little of God were it not for the Bible.

⁴ James Barr, 'The Fundamentalist Understanding of Scripture', *Conflicting Ways of Interpreting the Bible* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), edd. Hans Küng & Jürgen Moltmann, 71. Barr calls this 'the tragedy of fundamentalism' (74).

⁵ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1980), 62.

⁶ Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 64.

⁷ Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 55.

Barr's fallacious appeal to an excluded middle cannot be accepted.⁸

What Barr asserts, and what biblical scholars in general assert, is a shift of authority—from what is studied to the ones who are studying. The shift is subtle, but devastating. When such a shift is accepted, the mind becomes the arbiter and the authority.

The Ascendancy and Autonomy of the Mind

In what scholars today call the 'pre-critical' era of biblical studies, the Scriptures were treated as a given. Then scholars came to the bible to hear what it had to say to them and the people of their generation. Their task was to understand what the text said and to submit to the authority of its message. Biblical scholarship today has largely abandoned, or is simply unaware of, such authority. The rational mind has taken over and remains the only given.

The 'pre-critical' mind is dismissed as naive and obsolete, even dishonest. The modern mind is upheld as one of autonomy and integrity in that it is free from dogmatic pre-suppositions—except perhaps that of its own independence. We wonder how much of this reification of the mind in biblical scholarship is the product of contemporary culture. Modernity has as two of its chief features, rationalism and reductionism. The mind is given an autonomy beyond its rightful place, and the object of its scrutiny is reduced to nothing. Under the glare of pure rationalism, the object is not only explained, but *explained away*.⁹ Do we not detect the same demolition of absolutes and erosion of authority in the study of the Bible?

In tracing the two great periods of change in cosmological outlook, viz. from the primitive to the Ptolemaic, and from the Ptolemaic to the Copernician and Newtonian, T. F. Torrance thinks that our problem today lies 'in the recrudescence of the old page disjunction between God and the world, in which redemption is discovered from creation, and the mighty works of God removed from actual history. . . .' When this happens, theoretical

⁸ On this fallacy in argument, see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 84–87.

⁹ On modernity and rationalism, see Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Illinois: IVP, 1983), pp. 60f. On reductionism, see Donald M. MacKay, *The Clockwork Image* (London: IVP, 1974). MacKay calls such reductionism 'nothing-buttery', since its statements invariably begin with 'It is nothing but . . .'. According to him (43), reductionism is 'characterized by the notion that by reducing any phenomenon to its components you not only explain it, but *explain it away*.'

knowledge is no longer regarded as rooted in the objective Word of God to man, but rather as something thrown up by man about himself.¹⁰ The mind changes gear from heteronomy to autonomy.¹¹

The Primacy of Method

Where the mind rules and over-rules, method soon becomes its sceptre. If pride of place is given to autonomy, then only one method can emerge, viz, one of complete detached neutrality. In any case, the very nature of scientific and historical inquiry in modern times lies in value-free judgment and non-involvement in the object of research.

Hence, with the proliferation of methodologies in biblical studies, one premise undergirds most of them: objective neutrality. As importance is accorded to this supreme virtue, the method is given the primacy. In his survey of some recent trends in hermeneutics, D. A. Carson observes that biblical scholars have moved one stage further when literary tools have been 'upgraded' to hermeneutical principles.¹² He points out the danger:

. . . These 'hermeneutical principles' are frequently handled, outside believing circles, as if they can enable us to practise our interpretative skills with such objective distance that we never come under the authority of the God whose Word is being interpreted, and never consider other personal, moral and spiritual factors which have no less 'hermeneutical' influence in our attempts to interpret the text.¹³

Wink expresses the same concern. He asks if the method practised in biblical scholarship today suits inquiry into matters of faith. Is it commensurate with the intention of the biblical writers? Wink thinks not. He argues that the biblical writers themselves never treated their past in that manner. 'Their past was continual accosting, a question flung in their paths, a

¹⁰ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965), 263.

¹¹ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 277f, identifies the root error in modern thinkers, "They think from a centre in themselves and not from a centre in the object "out there" independent of them, so that their thinking is first by the way of self-expression and then by way of projection.'

¹² D. A. Carson, 'Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some recent Trends', *Themelios* (Jan, 1980), vol. 5, no. 2, 14. He adds, 'More than a semantic range of words is at stake; for as "literary tools" become "hermeneutical principles", they are upgraded not simply in dignity and in their ability to dominate the discussion, but in their ability to dominate what is legitimate in interpretation.'

¹³ Carson, 'Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends', 14.

challenge, and a confrontation. But because the scholar has removed himself from view, no shadow from the past can fall across his path.¹⁴ The historical critical method, when reified like the mind, reduces the Scriptures to innocuity, and robs it of its voice of authority to speak to us today.

III. The Loss of True Truth-Seeking

With the loss of biblical authority is also the loss of an adequate conception of truth and truth-seeking. We examine the way truth is perceived and pursued.

The Missing Person

To begin with, rationalism and reductionism in scholarship have left out the person behind the mind. Surely the mind—whether it is the scholar's or the people's—is not all there is to a person. Neither are the needs of a person merely intellectual. That this is so is seen in the contemporary upsurge of a post-modern consciousness that defies the objective and the rational.¹⁵ A protest movement of sorts, what is called the New Age phenomenon, is but a reaction against an age of rationalistic objectivism. The indulgence of the mind has left the human spirit dry and empty.

This reminds us of the tension that once existed between Peter Abelard, the rationalist of the twelfth century, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Reason posed no problem for Bernard though he did not highlight it in his works. But against Abelard's rationalism (and prompted in part by William of St Thierry), Bernard spoke for an affective spirituality. Unfortunately, as one historian puts it, 'Affect and rationality went separate ways, and western man divided loved from reason, action from thought, being from doing.'¹⁶ Western man today has done one thing more, i.e. he has chosen the latter at the expense of the former. He has become the child of Cartesian philosophy which is 'doubt of all know-

¹⁴ Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 4. He asserts (2), 'Such detached neutrality in matters of faith is not neutrality at all, but already a decision against responding.'

¹⁵ See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Leicester: IVP, 1977), 150–203. He calls it 'The New Consciousness', and points out (p. 159) that its worldview bears resemblance to Eastern pantheistic monism in that it 'rejects reason . . . as a guide to reality. The world is really irrational or super-rational, and demands new modes of apprehension. . . .'

¹⁶ E. Rozanne Elder, 'William of St Thierry: Rational and Affective Spirituality', *The Spirituality of the Western Christendom* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1978), ed. E. R. Elder, 86f.

ledge derived from the senses, combined with the absolute certainty of purely rational knowledge'.¹⁷

Thus, knowledge obtained through any sense other than the faculty of the mind is suspect. Biblical scholarship has imbibed this spirit. Is it any wonder that it does little to satisfy the total person? Of course, the mind is part of the person and has the right to function as such. However, in modern scholarly study, a distance is created, not only between the mind and the text, but also between the mind and the rest of the person. The first is necessary for unbiased scholarly study, but the latter is unnecessary. We speak of the need for 'distanciation' in the study of the Bible, that is, the need to understand the text from a distance, without caprice or prejudice. But such distanciation must be followed by 'fusion', an integration of the horizon of the text and the horizon of the student. Only when he integrates what he studies to his life will he find profit.¹⁸

Michael Polanyi calls this 'personal knowledge'. He disagrees that true knowledge, being universal, is impersonal, and argues for a need to modify our conception of knowing. His re-definition of knowledge as personal is worth quoting at length:

Such is the *personal participation* of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality. . . . It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge.¹⁹

If knowledge engages only the mind and not the whole person, then something is seriously amiss about it. Unfortunately, in the purely rational world of academic biblical scholarship, this is what has happened.

The Missing God

The submergence of the person is one thing. An even greater tragedy is when God as a personal being is missed out in study that seeks ostensibly to know him. It is axiomatic that we can know about God without knowing him.

¹⁷ Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), vol. 3, 322. Cartesian comes from the Latin name of René Descartes (1596–1650), Cartesius.

¹⁸ See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 21f.

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), xiiiif.

Considering the loss of the supernatural orientation in historical critical methods, it is little wonder that God as a person is of least interest to scholars. The denial of traditionally-held beliefs involving supernatural intervention (e.g. the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus, miracles in the Gospels) is becoming so fashionable that few are shocked any more. They are just wondering what would be debunked next.

Such radical scepticism has been traced to the influence of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). According to Kant, God is unknowable. Since anything we know must be the object of our experience, lying within the boundaries of time and space, God, being outside these boundaries, is beyond our knowledge. Religion becomes, not allegiance to a personal God, but belief in an Idea.²⁰ The mind that functions in Kantian terms cannot know God truly however much it studies theology, philosophy or metaphysics.

This is in sharp contrast to the mindset of the medieval scholars. God is not approached with the mind primarily, but with the heart. Love, more than reason, approximates the nature of God.²¹ As Blaise Pascal puts it, ‘The heart has its reasons, that reason knows not of.’ Indeed, he adds, the mind ‘has a method of its own; the heart has a method altogether different. Jesus Christ and Saint Paul have much oftener used this method of the heart, which is that of love, than that of understanding. Because their principle purpose was not so much to inform as to inflame.’²²

Thus, medieval scholars make a distinction between *scientia*, the knowledge of something outside of ourselves, and *sapientia*, the savour of what is deeply within ourselves.³ Of course, the latter is a more complete knowledge. Modern biblical scholarship encourages *scientia* but not *sapientia*, and hence misses knowing God as he should be known.

The Missing Community

God is personal, and we do not truly know him unless we know

²⁰ See Paul Helm, ‘A Taproot of Radicalism’, *Themelios* vol. 11, n. 1 (Sept 1985), 18–22. Helm claims that the adoption of a Kantian worldview is the reason leading to the denials of orthodoxy by radical theologians such as Don Cuppitt and David Jenkins.

²¹ See Elder, ‘William of St Thierry: Rational and Affective Spirituality’, 98. Elder adds, ‘Love brings man an understanding which surpasses rational cognition as God surpasses the rational creature.’

²² Blaise Pascal, *The Mind on Fire* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1989), 21.

²³ See Elder, ‘William of St Thierry: Rational and Affective Spirituality’, 103.

him personally. At the heart of the triune God is relationship. This relationship exists even before God created man. The Persons of the Godhead relate in love, and this love overflows into his relationship with man. This love becomes a model for man to follow, for by loving one another, they demonstrate their love for God and their true knowledge of him. In other words, the communion in God leads to the community of his people. We cannot know God adequately unless we know him in the context of such a community.²⁴

Many of the biblical writers wrote for communities of people. The prophets addressed Israel as a nation, and the apostle Paul spoke to missionary churches. Theology was not primarily formulated in a classroom; it was hammered out in the rough and tumble of life. That is where God is met and known. Yet, biblical scholarship today is pursued in a context divorced from a community of faith. This divorce is disastrous for scholarship because:

the questions asked the texts were seldom ones on which human lives hinged but those most likely to win a hearing from the guild. Historical criticism sought to free itself from the community in order to pursue its work untrammelled by censorship and interference. With that hard-won freedom it also won isolation from any conceivable significance.²⁵

Cut off from the church community, the scholars seek to answer questions which the ordinary people are not asking, while missing the ones they are. Worse still, they miss also the questions which the biblical writers themselves are grappling with, and instead impose on these writers concerns which belong to the scholars more than to anyone else. Is it any wonder that scholarship becomes academic and dry with the smell of library and classroom, and lacking the feel of sweat and tears of everyday life?

In our analysis of the present status of biblical scholarship, we detect the loss of several dimensions that are essential to the Christian mind and its knowledge of God. There is missing the

²⁴ See Samuel Mikolaski, *The Triune God*. God is not the lonely God whose world becomes the logical 'over-against-himself' to make him personal.

²⁵ Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 10f. On complaints that theological schools do not prepare seminarians for church work, see Edward Farley, *Theologia, The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 3. Farley (39–44) traces the parting of ways between the institution for the Enlightenment (the modern university), and that for pietism (the denominational seminary) from the Enlightenment to the present.

acceptance of divine authority, the involvement of the whole person, and the context of a believing community. In their places, the mind and method take primacy. How can we recover what we have lost and restore to scholarship the truly Christian mind?

IV. The Recovery of Reverence

We begin with the recovery of reverence. It is Harry Blamires who declares starkly, 'There is no longer a Christian mind.' In his proposal for the recovery of such a mind, he puts forward six 'marks of the Christian mind', the first of which is supernatural orientation.²⁶ Biblical scholarship must begin on this note, or else it will take off on a tangent.

Among other things, working within such an orientation means the humble belief in God, the acceptance of our accountability to him because of his authority over us. It means too the acknowledgement of revelation: God has spoken through the Scriptures, and has broken into our world through Jesus Christ. The miraculous cannot be discounted as impossible as it would be in the worldview of a closed universe. In fact, we would resist attempts to demystify and debunk the supernatural either by rationalism or reductionism.²⁷ We would seek instead to recover reverence for God, and a respect for mystery, recognising we do not know or understand everything.

Biblical scholars need especially to reckon with the authority of the Scriptures which they study. Often, the authority of God's Word is confused with the authoritarianism of human institutions, and the baby is thrown out with the bath-water. Liberal scholars, for example, are prone to over-react against the excess of the fundamentalist approach to the Bible. In trying to make the Scriptures more human, liberal scholars have divested it of all that is divine.²⁸

Also, in portraying God as a loving father, they rob him of his awesomeness. God's authority is not inconsistent with his love; in

²⁶ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1978), 3, 66ff.

²⁷ Donald A. Hagner, 'What is Distinctive about "Evangelical" Scholarship?', *TSF Bulletin* (Jan–Feb 1984), 5, gives an openness to transcendence, together with the general trustworthiness of Scripture, as 'the *a priori* convictions that mainly account for the differences between the conclusions of evangelical scholars and radical-critical scholars who may be working with a common field of data.'

²⁸ See David L. Edwards' critique of fundamentalism and the authority of Scriptures, and John Stott's response in *Essentials* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 41–106.

fact, it is essential to it, for love and authority together describes God's character. One at the expense of the other distorts it. We may ask how much of the cavalier attitude towards the study of the Bible today is the result of scholars imbibing the prevailing spirit of the age towards any symbol of authority. We so easily make God in the image of our culture.²⁹

If God has spoken, then his voice must be heard with humility. We come to the Word, not to be masters of it, but to be mastered by it. Such is the attitude of the scholars of a past age. One only has to read the works of Augustine, Calvin, Tyndale and the Puritans to sense the deep reverence they gave to what they studied. They were no less scholarly when they were reverent. Amidst the prevalent condescending attitude towards them B. S. Childs suggest a fresh appreciation of these pre-critical scholars.

They could pass with complete ease from the detailed study of syntax to the anatomy of the soul because they saw God at work in all levels of Scripture. They learned to scrutinize its parts with utmost rigor, and yet to confess at the same time that in that process they themselves were being examined.³⁰

To regain what we have lost, we need to put the mind in its rightful place. It must not usurp the place of God. Reason has its limits.³¹ It is not difficult to argue for this, and many scholars would admit it. But what is more difficult to recognise and mortify is the pride of the human heart. We need to examine some of our pre-suppositions (Kantian, Cartesian, and shades of them) and understand that they are the real stumbling-blocks to

²⁹ In some Asian societies (e.g. those built on Confucianist ethics) where authority is traditionally respected, the authority of the sacred scriptures of one's faith is accepted without question. As David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 165, aptly puts it, 'No more systematic or logically compelling reason can be given for taking the scripture as authority than for becoming a Christian.'

³⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 146f.

³¹ See Clark Pinnock, 'How I Use the Bible in Doing Theology', *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), ed. Robert K. Johnston, 33: 'Reason is a faculty of great usefulness to theology and exegesis. Occasionally it rises up to challenge Scripture and when it does we ought to put it in its place, its place being a supportive, ministerial, non-legislative one.'

See also Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1977), 84-101, where he argues that human reasoning is neither autonomous nor self-justifying.

acknowledging God as God. We need to ask if we have made gods of our methods.³²

If reverence is to be recovered in biblical scholarship, God must be given his rightful place again. The mind and method must become his servants once more.

V. The Recovery of Obedience

When reverence for God is recovered, obedience on our part must follow. But first we must re-define our conceptions of truth and truth-seeking if we are to understand obedience as an integral part of them. We seem to have inherited the idea of truth from the Greeks, and as a result tend to view it as a static commodity, like iron mined from the earth, when it is live and dynamic, like a friend whose acquaintance we cultivate.

The Greek *alētheia* carries the idea of non-concealment. Truth is what is seen, revealed and expressed, as opposed to what is concealed, falsified and suppressed.³³ What is true is contrasted with mere appearance. We are warned against too glib a distinction between the Greek and Hebrew ideas of truth.³⁵ Nevertheless, the essential idea behind the Hebrew *'met* is not non-concealment, but firmness. Truth is what is solid, valid, and binding. Used of a person, it denotes integrity and faithfulness. In most of its uses in the OT, truth is not abstract. The God of Israel reveals truth, not only in word but also in deed. This idea of truth

³² So John H. Yoder, 'The Use of the Bible in Theology' *The Use of the Bible In Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), ed. Robert K. Johnston, 115, argues for 'flexibility of method' on the ground of 'modesty about the power of our human instruments of interpretations'. He asserts, 'Only in this way can the Bible be served and not become the servant in a communication event. Just as we are willing to receive our message from an authority we do not challenge, so we would properly subordinate our methods.'

See also Carson, 'Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends', 20. 'Yet the most touted hermeneutical approaches today never enable anyone to hear a sure word from God. . . . Despite the many things we must learn from these hermeneutical developments, we must not worship at their shrine.'

³³ Bultmann, '*alētheia*', *TDNT* I, 238.

³⁴ See A. C. Thiselton, 'Truth', *NIDNTT* III, pp. 874-77. Scholars have generally accepted the difference between Greek and Semitic uses of 'truth', though (Thiselton warns, 874) 'these theological claims of 19th- and 20th-century biblical scholarship are valid up to a point, but can be misleading unless they are carefully qualified.'

being the correspondencce between word and deed continues into the NT.³⁵

Truth in its biblical sense may be understood according to the following sets of contrast. Firstly, it refers to what is settled in the past more than to what could be discovered in the future. In that sense, truth is a given which we 'remember' more than an uncertainty we hope to formulate. This is particularly true of the remembrance of God's covenantal faithfulness (e.g. Ex. 34:6).

Secondly, as a consequence, the quest for truth is not a speculative, but a moral exercise. The truth sought is not abstract and a-historical, but concrete and life-based. When found, it makes a difference to how one lives (e.g. Ps. 119:105).

Thirdly, truth is not merely a propositional statement, but ultimately a personal encounter. Truth has a personal dimension, for it points to *the* Truth, the trustworthy and faithful One. Truth about God is a personal encounter with him (e.g. I Kings 3:6; John 14:6). Fourthly, as a consequence, biblical truth is concerned, not so much with the curious eye, but the listening ear. To know God is not merely to 'see' and understand, but to 'hear' and obey (e.g. Rom. 1:18; 2:8). Finally, while truth is correspondence, it is not mere correspondence with what is true in the abstract, but with what is true in life. We possess the truth not only because what we know corresponds to what is true, but what we say corresponds to how we live (e.g. Ps. 51:6).

Clearly knowledge means obedience. But before that can come about, a few modifications have to be made to our quest for knowledge. We need to seek out from the Bible that which relates to life. This is not to say we ignore everything else. No, there are many interesting things we can discover in the biblical research. However, at the end of the day, the question must be asked, 'What difference does this mean to my life now that I know it?' Some may scoff at such an approach as crass pragmatism. So be it. Unless what we learn influences how we live, we have not learned.

It becomes imperative then that biblical studies be pursued in close relation with life and the whole business of living. My own experience as a pastor and teacher is that the Bible is best understood and appreciated when studied in the context of the questions and needs confronted in the lives of people in the

³⁵ Hence, the LXX translates *met* in some places, not with *alētheia*, but with *pistis* (faith or faithfulness). Of course, *alētheia* is used in the NT in contrast to concealment and deception too (e.g. Mt. 22:16; Mk. 5:33).

pastorate.³⁶ Perhaps, this is why the scholars who make the Bible come alive are those who have been pastors. John Stott, William Barclay and Michael Green are a few examples. If scholars were pastors (or active lay-people in the church) before they become professors, their scholarship may exhibit a better texture of reality about it. So it would be if scholars are actively engaged, beyond the classroom, in the life of the church and community.

VI. Conclusion

Biblical scholarship must bring us face to face with the God with whom we have to do. Ultimately, whether we are good or bad scholars, whether we have a Christian or an unchristian mind, depends on whether we hear what God is saying and obey it. Every student of the Bible lives under authority. He is either an obedient or disobedient student. That is what matters in the end.

³⁶ See John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1982). Stott (190f), citing an example from David Read, presses home the point that the path from the study must run out of the manse into the streets, in and out of houses, and amongst the common people, before it reaches the pulpit.