

# PANEL ON DOCTRINE

MAY 1998

## PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

### The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Accept the Report on the Interpretation of Scripture as fulfilling the remit given to the Panel at the General Assembly of 1995.
3. Encourage the Panel to continue work on the matter of Ordination to the Diaconate.

## REPORT

### THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

**1.1** Scripture has always been at the centre of Christian faith, and will no doubt always be there. Without the Scriptures we should know little of the character of God as self-giving, creative, responsive love, shown in the events concerning Jesus Christ. The early Church based its doctrine and life on Scripture, the medieval Church was steeped in the Bible, the Reformers fought for open access to the Bible, Enlightenment scholars struggled to find the original meaning of the Bible, contemporary judicial systems remain steeped in biblical concepts.

The Christian gospel is the reality of the presence of the incarnate God within our world, as a unity of Word and Sacrament. This presence is the presence of creator and reconciler, God through Jesus Christ, made known to us through the Spirit of Christlikeness. It is to this God, this vulnerable and generous God, that the narratives of Scripture bear testimony, witnessing to the reality of the hidden presence of God in Jesus Christ.

The Bible will continue to be central. For this is the source of most of our information about Jesus, about the understanding of God which arose in Israel and in the early Church, and about the Christian view of the nature of the gospel of salvation. Through the Bible God has spoken to the Church over the centuries, inviting, encouraging, provoking faith and discipleship. Christians have found faith, knowledge of God, and guidance for their lives as individuals and in community. They continue to do this today, and they expect to learn new things from God through reflection on the Scriptures in the future.

The Church believes that God uses the Bible to illuminate our life and thought in various ways at different times. Christian people in faith understand the Bible, as they understand their lives, as a gift of God. All human knowledge and understanding may be of value in arriving at the best possible interpretations of this Scripture. Within its pages we may receive divine revelation through human experience, understand the story of salvation through creation and reconciliation, gain insight into prayer, liturgy and service in community, reflect on the communication of the gracious presence of God through Word and Sacrament. It is in this context that the Panel seeks to consider the interpretation of Scripture at this time.

#### **1.2 The Bible in the Church of Scotland**

In addressing the many questions raised in the act of interpreting the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, we note that the authoritative position of the Scriptures in the Church of Scotland is established by the *Articles Declaratory*. There is no sense in which this report should be understood as offering an alternative understanding of the authority of the Scriptures. However, the acknowledgement of an authoritative position does not predetermine the act of interpretation. Rather, it directs the Church - and each member who addresses, and is addressed by, the Scriptures - towards the supreme rule of faith and life which we receive in the Word of

God. It is because we acknowledge the authority of Scripture that we are constrained to begin the task of interpreting it.

The constitutional position of the Church of Scotland in matters spiritual is set out in the *Articles Declaratory* as acknowledged by Parliament in the Church of Scotland Act of 1921. This may be understood as an acknowledgement by Parliament of the spiritual rights already inherent within the Church rather than as an Act by which these powers were conferred. The *Articles* came into effect in 1926 and formed an integral part of the Uniting Act which brought about the reunion of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church in 1929.

The *Articles* themselves do not have an equal status: *Article 1* has a pre-eminent position. Thus, while it is granted that “the Church has the right to interpret these Articles, and ... to modify or add to them” (VIII), it is equally maintained that this act of interpretation must take place “always consistently with the provisions of the first Article hereof, adherence to which, as interpreted by the Church, is essential to its continuity and corporate life”. J L Weatherhead comments: “There is a clear distinction in the *Declaratory Articles* between what is fundamental (*Article 1*), and what is expedient and may be altered by the Church (all other *Articles*).”<sup>1</sup> *Article 1*, then, embodies the “evidently cardinal doctrines” of the Church, and points to these doctrines “which were clearly fundamental and essential to a Christian Church”, and while those doctrines may be “few in number” they constitute, for our purposes, the indissoluble minimum of what it is to be a Christian Church.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2.1 The First Declaratory Article

In looking more closely at *Article 1*, we find a description of the place of the Church of Scotland as “part of the holy Catholic or Universal Church”, brought into being through the saving intention and act of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost”. Thereafter, we find a narrative of the work of Christ allied to the promise of the Spirit, in which we acknowledge that we:

*confess ... our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, made very man for our salvation; glorying in His Cross and Resurrection, and owing obedience to Him as the Head over all things to His Church; trusting in the promised renewal and guidance of the Holy Spirit; proclaiming the forgiveness of sins ... and labouring for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world.*

Following this, we are presented with a statement of the Church’s identity and its relationship to the Scriptures. This states that

*the Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.*

What, then, is the relationship of the interpreter to *Article 1*? In reading these sections of the Article, it is obvious that we are not offered a set of self-evident principles for the interpretation of Scripture. The Article itself requires to be interpreted. Instead, what is offered is a form which embodies the substance of the constitutional position of the Kirk. As a guide to the interpreter, this Article cannot be said to be overly expansive. Nonetheless it offers - albeit in embryo - an overarching narrative of the saving work of God against which we may read and interpret Scripture. It expresses the nature of the Triune God’s saving intention as it is expressed in the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. The Church is then entrusted with the task of proclamation and of working towards the realisation of the Kingdom of God. Further, it roots the Church of Scotland within a particular historical tradition as one which has received the Word of God upon which the fundamental Catholic doctrines are founded. Faithfulness to the narrative unfolded in *Article 1* might reasonably be asked of any interpreter of the Word of God contained in the Scriptures, and it is in this spirit that the report is offered.

We note the use of the word “contained”, suggesting as it does that the Word of God is not to be identified exclusively with the written Scriptures. In its Report to the General Assembly of 1973, the Panel wrote:

*The Word of God is always one and the same. But it has different forms. It is God’s Revelation in Christ, it is Christ. The Word is communicated to men [sic] in and through the witness of the prophets and of the apostles. The witness of the prophets and of the apostles are the holy Scriptures usually referred to as the written Word of God. The Word of God, however, comes to men also viva voce. It comes to men in and through the Church’s proclamation. This viva voce communication is not an arbitrary passing on of something inherent in the Church, or of something the Church owns or possesses. It is the communication of something God tells the Church as she meets Him in the Scriptures where He becomes her vis-à-vis .... The Word of God, then, has three forms: the Word made flesh, the written Word, and the proclaimed Word.*

<sup>1</sup> *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, pp 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p 26.

### 1.3 The Task before the Panel

The Panel on Doctrine is grateful to the General Assembly for supporting the proposal that it should prepare a study of the interpretation of Scripture. The Bible plays a key role in the construction of Christian doctrine, and its role in helping to shape doctrinal decisions has always presented the Church with the challenge of how to read it rightly, as much in recent years in this Church as in the distant past. We do not expect now to produce a definitive statement for all time, but we hope that this study may help to inform debate on our other studies over the next few years, and also contribute to the use of the Bible today within our Church.

We are grateful to a number of people who have generously given us expert assistance, especially Dr Marcella Althaus-Reid of Edinburgh University, Professor Robert Carroll of Glasgow University, and Professor Iain Provan, now of Regent College, Vancouver, as well as our ACTS representatives, Father John Fitzsimmons from the Roman Catholic Church and the Rev. Professor Frank Whaling from the Methodist Church. It has not been possible to include a full treatment of the papers they have produced, on such topics as the Bible in liberation theology and the uses of sacred scriptures among the major world religions, but their work has informed and undergirded our discussions throughout.

## 2. TEXT AND INTERPRETATION

### 2.1 A Variety of Approach

The roots of this report are to be found in the Panel's study of *Christian Marriage* (Assembly Reports, 1994 and 1995) - a study which exposed quite deep division amongst Church people, who sincerely believed they were being faithful to the insights of Holy Scripture. Other instances of similar division have surfaced in recent years - for instance in varied reactions to the Toronto Blessing, and the distress recorded by many ministers and members after it was suggested in a moderatorial sermon that it was legitimate to understand the Virgin Birth of Christ as a theological but not a biological truth.

Disagreement over general principles and over specific instances of biblical interpretation is as old as the Church itself; we may assume that Peter and Paul were equally sincere in applying Scripture to the question of whether Gentiles were welcome in the Church without circumcision. From patristic literature, from the heated discussions between Reformers all committed to recovering the centrality of Scripture, from the seventeenth century theological battles that gave rise to our own Confession of Faith, from eighteenth century tussles between Evangelicals and Moderates, all the evidence indicates that there has always been a constructive tension between diverse readings (although there are consistent elements throughout, such as the divine origin of creation, the inspiration of the prophets, the importance of holding together the Old and the New Testaments, the centrality of Jesus). While this may seem disappointing it is also reassuring. It allows us to see diversity within the contemporary Church in a context of historical continuity, and therefore to feel less threatened by it. If Christians living through a time of unprecedented change, constantly confronted by new knowledge, new discoveries and new forms of communication, are not agreed as to how (if at all) these changes impinge on our view of the Bible, we need not assume there is a battle being waged in heaven for the soul and wellbeing of the Church. It would be surprising, and more worrying, if we all reacted in exactly the same way to the times in which we live.

The questions are real, and they surface constantly. In upholding "the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" we are not asserting that everything found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the Word of God. Such an assertion might appear to require us to justify the slaughter of other races to make room for Israel, the number of wives King Solomon enjoyed, the wish to see babies of hostile adults battered on rocks. In our own century, too literal an identification of fragments of Scripture as "Word of God" has been made the pretext for Nazi oppression in Germany and for the apartheid supported by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. Every Christian, consciously or not, brings some interpretative process to bear on the reading of the Bible. Every Christian also accords Scripture a unique status: God's Word by which all theology, all Church life and all ethical decisions must be judged. An evaluation of the whole is necessary for this, rather than the selection of proof texts.

At a later stage in this Report we look at the reasons why particular books were chosen for inclusion in our Bibles - the question of Canon, which gives unity to this diverse collection of documents and invests it with the status of divine Word. We also examine (Section 4) different ways the Bible has been understood throughout the Church's history. But knowing where we have come from is never the whole answer to the question of where we should go now.

No longer are the peoples of western Europe divided, as they were at the Reformation, according to which version of the faith they adhere to. Church members are likely to be living, working, alongside neighbours who subscribe to other faiths, or who have no faith other than the vaguest belief in a deity. Doubts and questions force themselves increasingly on people's consciousness from outside Scripture: from the physical sciences, from psychology, from daily viewing of a suffering world, from an awareness of the good to be found within other religions. There is no commonly shared belief within society in biblical authority, and very little sense of an inherited shared faith. Advances in communication which give instant access to events and information all

around the globe, in one way drawing the world together, also fragment cultural identity by making us more aware of diversity. Schools provide young people with some insights into world faiths other than Christianity; and respect for the beliefs of others (whether we attribute this to more generous attitudes or to a weakening of our own conviction) makes it impossible for most of us to classify people as “believers” and “heathen”. Insofar as the ecumenical movement has impinged at all on Church life, it has made it difficult to maintain that one’s own ecclesiastical system is in every respect the best or that any single doctrinal position is the only right one.

Traditionally, Church statements and documents, whether Orthodox, Roman or Reformed - including our own Confession of Faith - have pronounced on the basis of given assumptions, without asking the prior questions. More recently the boundaries separating belief from doubt have become more blurred. For instance, even among Church members a remarkable number do not feel sure that there is any life after death.

We must hope for a recovery of confidence in Scripture. But this is unlikely to be born of the formulations that were helpful in the seventeenth (or any other) century. Perhaps it is our own commitment to the concept of *Semper Reformanda* which is really at stake. Can we be true to the insights of the past and project them on to the present and the future in ways that stir the imagination and inspire faith? Some will regard any attempt to integrate scriptural faith and modern knowledge as a dangerous slide into relativism which can only undermine the authority of God’s Word. Recently, parish ministers were sent a circular headed “Reject Evolution, Support Creation” as if one were a denial of the other. Others, though, will feel that we cannot do other than present the ancient gospel in terms that take account of new knowledge and a changed culture. The way that the prologue to the Fourth Gospel re-presents the Jewish faith to a Greek readership shows that the Good News has never been static, or insulated from the world in which it is preached.

**2.2** We offer here some observations which underlie the main thrust of this Report:

**2.2.1 The Bible remains the supreme rule of faith and life.**

Millions of Christians around the world are nourished by the story of God’s involvement with ancient Israel and the incarnation of Christ on behalf of God’s world. They can testify to Scripture’s continuing power to awaken, sustain and nourish the life of the faithful. Through its witness to God’s self-disclosure it still points humanity to faith and hope and love.

**2.2.2 We always read the Bible with some degree of interpretation.**

As soon as we move beyond general statements about biblical authority we are plunged into territory where choices have to be made. Not even the most staunch defender of biblical authority is likely to contend that it reveals a uniform level of divine inspiration. Whatever their value in the total canonical scene, Esther and Jude have not proved so useful to the Church in revealing God as fully as the Fourth Gospel does. We all tend to give more or less prominence to some parts of canonical Scripture than to others.

There are also unconscious factors at work when we read the Bible: different lenses through which we all view the same light. These will depend largely on our culture, education, life experience; and the presuppositions which influence interpretation are generally easier to spot in others than in ourselves. We can understand why some affluent western Christians read the Parable of the Talents as a justification of capitalism and why Christians being exploited under oppressive political regimes may see the Exodus as a mandate for economic revolution. The fact that we can recognise such obvious connections should caution us against claiming dispassionate objectivity in our own reading. We also read through lenses.

**2.2.3 Within Scripture itself, understanding and interpretation can be seen to evolve.**

“One of the things that gives the Bible an inner unity, unique of its kind, is the fact that later biblical writings often depend upon earlier ones. These more recent writings allude to older ones and create ‘re-readings’/relectures which develop new aspects of meaning, sometimes quite different from the original sense” (Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p 86). Continually, precepts and insights from earlier generations are adapted and applied to changed situations. Examples of this are the re-statement of the ancient Law in Deuteronomy, Amos’ reinterpretation of the doctrine of Election (Amos 3:1-2), the way that Paul often interprets Old Testament Scripture, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Within the pages of the Bible the Word is constantly being re-applied to the new situations in which the people of God find themselves.

**2.2.4 There are significant issues on which it is difficult to see one clear unambiguous “biblical” view.**

It is natural that we should wish to be told “what the Bible says” on issues that concern us. But there is often no neat answer to the questions on which we seek clear solutions: for instance, questions of poverty, military service, corporal and capital punishment. Sometimes what we are really seeking is an affirmation of simplistic answers we think we already know.

We should not feel defensive either about ambiguity or about mystery. Jesus in his teaching seldom gave quick easy answers. Often he responded to one question by asking another, or turned the question back on the questioner to expose the false suppositions (or the ulterior motive) underlying it. There are within the scriptures certain statements everyone would probably regard as seminal: *eg* In the beginning was the Word .... God so

loved the world .... Judge not, that ye be not judged .... I say seventy times seven .... God is Love .... Yet even these distillations can hardly be said to stand entirely on their own. The Church has a prophetic role which may often imply an element of judgement. God is many other things besides Love. The Gospel in its fullness cannot be expressed by means of soundbites or proof texts. Pastorally, we must try to help people reach the conviction that is born of search and enquiry, not conviction that suppresses all enquiry and regards any areas of doubt or complexity as sinful. If our faith does not involve development, growth, sometimes change, it bears little relation to the faith of the Apostles.

### **2.2.5 Scripture properly addresses different people in different ways.**

Every pastor soon becomes aware of the diversity of spiritual needs within a congregation. It is a perennial part of the preacher's challenge to communicate a "word from the Lord" that will be apposite to all who hear it. For every nine who sit too loosely to their faith and may legitimately be exhorted to do more, there will be one over-anxious soul who should appropriately be encouraged to relax and do less and just soak up the reassurance of justification by grace. The same gospel can have very different implications, depending on the spiritual state of those to whom it is addressed.

On a larger canvas, this should make us wary of claiming any one authoritative insight into the interpreting of any part of Scripture. For example: many of us in the West have been encouraged to see the events of the Exodus, not as a model of social justice or as a charter for civil unrest, but as the supreme Old Testament evidence of God's great love for a chosen people and God's faithfulness towards them. The Exodus from Egypt bears witness to God's initiative of sovereign grace in spite of Israel's apparent insignificance. If others, reading Exodus in the context of a lifetime's political and economic repression, find that it confirms for them God's concern for the poor and a compassion for their own situation, it is not appropriate for us in our prosperity to say that they have got it wrong, as though they had ticked the wrong answer to a multiple choice question. Their reading may be leading them to hear exactly what God hopes and intends that they should hear.

There are dangers in according this kind of elasticity to Scripture. It can lead to selective and highly subjective interpretation, if we fail to acknowledge that we may be going beyond what the author had in mind - though it is often difficult to say with certainty what any author had in mind when a passage was written two thousand or more years ago. It is helpful to recall the statement in the Westminster Confession (I:vi) that "we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word"; but this very proper emphasis on the role of the Spirit does not in itself safeguard against subjectivism. Individuals with diametrically opposed views may both feel sure that they are interpreting Scripture with wholehearted backing from the Holy Spirit. When parts of Scripture are, as the Confession of Faith puts it, "not alike plain in themselves" (I:vii), the corporate mind of the Church is a surer guide than the conviction of any individual reader in deciding the legitimacy of interpretation.

### **2.2.6 Scripture is unique: and yet it is related to our own experience of God.**

Academic questions about Canon are of little interest to most members of the Church. And yet we need some sense of Canon, some perception that this diverse library of books together constitutes the Bible. The entire basis of our faith is in its pages. This is not to suggest that God can be packaged in one volume, or that we can ever hope to assimilate - let alone exhaust - all that Scripture contains. It does mean that the Bible is special and distinctive. Within its pages lies the record of God's definitive self-revelation: the material by which the Church is equipped to formulate doctrine and interpret God's will for a world very different from the Bible world. Scripture is a regulator; everything since Scripture has to be related back to it and evaluated in its light.

To accord the Bible such pre-eminence involves an act of faith. This has to be said clearly and without apology. Reason alone could not lead us to the conclusion that one set of ancient documents stands in a category of its own. Reason would suggest that we might find as much value, and more relevance, in more recent illuminating writing - Shakespeare's plays, modern novels, manuals of psychology or whatever. Without trying to minimise the value of such other works, we cannot allow them to be set alongside Scripture on an equal footing. The practice adopted by some congregations in their search for relevance of following "God's Ancient Word" (the Bible) with a reading of "God's Word Today" (an extract from a book or newspaper or magazine) is confusing and can only serve to relativise the place that Scripture rightly has in Christian worship.

Yet if Scripture is regarded as too different, and too fenced around by the mystique of Canon, the effect can be to drive a wedge - or draw a curtain? - between people of the Bible and God's people now. There is of course a valid distinction to be made between those who observed or took part in the mighty acts of salvation history and ourselves who hear of them at second hand. But we love the same God - the God of our salvation as of theirs. We serve the God whom they served. God's attitudes now are presumably the same as then, and the gifts of the Spirit enjoyed in the first century are offered still to the Church of the twentieth and twenty-first. Perhaps part of the reason for people's low expectations of God, and their lack of much sense of excitement and discovery in Christian faith, is that we have separated off the Bible too much from the life of God's people now - making revelation just a matter of belief and memory, as though Christ had long ago gone into retirement.

Knowing what God did once, two thousand years ago, is not of much help if it does not open up some insights into what God has done since and is still doing. The experience of most people recorded in the Bible was not different in kind from ours now. The Christ whom we encounter in the sacrament is not a different

Christ from the man they encountered in the days of his incarnation. Reverential faith in Scripture starts to border on superstition when it suggests a world in which, for one distinct period of history, people were reduced to robots while God performed saving works - a world in which people wrote books which were not really written by them at all, but by God.

Our hope is to help people see that the inter-action between God's free grace and our sinful humanity is as real now as it was then. We know that God can make new believers, change human lives, through the medium of stumbling sermons and faltering witness. Was the process really very different when God "spoke" through the prophets? The Bible is enhanced, and opens up new possibilities, when we acknowledge that God does work through our human lives and human efforts - and that God works in ways we will often perceive only later, with the benefit of hindsight. This is not to suggest that our sermons now have the status of holy writ. It is to suggest that holy writ may have stemmed from people not unlike ourselves.

Understandably there is in many people's minds a caution about seeing the Bible as an amalgam of the human and divine. They fear that if we ask too many questions about authors' motives and cultural context we may pride ourselves on having reached full "understanding" - thereby denying the supernatural and reducing interpretation to the level of our rationality. We believe the opposite is true. A God who years ago pushed people's pens to make sure that they only wrote according to prescription, and then stopped when the Canon was complete, would not be much help to us. A God who takes the "natural" - the human, the fallible, the fallen - and transforms it by grace, is an enormous help. If the Scriptures which inspire us all arose through such a sacramental process - human documents transformed and vivified to become Word of God - this is consistent with the incarnational belief to which they witness.

### **3. QUESTIONS OF CANON**

The Bible contains a collection of books written by different people at different times over a period of hundreds of years. It is not, however, a haphazard collection. It comes to us as a Canon of Scripture. Canon comes from a Greek word meaning "measuring stick", and implies a definitive list of books chosen from a larger number of books which were in circulation. The choice was not made on literary grounds. Some of the books in the Bible would hardly pass muster as great works of literature. Both in Jewish and in Christian tradition the Canon pointed to books which were acceptable because they enshrined and continued to speak to the faith of the community.

The Canon is the subject of lively debate today. The precise stages by which the Canon came into being, and indeed whether some books should be in the Canon, are matters of dispute. In ordination services "the Church of Scotland acknowledges the Word of God contained in the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme rule of faith and life". This follows the Reformation approach that the Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible as defined by Jewish scholars and teachers (Rabbis), towards the end of the first century of the Christian Era, although there was and continued to be discussion as to whether several books, *eg* Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Ezekiel, should be included. The early Church, however, used a Greek Bible (the Septuagint) which accepted as part of Scripture the books of the Apocrypha. This is still the position of the Roman Catholic Church, while the Eastern Churches in addition accept several books beyond those normally classified as the Apocrypha. Most modern translations now include the Apocrypha, as indeed did early editions of the King James version.

The Canon of the New Testament was not finally fixed until the fourth century of the Christian Era, largely in response to claims of new revelations from heretical circles. Amid discussion concerning certain books, two main criteria seem to have been decisive. Did the books come from the early apostles and did they reflect the consensus of the faith as witnessed to and practised in the Church?

There may still be divisions within the Christian Churches as to the precise boundary of the Canon and it is always possible to raise questions as to why book "x" is acceptable and book "y" not, but it is the fact of the existence of the Canon which must be decisive for our understanding of the Bible. It speaks of authority. It holds the Old and New Testaments together, binding God's revelation to his people Israel to his decisive revelation in Christ. It also challenges us to see that amid the very diverse books which make up the Bible there is an underlying unity inviting us to read all the books as part of the whole. These were the books which spoke to and shaped the life of the believing community. They were believed to enshrine a definitive and irreplaceable revelation of God and the community's response to that revelation. In the midst of their rich variety they spoke of a distinctive faith and challenged the Church to continue to bear witness to that faith. To these books, therefore, the believing community in every age must return again and again - to ask who it is, how it must live and what its witness to the world ought to be.

## **4. THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION**

### **4.1 The Effect of Translation**

However much we may wish to affirm the authority of the Canon of Scripture, one thing is clear from the history of interpretation - there never has been, and presumably never will be, one agreed interpretation of Scripture. This is not something to be regretted. It corresponds to the nature of the Bible itself, the way in which

it has come down to us, and the fact that it presents us, not with one neat theology, but with a tradition of faith constantly in the process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

It is helpful to remember, first, that the Bible comes to us in translation. Sometimes differences in modern translations are due to differences in establishing the original text. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, with a sprinkling of Aramaic, the New Testament in Greek. The versions we commonly use differ in translation because translation is not an exact science but an art. This has been true from the earliest times. The Greek translation of Exodus 19:3 renders “Moses went up to the mountain of God”, while the Hebrew has “Moses went up to God”. The Greek text of Exodus 24:10 reads “They saw the place where God stood”, while the Hebrew has “They saw God”. In both cases the Greek was uncomfortable with the bold directness of the Hebrew and reflects a theology which emphasises the transcendence of God.

Let us take examples from modern translations. Here are four English renderings of the first two verses of the Bible:

**New Revised Standard Version**

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

**The Revised English Bible**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water.*

**New International Version**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

**Good News Bible**

*In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the power of God was moving over the water.*

All of these translations, with the exception of the New International Version, indicate in footnotes alternative translations of certain key words or phrases. It does make a difference to our understanding of these verses whether we take the opening words to be a definite, absolute statement, “In the beginning God created ...”, or whether they are a temporal clause, “when God created heaven and earth”. And what about the phrase rendered “the spirit of God” or “the power of God” or “a wind from God”? Should we opt for one of these translations and if so what guides our choice, or should we be exploring the richness in all of the translations?

Take an example from the New Testament, a passage which has been much used in discussions on the place and authority of the Bible, 2 Timothy 3:16:

**The New Revised Standard Version** renders:

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching ...*

**The New International Version**

*All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching ...*

**The Good News Bible**

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching ...*

In all of these translations there is the temptation to equate scripture - especially when it is rendered Scripture, with a capital “S” - with the Bible as we know it, although our Bible did not exist when 2 Timothy was written.

**The Revised English Bible**, however, renders:

*All inspired scripture has its use for teaching* - a translation which follows some of the early translations, including the Latin Vulgate, Luther and early English translations, including those of Tyndale and Coverdale, which add “by God”, ie “All scripture inspired by God”. This translation also appears as an alternative in the footnotes to the **New Revised Standard Version** and the **Good News Bible**.

This leaves open what scriptures are to be regarded as “inspired by God”. Which translation should we follow and why? Even translations highlight the problem of interpretation.

## 4.2 Differences of Emphasis

When we turn to the content of the Bible, differences of emphasis are apparent:

(A) Even within the same book in the Bible we find different ways of speaking about God. Genesis is a classic example. In the traditions surrounding the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, there is a clear pattern of God speaking in a very direct way. It is there at the outset: "Now the LORD said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred ...." (12:1). It is heard for the last time in 35:11 where God says to Jacob, "I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply ...". At significant points in the narrative God appears to the patriarchs, often closely associated with sacred sites. This is a particular way of talking about God which has links with other parts of the Old Testament, not least with prophetic traditions with their visions and "Thus says the LORD". When we come to the Joseph story, however, we enter a different world. God nowhere intrudes directly into the narrative. There is no "Thus says the LORD". This does not mean that the narrative is not God centred. There is running through the narrative a strong sense of providence. In the denouement to the story Joseph reassures his anxious brothers that although they had sold him into slavery in Egypt, "It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives" (45:5, cf 50:20). This is a different way of talking about God and one which has closer links with other parts of the Old Testament, particularly with the wisdom literature. Both lie side by side within the one book as if reminding us that there is no one way of talking about God, no one way of doing theology.

A prophet will stand before his people and say with ringing certainty, "Thus says the LORD". He claims to know beyond any shadow of doubt what God's word and God's will are in the perplexing circumstances of his day. Not that the claim could always be taken at face value, since people in Israel were only too familiar with rival prophets proclaiming with apparently equal certainty and sincerity, "Thus says the LORD", and delivering diametrically opposed messages (eg Jer. 23 and 28). There were others, however, for whom "Thus says the LORD" was fantasy: "... always I perceived that God has so ordered it that no human being should be able to discover what is happening here under the sun. However hard he may try, he will not find out; the wise may think they know, but they cannot find the truth of it" (Eccles. 8:17). Here there is no "Thus says the LORD", only a highly intelligent and perplexed man concluding that to ultimate questions in life there are no answers. He accepts that there must be a divine purpose running through life, but God has not chosen to reveal it. If there were such a thing as an agreed theology in Israel in Ecclesiastes' day, it rings no bells for him. To try to argue, as some have done across the centuries - and still do, that Ecclesiastes is not stating his own position, but only attempting to be in dialogue with a contemporary scepticism which he sets out to refute, is wholly to misunderstand the book and would never have occurred to anyone unless committed to belief in one consistent biblical theology.

(B) Within the Bible we find the same themes being handled very differently. Take, for example, the Exodus and wilderness wandering themes central to much Old Testament credal affirmation. For Jeremiah this was the honeymoon period in Israel's relationship with God (Jer. 2:3). Domestic friction only occurred after the settlement in Canaan. For Psalm 78, however, the whole period is a story of disobedience, of sin based on astonishing ingratitude. For Isaiah 40-55 the exodus theme is projected into the future, to become the prototype of a new and greater exodus which will see the return of the exiles from Babylonian captivity (eg Isa. 43:14-21; 51:11-12).

Or take the Melchizedek tradition. Melchizedek, priest king of Salem, flits briefly in and out of the Abram story (Gen. 14:18-20). He reappears in Psalm 110 seemingly to justify the priestly role of the Davidic king in Jerusalem, the Davidic family not coming from the accepted priestly ranks of Aaron or Levi; "seemingly" because anyone who dogmatizes about Psalm 110 has never wrestled with the Hebrew text. He then reappears in Hebrews 7 in a *tour de force* of interpretation, which owes much to the paucity of information about Melchizedek, to justify the high priesthood of Jesus, a high priesthood infinitely superior to what Judaism had to offer. Would the author of Hebrews have used this interpretation unless he was addressing a situation in which Jewish converts were in danger of relapsing into Judaism? It is but one step along the same interpretative road when in early Christian apologetic the bread and wine Melchizedek brought become the Eucharist.

(C) We face the same issue when we look at the way in which different New Testament writers handle the relationship of the Gospel to the Old Testament. They all believe that the story of Israel does come to its climax in Jesus. But there is no agreed way of saying this. Matthew makes liberal use of the fulfilment formula: "All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet" (eg Matt. 1:22). John prefers to shape his theology at this point round a series of great "I am" sayings, for example "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), all of which draw on Old Testament themes. Paul's approach is again different. He appeals to the Abraham tradition as gospel, good news freely available to both Jew and Gentile on the same basis; while Hebrews has a much richer variety of ways of introducing material and texts from the Old Testament than we find anywhere else.

#### **4.3 Early Jewish Interpretation**

There is a memorable passage in Isaiah 40:6-8, which claims that: "*All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field*"; and goes on to say, "*The grass withers, the flower fades; / but the word of our God will stand for ever*".

As nearly all modern translations make clear, the original context points to "all flesh" being a reference to the human race - "all mortals", "all peoples", "mankind" - to cite a few translations. The prophet is reminding



the bruised people of Israel in exile in Babylon that everything human, including the greatness that is Babylon, is transitory, touched with the frailty of mortality. The only permanence lies with God and his word. The Aramaic Targum, however, a translation produced to help Aramaic speaking Jews to understand the Hebrew when it was read in the synagogue, renders:

*All the wicked are as grass, and all their strength  
as the flower of the field ...*

*The wicked man dies, his thoughts perish;  
but the word of our God abides for ever.*

Now it is only the wicked who are compared to the withering grass and the fading flower. A prophetic word to a people whose faith was under threat in the bitter experience of exile has been replaced by a word for a different context within the life of the religious community, where the translator is conscious of the contrast and the tension between those who must be classified as “the wicked” and those who belong to “the righteous”. This is the lens through which he reads the text. Interestingly the Letter of James does the same, echoing the text in 1:9ff and applying it to the rich who “will disappear like the flower” and “wither away”. Here some of the sociological divisions which were threatening to tear apart the Christian community provide the lens through which the text is being read.

The Qumran community from which the Dead Sea Scrolls come believed they were the true Israel. Separated from the corruption of the world, they believed they were living in the last times, preparing for the final battle between good and evil. So they took passages from the prophets, notably Nahum and Habakkuk, ignored their original context and gave them an interpretation which mirrored the events and personalities impinging upon their own life. They believed that the original prophets were dealing in “mysteries” which they could not understand, since they were related to the end time and would only be revealed at that time. There is a certain similarity here to Matthew’s use of prophetic texts. Again the context in which the community believed it was living provides the clue to the interpretation.

A Jewish student in training to become a Rabbi commented, “That God gave the Torah to Israel we all accept; but what it means, ah, that is another question”. This was always the Jewish scholarly attitude and there never was any embarrassment in being unable to come to the same conclusion. This is amply demonstrated in the Mishnah, the second century compilation of Rabbinic teaching and in the later Talmud (the Teaching). To take but one example - on what grounds was divorce acceptable within the Jewish community? There is only one verse in Torah which tackles this issue - Deuteronomy 24:1. This permits a man to divorce his wife “if he finds something objectionable about her”. The key question then is what does the word translated “objectionable” mean? The Rabbis offered different interpretations. Shammai concluded from this that a man ought not to divorce his wife except on the grounds of adultery; Hillel argued that a man may divorce his wife if she does anything which displeases him. Akiba claimed a man may divorce his wife if he finds another fairer than she, quoting other words from the same verse “she does not please him”. All accept that the text is authoritative, all quote the text to support their conclusion and all come to very different conclusions.

#### **4.4 Christian Interpretation**

##### **4.4.1 The earliest period**

When we come to the early Church we enter a period which, although it had its different approaches to Scripture, is characterised by a rich allegorical approach, which owes much to earlier Jewish and Greek norms of interpretation which flourished at Alexandria. Origen’s impressive Scripture commentaries are largely unintelligible without a prior knowledge of his earlier Jewish counterpart Philo. Early Christian interpretation was based on the Greek (Septuagint) text which provided the canon for the Church, a view passionately defended by Augustine in face of questions raised by Jerome who had some knowledge of Hebrew. Augustine provides a good illustration of this allegorical approach in his commentary on the Psalms. He argues that the person referred to in Psalm 1:1 must be none other than Jesus, since no other person comes near to the perfection implied in the words of the verse. He goes on to claim that “the tree planted by the streams of water” in verse 3 is Jesus “who draws in the water, the sinful people as they course along, into the roots of his moral law”. This kind of approach to the text became firmly established in Christian tradition and still has its advocates. It is important to note, however, that this was only one of the ways in which Augustine, in his interpretation of Scripture, sought to communicate his belief in the love of God which comes to us in Jesus.

##### **4.4.2 The Reformation in Europe**

Since we stand within the Reformed tradition, let us take a look at the way in which the two dominating figures of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin, handled Scripture. They may be united in their belief in the unique authority of Scripture, but they are often poles apart in their interpretation of it.

Luther, in his early lectures on the Psalms, offers us five different interpretations of the words in Psalm 18:11, "He made darkness his covering". They refer to:

1. the riddle and darkness of faith;
2. God's dwelling in unapproachable light, hence we must enter into analogical darkness and ascend to him by way of denials;
3. the mystery of the incarnation, God hidden in humanity which is his darkness;
4. the Church and the Virgin Mary in both of whom God is concealed;
5. the sacrament of the Eucharist in which He is completely concealed.

Luther is here very much the child of the spirituality and the interpretation of Scripture in the Middle Ages.

Calvin will have none of this. He is content simply to interpret the words in the context of the coming of the awesome God to his people.

In Psalm 118:12, the Psalmist describes those who threaten him as being "like bees ... like a fire of thorns". "Like bees" Luther takes to be an analogy of Christ to the Jews, stressing his greatness compared with their tiny size: "And as the bee does not overpower and does not kill man, but only penetrates in a tiny place of the whole man, and yet by this removes all good for itself, so the Jews stung Christ on the tiny spot of his being, that is, only in the humanity, but were unable either to overpower or to kill the whole Christ." He then applies the analogy to the followers of Christ: "Therefore every persecutor of his is like a bee to him, which he should magnanimously receive and despise and on which he should seek vengeance in the name of the Lord." As for the "thorns", "fire among thorns is useful because it devours only thorns and clears a larger area. So the Jewish persecutors laid themselves waste and enlarged the Church all the more. Both can also be understood in a good sense thus, that like the bees which lose their stinger when they sting, so the ungodly are converted by the patience of the saints whom they sting and lose their rage and desire to inflict harm. Similarly, like fire among thorns, they consume themselves through patience and afterwards become fruit-bearing trees. And in this way vengeance is done in the name of the Lord".

In his later commentary on the Psalms, Luther is more restrained in his use of the similes. He notes, for example, that an angry bee stings, although it knows that when it loses its sting it will die. This he applies to the enemies of Christ, and in particular "the council of Jerusalem ... when they had determined to kill the Son of God". No longer is there any distinction between the stung humanity of Christ as opposed to the whole Christ, no longer any use of the simile to point to the ungodly converted by the patience of the saints. Luther's focus remains Christological, but it is a Christological approach which is freeing itself from some of the more fanciful mediaeval spiritualising of the text.

Calvin's comment on Psalm 118:12 is much briefer. The fury of the Psalmist's enemies "is set forth in comparing them with bees, which, though not possessed of much strength are very fierce ... and occasion no little fear". As for the fire of thorns, it "at first makes a great crackling ... but soon passes away. What it amounts to is that David's enemies had furiously assailed him, but that their fury soon subsided". Again we notice how Calvin is concerned to contain his comment within what he considers appropriate for the interpretation of the Psalm, as a Psalm of David. Thus Calvin is focusing upon what he believes to be the literal meaning of the text. This was to be an important element in the Reformation concern to rediscover the meaning of the Word of God. Nevertheless Calvin was not concerned merely to place a psalm in its context in the life of David. His approach is thoroughly Christological. For him, David portrays and points forward to the revelation in Christ, the king to come. For Calvin there is no conflict between a literal understanding of Scripture and its witness to the story of salvation in Christ.

Calvin is also happy to accept that there are places where, because of the difficulty of the text, no certainty is to be had. Thus on Psalm 89:19 he comments: "In so doubtful a case, I leave everyone to adopt the conjecture which appears to him most probable."

What Luther and Calvin share is an unquestioned belief in the authority of Scripture as central for Christian life and doctrine. What the history of interpretation, however, underlines is that even when there is this common assumption about the authority of Scripture, this does not lead to a consensus in interpretation. Indeed some of the most bitter disputes about the nature of the Church and the Sacraments, for example between Luther and Zwingli, hinged upon different interpretations of certain verses in Scripture.

It is important that we should recognise this and not make modern biblical scholarship responsible for all lack of certainty as to what Scripture is saying, as if there was once a golden age when within the Church all agreed as to how Scripture should be interpreted. It is comparatively easy to look back and identify the main theological, intellectual, social and cultural factors which influenced the way in which Scripture was being interpreted in the past. It is far more difficult to accept that our interpretation is similarly influenced by who we are today.

#### **4.4.3 The Scottish Reformation**

The ratification of the *Scots Confession* (1560) may be taken as the event which established the reformed Church in Scotland, and its understanding of the relationship of Scripture to the *Confession* is a particularly interesting one. Thus, in the Preface to the *Confession* it is held that:

*... if any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.*

Therefore, the *Confession* establishes the priority of Scripture over *Confession*, and establishes a relationship between Scripture and *Confession* which is inherently dialectical. This points to a creative locus through which we may hear the Word of God, and suggests that in the dialogue between Scripture and *Confession* there will be found the path to the right interpretation of Scripture.

The First Book of Discipline of the same year, in its First Head ("Of Doctrine") declares it "necessary that [the] Evangel be truly and openly preached in every Kirk". By way of explanation it adds, "By preaching of the Evangel, we understand not only the Scriptures of the New Testament, but also of the Old; to wit, the Law, Prophets, and Histories, in which Jesus Christ is no less contained in figure, than we have Him now expressed in verity. And, therefore, with the Apostle, we affirm that "All Scripture inspired of God is profitable to instruct, to reprove, and to exhort". In which Books of Old and New Testaments we affirm that all things necessary for the instruction of the Kirk, and to make the man of God perfect, are contained and sufficiently expressed".

Head IX (2) is entitled "For Preaching, and Interpreting of Scriptures, &c". This does not deal with the principles of interpretation, but with arrangements for establishing what came to be known as "the exercise", which, they say, "St Paul calleth prophesying." It is to take its form from the description at 1 Corinthians 14:29. The following comments on the manner in which these interpretative exercises were to be conducted may bear repetition:

*But lest that of a profitable exercise might arise debate and strife, curious, peregrine and unprofitable questions are to be avoided. All interpretation disagreeing from the principles of our faith, repugning to charity, or that stands in plain contradiction to any other manifest place of Scripture is to be rejected. The interpreter in that exercise may not take to himself the liberty of a public preacher, yea, although he be a Minister appointed; but he must bind himself to his text, that he enter not by digression in explaining common-places. He may use no invective in that exercise unless it be with sobriety in confuting heresies.*

Although the authors of the Book of Discipline thought it "a thing most expedient and necessary, that every Church have a Bible in English", they did not prescribe any particular translation, and neither they nor the authors of the Confession of Faith made any pronouncement on the Canon. In 1579 the first Scottish printing of the Geneva Bible was completed and, at the request of the printer, the General Assembly provided a preface dedicating it to the King. The translators of the Geneva Bible did not exclude the Apocrypha from their labours. It may be that in the earliest post-Reformation years that attitude of the Kirk was similar to that of the (generally Calvinistic) Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England: "In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church. [Here the Old Testament books are listed.] And the other Books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine." Calvin himself cites Apocryphal books in the *Institutes*.

#### **4.4.4 The Bible after the Reformation**

Much of the seventeenth century in Europe was devoted to religious wars as the fierce disputes between Reformation and Counter-Reformation interacted with national and political interest. The Reformation recovery of the centrality of Scripture owed much to the "New Learning" of the Renaissance. This had given scholars access to manuscripts which allowed them to make more accurate translations into various vernaculars, and the Reformers believed that this scholarship could serve people's access to the Word of God.

There were, however, other aspects of the new learning. One was an increasing insistence on checking by investigation, rather than simply accepting authority. If Galileo was right in questioning the old and firmly held belief that the earth was at the centre of the universe, in principle, anything could be questioned: the authorship of the Pentateuch for example, or the attribution of New Testament letters to Paul or John. The tools which were accelerating discoveries in the natural world, the medical discoveries arising from anatomy, the geographical discoveries arising from exploration, were basically investigative. The message was: "Don't take it on trust or authority: look and see."

The huge expansion in natural science and the related technologies as materials came to be better understood, led to a huge confidence that there was publicly ascertainable truth, and common standards of reasonable evidence which freed people from the claims and counter-claims of warring "authorities". Weariness and distress at the pointlessness and barbarity of the wars of religion was beginning to replace the fierce alignments of the post-Reformation decades, and a broad consensus began to emerge that civilisation depended on such principles as tolerance of diversity where there was no proof that could be agreed upon, and on public laws which were based on general consent.

In Britain, the period we think of as "Modern Britain" depends on these assumptions:

- \* people have an obligation to respect publicly agreed views, which depend on scientific proof and moral consensus;
- \* where there is no scientific proof or moral consensus, personal opinions are to be respected so long as they do not infringe the rights of others, *eg* a minority group cannot dictate to the majority consensus.

In the last two hundred years, the impact of “modernity” on Christianity in Britain has been significant. What has been positive and what has been negative in it remains a matter of controversy.

In relation to the interpretation of Scripture, there have been divergent tendencies in modern theology. The “liberal”/“radical” traditions have agreed that the study of Scripture should be conducted on the same principles as the study of any other text, *ie* questions about authorship, transmission, context, genre, *etc.*, are all open. The methods of critical enquiry sought to establish

1. the best available text, given knowledge of variants and how they emerged [textual criticism];
2. the sources of texts in literary precedents to the existing manuscripts (*eg* the Q “sayings” source behind the Synoptic traditions in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s Gospels) [source criticism];
3. the stages and forms of oral transmission before the text was finally written [form criticism];
4. the historical/sociological context of documents which clarify the meaning of the text [historical criticism];
5. the editorial contribution to the final shape of the text through selection and focus of material [redaction criticism].

In all these cases, “criticism” does not have the negative overtones that the word has in general conversation. It means something more neutral, like “discernment”. But it does threaten fundamentalist views of the Bible which assume verbal inerrancy or guaranteed dictation by God.

For together, these techniques of investigation suggest and document human elements in the process of Scripture coming to be written: a scribe finds a passage puzzling, and adds a note which becomes part of the next text. Something in the Jesus tradition is not meaningful for a particular community and it is ignored or altered. An editor has a certain theological intention, and shapes the material at his disposal to fulfil it.

These human processes do not of themselves determine the question of truth or of inspiration, but they increase the recognition that whatever happens in the writing of Scripture, it is not a mechanical process of divine dictation. Comparisons with other forms of ancient writing show similar tendencies (like the attribution of authorship to heroes of the past, *eg* Moses, when the substance of the material appears incompatible with that on grounds of dating and content.)

The assumption that the methods of scientific-historical research apply as fruitfully to Scripture as to other texts has yielded huge insights into the dynamic interaction between community and context and the sense of God’s presence and working. (It should also be said that the assumptions of the new critics were themselves in turn open to debate).

They have also raised subsequent theological questions. For if Scripture is as human a collection of documents as it seems to be, at all levels from textual transmission and mistransmission to theological debate, wherein lies its specialness, its uniqueness, its normative relation to faith and life?

The Enlightenment was, on the whole, hostile to authoritarian dogma, seeing that as the source of barbarity and infantile superstition. It had, across many national frontiers, a shared confidence in the power of reason, both at the intellectual level (what counts as evidence? what counts as a good argument?) and at the moral level (the basic sanity of human beings on matters of co-existence). David Hume, the main Scottish philosopher of the Enlightenment, was clear that this was not just a matter of abstract rational thought. “Reason is, and ever ought to be,” he wrote, “the slave of passion.” Motivation came from feeling, but these were “sane” and educable feelings, the feelings of civilised people.

From this period we can date the beginnings of characteristically “modern” Western society, and its exports via colonialism to other parts of the world; the sense of the individual and his/her rights; the reduction in the power of the theocratic state (where a dominant religious group could dictate with legal sanctions how people lived, worshipped and educated their children); the conviction that minorities deserve protection unless they are threatening the life, freedom or well-being of others; the right to “free-thinking”.

Although Scotland continued to be in many obvious ways a Reformed country, it also shared with the rest of Western Europe the beginnings of industrialisation and secularisation. The educated bourgeoisie, which was deeply influenced by the climate of Enlightenment thinking and feeling, came to take it pretty much for granted that natural reason and empirical scientific investigation were the authentic ways to knowledge, and that appeals to revelation or authority were self-contradictory or unverifiable. The extension of travel to other cultures made people more widely aware of other religious traditions and the view that religious belief was influenced, if not determined, by social, cultural and psychological factors began to be explored.

By the end of the eighteenth century, “the Age of Reason” as it has been called, there was a reaction against what many felt was a rather sterile rationalism. In the general culture, the Romantic Movement was marked by a huge counter-emphasis on experience and feeling; and within theology the impact of Methodism with its appeal to the individual heart and the intense experience of personal conversion had a lasting impact on the style of Protestant evangelical life.

The climate of modernity was then characterised on the whole by a positive and confident view of the powers of science, and an optimistic view of historical progress where human beings, given proper education, were capable of creating a humane and enlightened society.

This was very unlike the spirit and anthropology of Protestant Orthodoxy and various theological battles raged in the Churches between “Moderates” and Evangelicals, and between biblical scholars and systematic theologians. The heart of this debate in some ways focused on the Gospel traditions, and questions of how much the sayings and actions of Jesus in the four gospels were what we would call historically verified and reliable sources of information. It is clear from the history (and the art) of different societies and places that all communities tend to project on to Jesus aspects of their own society, and that was clearly true of Enlightenment Modernism as well as of earlier periods. These debates continued in developed form throughout the nineteenth century, surfacing in classic debates, as in the McLeod Campbell and Robertson Smith cases in Scotland and the controversies surrounding Catholic Modernism elsewhere.

#### 4.5 Truth and Interpretation

All these developments raise the important issue of different facets of truth in Scripture. They have not merely theoretical but practical consequences for the Church.

Part of the Church’s task is to help readers to distinguish between different types of truth – to acknowledge that poetry may be as enlightening as prose. Strictly factual biographies of Hamlet or Macbeth would almost certainly be less enlightening than what Shakespeare made of them; but if we have only Shakespeare’s version there is no way to construct a biography in our usual understanding of that genre.

Are there dangers in acknowledging that any parts of Scripture may be imaginative or poetic - dangers of subjectivity, selectivism, and at worst the scaling down of mystery and miracle to the level of our own understanding? The question of different facets of truth is, however, clearly raised in the Scriptures themselves. A good instance is in the different records of the death of Jesus.

Mark, whose gospel is almost certainly the earliest, tells us that when Jesus died “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood there in front of Jesus [heard his cry and] saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God’.” (Mark 15:38,39)

We know why that curtain was significant. For centuries it had separated off the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, from Jewish worshippers. The space behind it was penetrated only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, by the High Priest. Its tearing at the moment of Christ’s death is evocative of much that the early Church came soon to believe about the atoning death of Christ, about his priesthood and his opening of the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. These are motifs that we find spelled out more fully in the later Letter to the Hebrews (9:24; 10:14,19):

*Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence ... by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy .... Therefore, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith ....*

Did the Church believe these things about Jesus because the temple curtain had been supernaturally torn in two at his death? Or does that tearing of the curtain represent and symbolise what the Church believed? No one can give a categorical answer, but in many ways the incident is more telling and more convincing when it is seen as poetry than when it is seen as fact. If it is fact, then Christian belief about Jesus is based partly on a dramatic miracle - on exactly the kind of “sign” that he had warned his public not to seek - and only the centurion arrived at the truth through faith and through observation of Christ. Moreover, if the Saviour’s dying had been marked by such an unmistakable affirmation as the destruction of the curtain that screened off the Holy of Holies, this would surely have compelled the Jewish Establishment to concede that something momentous had happened. A God who suddenly coerces people into faith in this way is inconsistent with the Gospel picture of a God who encourages people to ask questions and to make their own leap of faith.

The likelihood that we are dealing here with theological poetry rather than historical prose is reinforced when we read Matthew’s extended account. Matthew says (27:50-54):

*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those*

*with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'*

In this version, divine power and human fear have become the ground of the centurion's faith. If Christ's death was historically marked by such a massive cosmic drum roll as an earthquake (of which, according to Matthew, there was a recurrence on Easter morning) and bodies emerging from tombs and going walkabout, it would have been difficult for the "many" who saw them to do other than believe. Seen as poetic theology though, this account also is powerfully symbolic: symbolic of the cosmic significance of Calvary and of the efficacy of Christ's death - symbolic of what is expressed in the Creed by Jesus' descent into hell.

Luke opens up yet another perspective, linking the rending of the temple curtain with the darkness mentioned earlier by both the other Synoptic writers. "Darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'. When he had said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:44-46). The sequence here has been subtly altered. It is not Jesus' death that effects the tearing of the curtain and allows humanity to enter the Holy of Holies. Christ's redemptive voyage into the territory of godlessness has huge, hopeful, implications for the people in every generation who inhabit that territory of godlessness. Christ has reached out to them and shared their aloneness, whether they are aware of it or not.

So what are we to say "happened" when Christ died? If truth means nothing to us other than historical accuracy, these three descriptions of the most important event in world history may seem to be confusing and inconsistent. There is no point in asking questions such as "Which evangelist is telling the truth?" No one can have been at Calvary and in the Temple at the same time.

If, though, we can recognise that first century evangelists operated within different parameters from twentieth century biographers, and if we can accept that the central core of these accounts is the redemptive death of Jesus, then each account will let in its own shafts of light and open up new ways to understand the Saviour's dying. Each will find corroboration elsewhere in the Scriptures. Each will be borne out in the faith of the Church. The relevant question then is not "Which account is true?", but "What truth does each account have to teach us?"

#### **4.6 Postmodernism**

Many students of contemporary culture judge that we have now come to a significant shift from the dominant axioms of modernity. The name suggested for this new stage is "post-modernity". It is characterised by a revision of the Enlightenment confidence about universal rationality, moral consensus and optimism. Given the history of the twentieth century, of global conflict, the atrocities of the Holocaust and the nightmares of the nuclear age of weaponry, there is a more sombre picture of the human capacity for self-deception and even of malice.

The impact this has had on literary studies - including biblical ones - has been dramatic. There is a widespread recognition that every text has a "sub-text", that is to say that it represents a vantage point at which the writer or speaker has, so to speak, vested interests in the outcome. Usually this is understood to be connected with the conscious or unconscious manipulation of language for the sake of power. The aim of critical reading is then to "deconstruct", to clarify what the sub-text is, so as to make manifest what is hidden sometimes both to the user and to the person addressed. Classic examples of this within twentieth century theology come, for example, in the work of liberation theologians and of feminists, who argue that most "standard" theology expresses the vested interests and projections of rich/Western/male/ intellectuals. The neutral Cartesian "method of doubt" has hardened into what is sometimes called a "hermeneutic of distrust".

The impact of this upon biblical scholarship has been significant. Biblical writings are liable to be scrutinised for traces of their socio-political context, and seen less and less as "timeless", "placeless" writings. Any community which reads a text is asked to recognise the multiplicity of readings, including its own one, which are inescapably part of the process of interpretation. In a way, it is another means of expressing the radical pervasiveness of sin as human partiality, that many no longer believe there is a cosmic vantage point from which human beings share the truth as God sees it. All our accounts of God's truth are our accounts.

This recognition can provoke diverse responses in the faith community. On the one hand, it may lead to panic or dismay at the removal of absolute certainty, and is met in some quarters by a fundamentalist denial of the problems associated with biblical interpretation. On the other hand, it may lead to a word-weariness that no longer expects to find a clear meaning, to an indifference towards the results of interpretation, which are dismissed as relative at best: "And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8).

Modernity and postmodernity alike serve to accentuate the distance - historical and cultural, as well as moral and spiritual - that separates interpreters from the text. This is the humility of biblical interpretation: the acknowledgement that we see from afar, only in part. Yet we *do* see. That, at least, is our belief as we approach the Bible in the confidence that its human words communicate God's Word despite historical distance, despite our own pride and prejudice, thanks to the Spirit who inspired its authors and illumines its readers. There is, therefore, an alternative between interpretative dogmatism and interpretative scepticism. It is the conviction of

faith - the chastened assurance that we are able to encounter, beyond criticism and often *through* criticism, the intentions of the biblical authors, rather than our own inventions only.

As we recognise the fragmentariness of our own perceptions in the global village which everyone inhabits as we approach a new millennium, it should provide an incentive for the people of God from every culture to meet and share their insights into the meaning and significance of Scripture. How God speaks to us through Scripture - in community, in history, in culture - is not just a theoretical question, but an invitation to join with other pilgrims on a journey of discovery, in which we of our time have as much need to participate as the generations of the past.

The ultimate service of postmodernity to the Church may be to remind us of the need to “lift up every voice”. The plurality of approaches, concerns and interests that readers bring to their study of the Bible need not result in an interpretative free-for-all, but rather in an attempt to recover a genuinely Pentecostal diversity. It may well be that we need many Christian communities (even denominations), representing different times, places and peoples, to articulate the full meaning of the Word of God for the present. Biblical interpretation in the Church today need not succumb to the relativistic spirit of the age, but instead pursue the plural unity that characterises life in the Holy Spirit.

## 5. THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH TODAY

### 5.1 Renewal and Change

The Bible was a building which people walked in and out of each day and where they felt at home. One day, however, some learned gentlemen arrived who had heard of the beauty and antiquity of the building. They obtained permission to do research, and made many discoveries of which the people knew nothing. As the building became more famous and more well-known over the whole world these people felt less and less at home. The building became a working place for the academics and the people began to forget it. The main door was overgrown with weeds and could no longer be found. Only the side door was used from time to time. After a while, however, an old beggar, searching for shelter, discovered the main entrance quite by accident. He entered the building and was so surprised by what he saw that he told his friends of his discovery. The people all converged upon the building, recognised it as their home and began, without paying any entrance fee, to celebrate, for days and nights.<sup>3</sup>

Although told in a different context, this story may be found to have relevance for the Scottish situation, both in the warning it contains and in the encouragement it offers. Scholarship *can* distance the Bible from the general membership of the Church, especially when it alone decides which questions to put to the text. On the other hand, in situations where the majority have become estranged from the Bible, new circumstances can return Scripture to its rightful place. In the Latin American context described, peasant communities have found in Scripture a new understanding of, as well as hope in the face of, the circumstances in which they are forced to live. What is more, they have found that “special tools” are not required and that their own prayer and experience of life has been sufficient to give them access to Scripture and to undertake the process of interpretation.

There is widespread concern about the level of biblical literacy today, both inside and outwith the membership of the Church. The tradition in which we stand gave the Bible a prominent place in both domestic and public life and at certain periods much of it was known by heart by greatest and least. Even where in the fairly recent past most people had at least a “working knowledge” of the main narratives and personalities of Scripture, today knowledge seems far sketchier. Yet there remains much interest in it on the part of the general public, as proven by the sales of the *Glasgow Bible* and by the reissue by Oxford University Press of a “secular Bible”, an edition promoted as a “good read” rather than as a religious text. Further, at the time of writing, the Whitbread Novel Award has been won by a reworking of the Temptation narrative (by a self-confessed atheist), and the several recent radical re-examinations of central New Testament events by such literary figures as Norman Mailer and A N Wilson have kept the Bible in the news. It would seem then that in society at large, the fascination with the Bible is not less than before, although it may take different forms.

Within the Church itself, it is possible to see signs of a new attention being paid to Scripture. Church traditions which have seemed to value the Sacraments more highly now insist on a full diet of Scripture in worship, serving as reminder, affirmation and encouragement to those in the Reformed tradition who have accorded the Bible a central place throughout, but who now may feel “faint but pursuing”. Indeed the form of the renewal is in part ecumenical. The Revised Common Lectionary, for example (reprinted, with “local” adaptations in *Common Order* 1994), is shared by “mainstream” denominations in all parts of the English-speaking world. In it, Churches have combined to try to enable Scripture to “speak for itself” and to save it from being read selectively in accord with favourite themes or preferred theological approaches. To achieve this, it

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Mesters: “The Use of the Bible in Basic Christian Communities” in S Torres and J Eagleson (eds): *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), pp 197-210.

offers a three-year cycle of Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel readings for each Sunday, together with a Psalm, with the additional result of enabling parts of Scripture to come into encounter with other parts so that the Word of God is heard in all its fullness.

Examples of the renewal of Scripture in the Church are found also in the life of the individual Christian. The daily readings and notes of such bodies as the Scripture Union and the International Bible Reading Association are used by many. House churches, Bible Study groups, and worship preparation groups give many a sustained experience of Scripture. The Lent Groups each year bring people of all churches together round a six week theme as they prepare together to celebrate Easter. A particularly interesting development is one which has emerged as part of the contemporary search for new patterns of personal devotion. In that context there is an increasing interest by many in our tradition in "Ignatian Spirituality" by which passages of Scripture, "prescribed" by a mentor or spiritual director, are not so much studied in a detached way, but lived through imaginatively in prayer and meditation.

## **5.2 The Appeal to the Senses**

The renewal of Scripture in the Church is found also in another direction. The Panel on Doctrine, in its 1973 Report to the General Assembly on the *Reformation Doctrine of the Word of God*, affirmed the importance of non-verbal means of communication as the Church gathered round the Bible, finding that "our inherited conception of the communication of the Word of God has been unduly narrowed". It should be noted that for many centuries, when only a few had access to written texts, the people of the Church knew their Bibles through story, depiction (eg stained glass) and drama. Mind and senses together brought Scripture to life in the community of faith.

In recent centuries such an approach was seen, in our own tradition, to contain danger. What led Reformers to evict effigies, and to allow the ornate accompaniments to worship to fall into disuse or silence, was not philistinism so much as the fear that such things were a shortcut to superstition. For a time the Church distrusted what could not be explained, and appealed urgently to the intellect to help recover the full force and flavour of the Gospel. As the Report of the Church and Nation Committee to the General Assembly of 1996, *Faith and the Arts*, argued:

We are sensual beings. We have bodily senses - sight, sound, touch, taste, smell; and these are the very same senses which are engaged in the making and experience of art. God's gift of sensuality, and the incarnation of Christ as a sensual being, is an affirmation of physicality; our ability to appreciate art is a valuable corrective to the church's tendency sometimes to be suspicious of "the things of the flesh".

To draw also upon the senses is both to enable an appropriate response to parts of the Bible in which there is the hand of the creative artist, as well as to allow Scripture to address and nourish the whole person. It is important that the community of faith approach its foundation document with imagination - not the imagination that makes things up, but the creativity which allows readers fully to receive the Word of Life. The senses are freed to savour the events Scripture captures. Senses, and the forms of expression they give rise to, and the imagination which enrich them, have the power, in the words of Hildegard of Bingen (the 900th anniversary of whose birth is marked this year), to "render hearts moist" and "usher in the Holy Spirit".

Perhaps this is a point in the Church's history when we need to "come to our senses" again, and many have sought the modern equivalent of the mediaeval mystery plays and the use of dramatic dialogue, not to mention other ways of depicting the events and themes of the Bible such as banners, tapestries and murals. One example is the recovery of the *story*. In the wider world, the role of narrative is being increasingly appreciated, even by philosophers and theologians. Also, as in less literate times, stories have their place and currency today, whether of a fairy tale princess or a fallen president or a miracle cure. Interpreters of all kinds have come to appreciate that language has non-cognitive functions as well as the ability to impart information. Indeed stories can engage the whole person in ways that information alone does not. It is in this context that many are exploring ways of releasing the power of the biblical narrative and of helping people reach in imagination inside the story to become part of it, and thus to take the Gospel to heart.

## **5.3 Implications for Interpretation**

How the Bible is actually used by the Church community and by individual Christians adds its own dimension to the matter of interpretation. Returning to questions of interpretation in the context of *praxis* will at one and the same time "test" the findings of previous sections of the Report and perhaps even enable them to be fleshed out. In the remainder of this part of the Report is explored, first, matters of interpretation relating to the use of the Bible in worship, followed by the implications for interpretation of approaches to Scripture where the imagination has a place. Since, as well as its use in worship and in personal devotion, the Bible is seen as a major resource in deciding questions of ethics and Christian behaviour, the section ends with a brief reflection on the role of Scripture in moral reasoning.

### **5.3.1 Worship and Interpretation**



Word and Sacrament shape Christian worship. For its part, the Word not only gives the community words to speak and to sing but gives it its direction and its dynamic. In the hearing of Scripture is recalled the tradition which has moulded and continually remoulds us, an event which transforms a “mere” gathering of people into an encounter with the living God, and which throws the focus on the hope and promise of the Kingdom.

It is stating the obvious to say that the Bible is a book, but the very form in which we have it today can cause us to overlook an important part of its character. Books are most often read by people on their own. They may also be studied, quarried for ideas and information. The Bible is, but is also more than, a book of this kind. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were formed principally for public use as the community gathered for worship, hearing again and again the foundation stories, receiving encouragement and correction from mentors like St Paul, echoing the canticles and the psalms, finding words for prayer.

There is a sense in which worship is more than the *occasion* for the public reading of the Bible. Because of its nature, worship also *shapes* our hearing of Scripture. The interaction, on various levels and in various directions, which is characteristic of worship can cause an enriched interaction with Scripture. Here, the penitential moment, the release of forgiveness, the wrestling in intercession, the self-giving, the going forth in service and mission - all are enlightened by Scripture but at the same time they sharpen our approach to Scripture.

Above all, public worship is the place where the Word is proclaimed. The Panel’s Report *The Reformation Doctrine of the Word of God* (1973), already cited, recalls the Second Helvetic Confession:

*The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the Church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful, and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven. [The Report further commented:] For the Reformers Scripture and preaching ... belong together. Scripture is the witness of the prophets and apostles; preaching is the interpretation and passing on of this witness. In Scripture as well as in preaching Christ Himself is present, speaks and communicates Himself to men [sic], but he does this through the Holy Spirit.*

Of course this quality of hearing of the Word will be present according as the “surrounding” worship resonates with rather than represses the reading and preaching of the Word. The “raw materials” of Scripture are the real world of human endeavour and failure, of deeply drawn feelings and aspirations, and of the vivid presence of the divine in the midst. Worship which does not make room for the “real world”, which encourages people to be other than they really are for the purposes of being in church, or worship whose materials and conduct never rise above the commonplace, will not offer a “way in” for the comfort and challenge of Scripture. We have to be the vulnerable, seeking, exulting people that we are before we can match the experience and longing of those who people the pages of the Bible, enter into their “stories”, and with them feel the grace of God suffusing our lives.

The preaching of the Word, too, has to be such that Scripture is released amongst the gathered people. The preacher’s prayer and preparation must ensure that it is the real Bible that is encountered and a real world for which the Word is declared, not some “sermonic world, fuelled by sermonic illustrations but not impinging dynamically on the world the people know”.<sup>4</sup> The preacher sees the task as enabling the Gospel to be heard with new freshness and challenge, as when the old words took on new sense and significance for James and the early Church in the controversy over the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-18), or for the crowd in the synagogue when they knew Scripture fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4:20), or for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus whose “hearts burned within them” (Luke 24:32).

It is in this connection that there is most controversy in the matter of interpretation. It is commonly observed that there is often a gap between what is discovered in the biblical studies classroom and what is subsequently heard from the pulpit. Preachers sometimes feel that they are protecting their hearers, whose faith may be shaken by what is commonplace in the colleges. They feel that the suggestion that something is not what it seems will open the floodgates to a fatal loss of faith. While there may be some in respect of whom this sensitivity is justified, there are many others who, in this modern climate, have long been asking questions which do not receive an answer, or who have been made to feel that their questioning is dangerous and wrong, or who feel patronised to the point of (literally) no return.

Perhaps any anxiety about a critical approach to Scripture in preaching is helped by the awareness that this is always allied to other aspects of the preaching task. It is used in many partnerships: with the intellect to address questions people have about the “truth” of the account; with the imagination to gain access to the circumstance of an event or a prophecy or a passage of teaching; with the preacher’s pastoral knowledge to identify consonances between present need and the Gospel promise; with skill in using words which enables people to receive as they are ready and not feel assaulted; with spiritual insight which allows the hearer to be partner in a search not the unwilling recipient of certain information; with love that deals gently with those who wait upon the preacher’s words. While the preacher ought surely to draw gratefully on all the tools of the study

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<sup>4</sup> Forrester, McDonald and Tellini: *Encounter with God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) 1983, p 77.

to bring Scripture alive, in the end what the sermon sets out to do is not argue people into a position but to affirm them on a journey and show the next step. Further, the problems with which scholars wrestle, although properly present, are less to the fore as we experience more the unity of Scripture as it mediates the challenge and call of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit whom we invoke and recognise before we read and preach, hear and receive. In the end, good preaching leaves people not with information but with a restored and deepened relationship, as the sermon, like the sacrament, in its own way “makes Christ present”.

### 5.3.2 Imagination and interpretation

To approach Scripture in ways that draw fully upon the imagination and the senses also has implications for interpretation. By “imagination” is meant the capacity to look past what immediately presents itself to what is beyond, to see the wood while appreciating every tree. Imagination makes connections, even ones which are not “obvious”, and can see different kinds of data as forming a meaningful whole. Imagination carries beyond facts to meaning, can penetrate to the essence. The use of the word “imagination” in the context of the interpretation of Scripture is far from suggesting that there is a place for unbridled fancy. The imagination of which we speak is one which is partnered by sense and discrimination, which is “rule-governed”, disciplined in fact by the divine imagination of Scripture itself.

Partner to the imagination is *performance*. In the case of a play or a symphony, the text or the score has the function of preserving an event for the purpose of realising or repeating that event. The play is only fully realised as the players interact with each other and as this is received by the audience, when its world is brought to bear on our world. A symphony exists only as it is heard through the medium of sound, produced not only in faithful reproduction of the score but in the quality of the players’ listening to each other. Conductors may preside over quite different “readings” of a score, so that a person might hear a well-known work as she has “never heard it before”. A particular approach to a production or performance may combine with the circumstances in which it is played to cause a work to be eloquent in a particular way perhaps not originally intended - a “tract for the times”.

In performance is revealed the true unity and character of a work. Even in variety of interpretation, the text is not changed. The question may be asked, Who is hearing the work in the way it was meant to be heard? Should the Messiah be heard only in the form of the original Dublin performance with small forces, or only as sung by a mighty North of England choral society? Might not a composer, having at his/her disposal the advanced instruments of our day, hail a modern performance as the most authentic yet? Nevertheless, what the freedom of performance does not allow is one that is inauthentic. The performer struggles with the text, to understand the intention behind it, to try to do justice to what was in the writer’s or composer’s mind.

The concept of performance, and the function of the creative imagination in its service, may assist us in the matter of the interpretation of Scripture, both in the understanding of the relationship between text and significance, but also in reminding of the enrichment that comes from the interplay of critical knowledge of the original combined with personal creativity and the times and circumstances of those who appeal to Scripture. On the one hand, our imaginations provide for two “real” worlds to meet and overlap. As the world of the Bible is brought to bear on our world, we learn further how to interpret our world by means of biblical categories, and recognise even here the presence and promise of the Gospel, and become able to say: “I have been crucified with Christ”. On the other hand, the Church “performs” the Gospel before the world, searching the text, vulnerable to the needs of the times, its members listening in love to each other.

### 5.3.3 Bible, theology and ethics

The metaphor of performance leads, finally, to a consideration of the role of the Bible in “doing theology” and moral reasoning. One aspect of the theologian’s task is to evaluate the life and language of the Church in order to determine not only whether they are intelligible to our contemporaries, but, just as importantly, to judge whether they are “according to the Scriptures”. For example, do our lives reflect the moral vision of the New Testament? Theology is the Church’s self-critical assessment of her putative interpretations and performances of the Word of God. Theology, in other words, evaluates our attempts to “embody” the Word of God in thought, word and deed. The critical task of theology is to determine whether our formulations, and our performances, correspond to the Word of God contained in Scripture. The Bible plays a crucial role, then, both in formulating and in examining Christian doctrine and Christian morals, for it is the only authoritative witness to the Word of God available to the Church today.

As the supreme rule for the Church’s faith and life, Scripture may be likened to the primary “script” that Christians are called, individually and corporately, to play out upon the world stage. The Bible, especially when “learned by heart” - that is, when imaginatively appropriated and “indwelt” - has the capacity to cultivate Christian wisdom and to enhance life. Biblical illiteracy is hazardous to our spiritual health. Christian interpretations of Scripture should be both creative *and* faithful, both free *and* obedient. They should respond to the contemporary context, yes, but in ways that are canonical. What one says about God, what one does in the name of God, must be decisively informed by the biblical portrayal of God and by the testimony of the prophets and apostles.

The Bible should be therefore at the centre of the Church's thinking and of its life - not as the object but as the norm of its worship and witness. Christians are called to respond to the Word of God with all their hearts, minds and strength of their hands. Theology and ethics are perhaps best viewed as the disciplines that examine the twin forms of Christian witness to the Word of God - in language (doctrine) and in life (action). These disciplines are indispensable for the vocation of the Church: to render the Word of God back to God - in verbal formulations, in ways of living - to the glory of God. The Scriptures suggest concrete shapes of Christian following, shapes of Christian freedom, in realms of life and thought. Disciples that are free and faithful "under the Word" will have an effective witness, in doctrine and in deed. Scripture is thus the touchstone for the integrity of contemporary Christian discipleship. In this sense, then, the Bible is a "book of discipline". Yet it is precisely through the discipline of thinking and living "according to the Scriptures" that Christians achieve both authentic witness and genuine freedom.

#### **5.3.4 A note on Theonomy**

The Panel promised to say something in the context of this report on the "theonomy" movement. This is a view of the use of the Bible which is centred in the Institute for Christian Economics, Tyler, Texas, and is connected with the names of Greg Bahnsen and Gary North. Its views have been criticised by many conservative evangelicals as being much too extreme. Theonomy has to do with the continuing validity for Church and society of all Old Testament legal prescriptions in their literal form, and not just the familiar Ten Commandments. It is bound up with recent forms of opposition to the jurisdiction of federal government.

Bahnsen gives "A Brief Summary of Theonomy" in his *No Other Standard* (Texas, 1991), pp 9-11:

*Any conception of the role of civil government that claims to be distinctively "Christian" must be explicitly justified by the teaching of God's revealed Word. Anything else reflects what the unbelieving world in rebellion against God may imagine on its own. If we are to be Christ's disciples, even in the political realm, it is prerequisite that we abide in his liberating Word (John 8:31) .... Theonomists repudiate the sacred/secular dichotomy of life, which is the effect of certain extra-scriptural, systematic conceptions of Biblical authority which have recently infected the Reformed community .... The civil precepts of the Old Testament are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals.*

The Old Testament penal codes are seen in their entirety as God's instrument for use by the covenant community. They are also applicable among "the Gentiles", who are part of God's created order. The code itself is inflexible, but there may be some variations on a case by case basis, though not in such matters as witchcraft and sexual perversion. Bahnsen concludes that the alternative is "just one human opinion among others". "The critics of theonomy would thus, in principle, undermine the civil order of society and leave us with a 'Beast' as our government. Think about it" (ibid. p 264).

The "theonomy" issue has generated a literature of debate among some Church groups, largely but not exclusively in Texas. It seems to us to be very far indeed from the understanding of the grace and the generosity of God which has long characterised the Church of Scotland's understanding of the Gospel.

## **6. SOME GUIDELINES FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

### **6.1 The Guidelines**

#### **I. Be attentive**

Each of these four guidelines concerns the nature of the biblical text as a literary work.

1. *Determine what kind of passage you are reading and read to gain a sense of the whole.*

The Bible is composed of many kinds of books (eg history, apocalyptic, prophecy, parable, poetry). To understand a passage correctly, read it in the light of the whole book in which it occurs. The literary context of the whole book helps one see how to take particular passages. It is most important that readers gain literary competence, that is, a familiarity with how different kinds of literature make sense.

2. *Be aware that different kinds of texts make different kinds of claims.*

The truth of a poem (or a prophecy, or a parable) cannot be measured with the same standards as scientific proof. The biblical authors often aim at a kind of precision other than that which readers of today's newspapers have come to expect. The truth question can be asked only after one decides what kind of text is being read and, therefore, what kind of a claim is being made.

3. *Locate the passage in the overall story-line of Scripture.*

Is a given passage looking forward to Christ or looking back? How are particular episodes related to the central narrative of creation and salvation? Think “horizontally”: keep the broader history of salvation in mind.

4. *Be aware of how one text may allude to, repeat, fulfil or modify another.*

Many passages in the Bible refer, sometimes explicitly sometimes implicitly, to other portions of Scripture. These “intertextual” connections often generate an enriched meaning (eg John the Baptist, by introducing Jesus as the “Lamb of God”, invokes a wealth of Old Testament imagery with which to understand Jesus’ life, work and death).

## II. Be open

Each of these four guidelines concerns the role of context: one’s contemporary context, the original context, the diverse contexts of interpretation in Church history and, finally, the canonical context.

5. *Acknowledge your prejudices and presuppositions.*

Be honest about the prior commitments you bring to the text (eg about God, about the good, about what is possible or impossible, about the relation between men and women, etc) and prepare to have them challenged, not confirmed.

6. *Determine what the authors could have meant in the original context.*

Be appropriately critical: be aware of the limited range of what words and concepts could have meant in the historical and cultural context of the author. Avoid anachronistic interpretations.

7. *Become familiar with the history of biblical interpretation.*

Be appropriately ecumenical: consider how other Christians - the Fathers, the Reformers, Christians from other denominations, other cultures and other ages - read a passage.

8. *Relate difficult passages to simpler ones.*

The overall purpose of the canon is to direct readers to the central message of God’s revelation and redemption in Jesus Christ. This central theme of God’s self-communication to Israel, Church and world should therefore never be too far removed from the interpreter’s view.

## III. Be obedient

Each of these four guidelines concerns the “fusion” of biblical text and contemporary context, of biblical canon and the community of faith.

9. *Read in the believing community.*

In principle, there are many purposes for reading the Bible. In practice, Christians read Scripture in order to hear the Word of God. The *Articles Declaratory* affirm Scripture as the supreme rule for the faith and life of the Church. “Faith” and “life” (eg obedience) are the requirements for correct interpretation too. Interpreters must be willing to put themselves “under” the text.

10. *Distinguish the descriptive from the prescriptive.*

Not all biblical stories describe practices that were intended to be normative for the Church today (eg ritual sacrifice). Bring a text’s intended meaning to bear on your situation today by distinguishing between the principle and the specific cultural application.

11. *Prayerfully perform the Scriptures.*

The message of the Scriptures is a dead letter unless there is some uptake on the part of the interpreter. Interpreters of the Bible have a responsibility not to lose the message and a freedom to perform it as the Spirit prompts (though always so as to extend the intended meaning).

12. *Use Scripture to form, inform and reform your heart, mind and imagination.*

Biblical interpretation entails not only reading but a certain kind of action in response to what is read. Doing the Word and following the Word are the way Christians practise the wisdom, justice and righteousness of God.

## 6.2 The Guidelines in Practice

To assist further consideration of the questions raised in this Report, and in particular of the suggested Guidelines (6.1), a “worked example” is now offered. While it would have been both possible and useful to study one particular passage, it was decided that to choose the other option of beginning from a theme - because it would necessitate reference to several passages from different parts of the Bible and in different literary forms - would provide a more comprehensive survey of the ways the Guidelines might be applied. In what follows, the numerical references in square brackets are to the relevant Guideline. The theme chosen was that of **poverty**, a condition of life for millions, many of them Christians, and for which no effective solution seems to have emerged.

### 6.2.1 Right and wrong approaches

A first requirement is to acknowledge presuppositions we bring to the Bible [5]. This can have the effect of directing us to a particular passage and/or a particular interpretation which “suits us best”. Some, for example, will justify their seeking after wealth by citing the parable of the Good Samaritan, arguing that if the Samaritan had not had enough, he would not have been able to help so effectively and thoroughly. However, this parable is recorded as being in answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” and would be taken to suggest that a quite unlikely person can nevertheless be a neighbour to us in the truest sense [1]. Again, our attitude to poverty may be that “the poor are always with us” (a paraphrase of Matthew 26:11), that this is the “status quo” and there is little hope of change. In that account of the woman and the ointment, however, Jesus was not offering a social prediction, but rebuking the somewhat smug objection of some of Jesus’ companions when an “unworthy” woman had stolen the limelight [6]. Jesus implies that it is easy to talk about giving to “the poor” when it suits us - and a little patronising.

Again, we may avoid or gloss over a passage because we have not been willing to risk what it might mean, another version of bringing our own prejudices - perhaps guilt in this case - to bear. An example could be Jesus’ call to the young man to “sell all and give to the poor”. St Francis interpreted this literally (on behalf also of his family!) - although he went on to live a life which is one of the great resources of Christian tradition. This encounter is included in all the first three gospels, but only Luke actually says “sell *all*”. The others - and Luke himself in another more general saying - report it as “Sell *what you have*”. All, however, balance the instruction with the hoped for outcome - that “you will have treasure in heaven”. The message is the danger inherent in possessing too much; it makes you blind to “real value”, distracts from the development of the spiritual life. Such a passage needs to be compared with other accounts of the same incident [4] as well as with the Gospel as a whole [8].

One of our greatest difficulties in considering the matter of poverty is the need to prioritise. *We* cannot solve a problem so complex on our own. Our natural inclination is to fulfil our nearest and most pressing responsibilities and to see the wider problem as beyond our remit. We may then welcome a passage like Deuteronomy 15:1-3 which shows how we should release from debt members of our immediate family but not the “foreigner”. Yet it may be that what we are doing is indulging those nearest to us to their own detriment and overlooking genuine need further afield to which a response from us would be appropriate. In this case, we need to be aware of the “local” reference of this book of “house rules” for a particular people [1] - but which nevertheless offers challenge and direction far more widely when, as part of the “old covenant”, it is taken along with the “new covenant” which offers hope of salvation not just to one people but to all peoples through the gospel of Jesus Christ [3]. Indeed, even in its own immediate context this passage is not able to justify any such restricted view as has been cited, since one of the things most characteristic of the book of Deuteronomy as a whole is its genuine concern for the alien.

Finally, in approaching Scripture we may go directly to the most familiar passages, which now come with their own almost unavoidable interpretation because of the way, at various stages of history, other Christians have read them [7]. The account of the Infancy narrative in Luke [4] offers details (“swaddling clothes”, the manger behind the inn) which have led people to conclude (along with passages like “foxes have holes ... but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head”) that Jesus was born in and continued in poverty. Taking the narrative of the gospels as a whole [3] this seems unlikely, but it has served to romanticise poverty, or even to a certain extent to “domesticate” it, so that the edge is removed.

### 6.2.2 Putting ourselves “under” the text

Yet even as we prepare to let the Bible address us we are in danger, for already we are making our own choice of passages which seem to be relevant. However, we must begin somewhere. At least we may choose widely and allow the passages to address each other [4] as well as ourselves. Again, we must be careful not to take as “last word” any one passage, or even a group of passages, but “hear” them against the great affirmations of the Gospel [3] so that no one “voice” in the harmony, even though correct, overbalances the others by being distorted or raucous.

Further we are to read as people who are well informed about the facts of the situation from which we approach the Bible; if our understanding of the issue is distorted, this may infect our hearing of Scripture [cf 5]. In addition to reading as members of an intelligent and informed community, we read above all as members of a *believing* community, where a history of deepening understanding as well as wrong turnings, plus our

contemporary engagement in prayer, discussion, preaching and practice, offers a resonant space for Scripture to be heard at its sharpest and clearest [9].

Finally, we read the chosen passages - and may be led to others - against the reservoir of a life that struggles or soars in prayer [11]. In this good relationship with God we recognise more clearly what is God's truth for us, and are able not only to receive it with less fear but also to allow it to inform our practice, for the life of prayer stirs not only souls but limbs [12].

### 6.3 "Chapter and Verse"

It is not intended now to offer a detailed study of certain texts, but to start further back at the point of the initial approach to Scripture. Are we to look in a Concordance under "the poor", or do we bring our wider knowledge of Scripture into touch with our knowledge and concern about the issue? The latter approach is the one employed here, allowing one passage to lead to another. What follows may enable any one passage to provide the focus for a single study, or it may suggest a possible series of studies, or stimulate personal study and reflection over a period. For convenience, passages are grouped under headings which either represent questions we ask of Scripture or challenges the Bible makes to us. The Reports of the Church and Nation Committee to the General Assemblies of 1996 and 1997 were of great assistance in preparing this example. Further, although poverty is global, it is easy to forget that it is part of the life of many in our own country and our own communities; for this reason, some "echoes" from Scotland are placed in boxes at appropriate points.

#### 6.3.1 Why raise the issue?

The story of Dives and Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**) contains the challenge to be aware of and accept responsibility for those who suffer from poverty. It addresses those who are bewildered by the number of "good causes" one is asked to respond to, and the temptation to opt out by limiting one's responsibility to a narrow group of people, such as one's own family.

#### 6.3.2 Who are the poor?

Passages such as **Exodus 23:10-11**, **Leviticus 25:8ff** - concerning sabbatical and jubilee years - affirm that "poor" people are not a category apart but "ordinary" people living under force of circumstance; a built in correction restores them as equal members of society.

In **Mark 2:15** Jesus is shown as keeping company with "outcasts", affirming them as fully part of society.

In **Galatians 3:28** it is affirmed that there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free ... (but) all (are) one in Christ Jesus", while a similar passage in **Ephesians 2:13-22** speaks of strangers being brought into fellowship.

In a recent survey in Scotland, one low income parent remarked: "Most of all, it's about having your choices taken away from you." These limitations set people apart from their kin. Townsend, *Poverty in the UK*, writes: "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the living conditions and amenities which are customary or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual and family that they are in effect excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities."

#### 6.3.3 The true nature of poverty

In many Old Testament passages (eg **Amos 4:1**, **Isaiah 3:13-15**; **10:1-3**), poverty is closely linked with injustice and oppression. Another example is the prophet Nathan's story of the poor man's lamb in **2 Samuel 12:1-6**.

A "Scottish Declaration on Poverty" has recently been launched (1996), bringing together several bodies, expressing a commitment to "eliminate the structural inequalities in the political, social and economic life of the country" which have led to one in four of all Scottish households currently living in poverty. It comments: "The causes of poverty lie in the political, social and economic structures of society."

#### 6.3.4 Tackling poverty

A very common theme in the Old Testament is that God is active in the world not only in the lives of individuals, but also in the life and development of communities. In the New Testament, the new Israel emerges from the teaching of Jesus and the reflection of the apostles. To put all the emphasis on the individual is at odds with biblical thought and Christian tradition. The implication is that poverty should be tackled, in the end, communally and through the structures of the common life.

The Old Testament offers some very practical approaches. In **Deuteronomy 15:1-11** there is set out the institution of the "sabbatical year" by which at every seventh year debt is cancelled ("there will be no poor among you ... if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God"). Obedience involves lending to the poor sufficient for their need regardless of the nearness to the sabbatical year. There is a reminder here that there are people living in poverty in our own cities, which can be more disturbing and sometimes easier to ignore, not just

in other parts of the world. As regards the latter, many are promoting a scheme called “Jubilee 2000” as a means of tackling the urgent matter of the crippling debt of the poorer nations.

Poverty can only be tackled when people speak with a common voice. In **Matthew 26:11** Jesus seems to be attacking a patronising attitude to “the poor” as the object of good works, which has the effect of isolating or marginalising them. Those who know about poverty are the poor themselves, and they also may know more of the solutions than those who do not themselves experience it. Thus, there is need to work with those in such circumstances. Just as we should approach the problem using the “voice” of the poor, so we approach Scripture with a common voice and a shared urgency.

Behind the pioneering self-help neighbourhood workers scheme set up by the Craigmillar (Edinburgh) Festival Society was the conviction that “the poor know the problems of the poor”. Theirs is the story of a remarkable growing partnership between people, planners and politicians. [*Let the People Sing! - A Story of Craigmillar*, by Helen Crummy, obtainable from the Panel on Doctrine.]

**Hebrews 13:12-13** speaks of Jesus “outside the camp”. We are called to share this abuse. We make people victims - *eg* treat the young house-breaker as though he alone is infected with the greed of consumerist society - but in Christ we are “in solidarity with” the “victims”, because we recognise we are “part of the problem”.

The Scottish Declaration on Poverty says: “The eradication of poverty requires the empowerment and participation of those who are living in poverty.”

### 6.3.5 Poverty and Christian growth

In the story of Jesus’ encounter with the young man **Mark 10:17-31** the intention seems to be that true spiritual growth follows upon the breaking of dependence on having to possess and acquire material goods and security. Here is “what really matters”.

In the account of the Exodus when the fleeing former slaves are given manna in the desert **Exodus 16:15**, the picture is one of a God who provides - but for need, not greed. In our time, one of the greatest pressures is to overspend. **Exodus 20:17** commands, “Thou shalt not covet”.

In **Mark 12:42**, a lesson is drawn by Jesus from the widow's “mite” about true generosity.

### 6.3.6 Poverty and the Kingdom

As far as the Bible is concerned, responding to poverty is not just “an issue” but built into the very promise of the Gospel. In **Luke 4:18** and **Luke 1:46-55** the poor and oppressed are made the subject of the announcement of the Kingdom of God. God could not rule over a community in which many would not know peace and freedom. The Gospels seem to suggest that there was a sense in which this Kingdom was not a new state discontinuous with the present; rather Jesus, for whom this was the burden of his teaching, was “both expectant of the future and demanding in the present” (Bruce Chilton), promising a kingdom “whose focus is irreducibly future and whose implications are pressingly present”.

This expectancy gives power and purpose to the present responsibility of approaching the issue of poverty, not as one thing on a “Christian shopping list”, but as a matter which demands our costliest love and our most agonised prayers.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the Church we are presented with a variety of inherited interpretations of Scripture, which influence us through our participation in an ongoing, varied tradition of worship, scholarship and Christian service. Different strands of our Church of Scotland community will tend to interpret Scripture in different ways, depending on which facets of the tradition have most direct impact on them. We struggle to express the sense that we are a community of faith, sharing the depths of a common Gospel. There is a measure of agreement in essentials, yet diversity may often be a positive gift of God’s grace as we are invited to love God in freedom with all our heart and mind and strength. Both unity and diversity may be gifts of God, or they may be coerced unities and faithless diversities. The ultimate unity of the Church is the unity in Christ which is the gift of the Spirit, a plural unity which may in some measure reflect the self-differentiated mystery of God, Father, Son and Spirit. It is through exploration of different insights in dialogue, respecting and engaging with difference in constructive tension, that the Church as a whole, in Scotland and throughout the world, can move forward into a new phase of expressing discipleship in the coming decades.

Within the Church, the Bible has been interpreted and used in many ways at different times. Distinctive groups, whether denominations or guilds of scholars, have had distinctive interpretations. In the life of communities, the Bible has had consequences for the use of power, authority and influence. There has been a complex interaction between sacred texts and the construction of culture. It is important to learn to respect

difference, to listen to the stranger, not least when the stranger, beyond the self-understanding of the particular group, is God.

God has a future for creation which will include future guidance in the context of Scripture. We should be prepared to move out with God into this future, to have confidence in the promise of the Spirit of Christlikeness. The history of interpretation may appear to us to be very long, and we may see ourselves as moving backwards. But God's future is an exciting and perhaps much more long term perspective. We should not close off options, but wait to hear the Word of God breaking fresh truth for us. God in Jesus Christ is the source of strength for the Christian community, dialogue with all humanity, and solidarity with those who are oppressed. This is the reality of Christlike transformation, to which the Word of God is our pointer and supreme guide. This is the character of the life and the faith to which the Bible invites us.

The Panel on Doctrine itself reflects the range of different traditions and perspectives within the Church of Scotland. We have experienced and gained much benefit from extensive, often heated, discussion and honest disagreement over most of the issues mentioned in this report. We have had majority opinions and minority opinions in different sorts of combinations. We fully accept that one of the best tests of a Christian community is the way it treats its minorities. We do not believe that one view of interpretation is necessarily to be held by all Church members.

We are concerned that the Bible should be at least as accessible to people in our time as in former times. As we struggle in the next century for love, justice and full humanity, we want to see the Bible as a central resource. God who has brought redemption to humanity through Jesus Christ encourages us to fight against powers of evil and domination, and to strive to participate in that liberation which is based in freedom of the children of God. Through the Bible God discloses new meaning to us within our experience of the world, and within the life and service of the Church.

The Bible is a central resource for Christian faith and life; it should be read. Many people find support in their faith from daily private reading of the Bible; it is hoped that these pages will offer some encouragement and guidance on the reading of Scripture. The Bible is a central resource for Christian thought and action; it is through reflection within the framework of the Bible in community that the understanding of God is increased and Christian action in society is shaped. The Bible is a central resource for worship; it is through the Word of God read and proclaimed that faith is nourished and deepened. It is in their response in assent and discipleship that the Christian community is enabled to live the life of the Spirit, sustained by the mystery of Word and Sacrament as the pilgrim people of God.

## **ORDINATION TO THE DIACONATE**

The General Assembly of 1997 passed a deliverance stating:

*Instruct the Panel on Doctrine, in consultation with the Board of Practice and Procedure and the Diaconate Committee, to consider the introduction of ordination to the Diaconate, and to report to the Assembly of 1998.*

Accordingly, the Panel on Doctrine established a Working Party consisting of representatives from the Diaconate Committee as well as the Panel, with a view to inviting representatives from the Board of Practice and Procedure to join the discussions at an appropriate stage.

Early in the Working Party's deliberations it was agreed that, given the fact that the Church of Scotland now has three different categories of persons involved in the courts of the Church (deacons, elders and ministers), and given the fact that elders and ministers are ordained to these offices (and that indeed an Act remains in place enabling the ordination of deacons in the context of a Deacons' Court - see also *Book of Common Order* 1940, p 194), there is, *prima facie*, an anomaly in the current practice of the Church.

It was agreed that a final Report of the Panel should offer to the Church an examination of:

- (a) the nature and meaning of ordination;
- (b) changing factors in the Church and in the world which raise the issue of ordination to the diaconate at this time;
- (c) the distinctive character of the diaconal ministry;
- (d) what the ordination of deacons would mean to the Church in terms of practice.

While the Panel has reached agreement, in the main, on areas (b) and (c) above, there is still much work to be done on areas (a) and (d).

The Panel would want to be clear about the nature and meaning which the Church can properly attach to the word "ordination" before recommending to the Church that the act of ordination be extended, beyond its present



usage, and be associated with entry into the office of the diaconate. To do otherwise would be to attempt to redress the present anomalous situation by a change of practice which had no doctrinal basis.

When the Panel has reached agreement about section (a) above, it will discuss the final section, (d), with the Board of Practice and Procedure, with a view to bringing a Report to the General Assembly of 1999.

*In the name of the Panel*

GEORGE NEWLANDS, *Convener*  
JOHN McPAKE, *Vice-Convener*  
DOUGLAS GALBRAITH, *Secretary*