



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

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The New Hermeneutic

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The season of church conventions will soon be upon us and it appears likely that a considerable part of such floor time as is not devoted to the real business of the Church — budgets, committee reports, elections, and the like — will be spent in debates revolving around the new hermeneutic. (For the benefit of my readers who speak only English, I should explain that “hermeneutics” is Theology-Talk for “principles of interpretation.”) In all my born days, no one has ever accused me of being a theologian — much less a good one. It is therefore possible for me to contribute my little all to these debates without fear of landing in the pages of any respectable theological journal. Of course, my observations are not the result of many years of hard study; they are only the conclusions of an observer who stands by the Way, watching the parade of theologians to the Throne of Grace, asking and finding forgiveness. So now I shall present the hermeneutics of such an observer and my son Stephen, age fourteen.

1. The Bible is the Word of God, speaking in words, in history, in life itself — always directly and unerringly to the hearts of men.

2. What the Bible tells about is always directly and unerringly Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior and King, Desire of Nations, Alpha and Omega. This I learned from Luther.

3. Some parts of the Bible seem to speak of Him more directly than others. This is probably due to the fact that I have let the Spirit of God get too far ahead of me and I have lost the clarity of His voice somewhere along the way. This means that I must listen again, just as the first man whom He addressed listened. For example, when He speaks to Samuel, I must put myself in Samuel’s house, listen with Samuel’s ears, and obey with Samuel’s heart. My ears must be sharpened only by what my hidden

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God has been saying these thousands of years. For me to try to intrude on the conversation between the Holy Spirit and Samuel only as a twentieth-century third cousin of Samuel is the ultimate arrogance. And to read into the Word things at which Samuel would have rubbed his sleepy eyes is the ultimate nonsense. The avoidance of this arrogance is, I would suggest, the ultimate purpose of all honest Biblical study. Here theologians go wrong in two ways. Either they claim to hear more than Samuel heard or they refuse to hear all that Samuel heard. The first group becomes hard, rigid, opinionated super-orthodox men. The second group becomes shoddy, shallow, partially deaf humanists. In both cases they become rationalists, continuous static on the wave length of the Holy Spirit.

4. In our study of the Bible we will probably never solve the mystery of the relationship of the human to the divine in the writing of it. The very same Holy Spirit was talking in the prison cell in Rome and on the isle of Patmos. For the time being — until the last lesson in hermeneutics at the Golden Gates — this is all I know, and all I need to know. Stephen agrees.

5. The Word of God to man must be sought in, with, and under the words of the Bible, in much the same way that we discern His Body in, with, and under the elements of the Eucharist. Take, for example, the hundreds of times the sacred writers refer to water — the still waters, the living waters, the quiet waters, counsel like deep waters, casting bread upon far waters, a cup of cold water, the water of life, and so forth. To a learned hermeneutician these references are all perfectly understandable. Our ancestors in God were always in a dry land, face to face with the Negev, waiting for the rainy season when the Jordan would run high and the Kidron would flow between its rugged banks. They had only to look around them to see the ever-present tragic need for water. But while we can grant that the writers were expressing their own sense of immediate need, we must understand that they were reflecting a cosmic, universal need. The world needs water. Humanity — all of it — needs water. As a consequence, many passages formerly localized in their background by our limited scholarship now take on a new and unusual significance. The city dweller in New York or the farmer in South Dakota now can understand — given our nation's growing water problem — what the sacred writers mean by "still waters"

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or “waters of life.” Here is something global and cosmic. Even the surface of the moon, we discovered a couple of years ago, is dead because it has no water. All the Scripture passages about water begin to glow and surge with a new, universal meaning. We have come a little closer to God’s view of the universe.

This suggests a question: As we advance into the hidden corners of science, as we explore the secrets of space, as we learn more about our own being, is it not possible that our understanding of certain passages of Scripture will assume new dimensions of depth and grandeur, the heights and depths of the hidden God, a vision of the ultimate truth of history as God has always seen it?

