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The Use of the Bible in Evangelism—II

by T. E. Brinnington

THE first thing to be said about Dr. Wedderburn's argument, from the viewpoint of the ordinary evangelist, is that it is unrealistic. Few evangelists are sufficiently *au fait* with the latest findings in biblical scholarship or gospel criticism to appeal to them with confidence, and the same may be said of the ordinary pastor. There are some pastors who forget all the technicalities of theological study almost before they have shaken the dust of university or seminary from their feet; there are others who, to the end of their ministry, will never cease quoting what they used to hear Peake or Denney say in class. The former pupils of Peake and Denney are now a diminishing band, although it may be suggested that the dicta of those teachers which left so permanent an impression on their hearers have more of the quality of immortality about them than the dicta of some modern teachers. One of Peake's dicta which many of his students have taken to heart is that biblical criticism is but a means to an end: "The all-important thing for the student of the Bible is to pierce to the core of its meaning." The pastor or evangelist who takes seriously his vocation to proclaim the Word of God will endeavour to determine the meaning of Scripture and to expound and apply its meaning to his hearers. Even if he has made some use of the critical method in order to discover the meaning of his text, he knows better than to show up his rough work along with the finished product.

Dr. Wedderburn, however, takes particular issue with certain scholarly evangelists who are well aware of current critical trends, and regrets that they do not reckon more explicitly with those trends in their written or spoken evangelism. It would be ludicrous for the present writer to undertake a defence of Dr. Stott or Canon Green: they are of age and can speak for themselves. But presumably when their evangelism presupposes certain conservative positions in gospel study, they have reached those positions in the light of all the evidence. These are their considered judgments: they are no doubt

willing and able to defend them when occasion requires, but evangelism does not provide that occasion.

When Dr. Stott undertakes "to marshal evidence to prove that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God", he knows very well that the first-hand experience of what Jesus said and did was far from compelling all His contemporaries to accept that this is what He was. Yet St. John wrote in order to bring his readers to this belief, and the modern evangelist who expounds St. John's message does so with the same purpose. That Jesus was the only begotten Son of God is still the response of faith to His person, His works, His claims. Those who make this response of faith appropriate St. John's testimony as their own: "we know that his witness is true", they say, because they have for themselves seen the glory of God in the incarnate Word.

The gospel makers wrote from faith to faith: that is to say, they wrote as men who themselves believed that the crucified and risen Jesus was the Son of God, in order to elicit like faith on the part of their readers. All four of them in general, and the fourth in particular, experienced the fulfilment of the promises recorded in John 14-16: that the Holy Spirit, when He came, would bring to their remembrance what Jesus had said and make its meaning plain. The modern evangelist, in reliance on their testimony, also speaks from faith to faith: as a believer himself, he calls on his hearers in their turn to confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour, knowing that this can come about only by the power of the Spirit who continues to bear witness by and with the Word in the hearts of men and women and to persuade and enable them to embrace Jesus Christ, as He is freely offered to them in the gospel.

Unless the evangelist is really conversant with current trends in New Testament criticism, he would be well advised not to deal with them directly in his preaching, but to refer those of his hearers who are concerned about such matters to works in which they are discussed simply and competently. Those who take an intelligent interest in the authenticity of the words of Jesus recorded by St. John, for example, might be referred to A. M. Hunter's *According to John* or to A. J. B. Higgins' *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*. The evangelist need not fear that his hearers will be unaware of current doubts regarding the trustworthiness of the New Testament if he does not draw their attention to such doubts: his hearers are

regularly exposed to them *via* the television screen and other public media. Having a robust faith in the trustworthiness of the New Testament himself, he will do his best to communicate that faith to others.

It is true that, where the words of Jesus in the Gospels are concerned, there are some schools of thought which hold that the burden of proof rests upon those who wish to affirm the authenticity of any one of them. If this were really so, it would go hard with the evangelist who uses one of our Lord's sayings as his text: he is simply not equipped to prove its authenticity in terms of form criticism or redaction criticism. But it is not really so: the natural course to adopt with sayings attributed by ancient writers to historical characters is to accept their authenticity unless good reason can be shown for doubting the authenticity of this or that one. Quite apart from the factor of biblical inspiration, the evangelist and his hearers may be satisfied if they recognize in the canonical sayings of Jesus what J. B. Phillips has called "the ring of truth". There is, quite plainly, something about most of them which is self-authenticating.

It appears to be generally accepted that most of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels were not spoken in the Greek form in which they have been preserved to us, but in Aramaic. That is to say, what we have is translations of His sayings. Translation may take a variety of forms. It may be a word-for-word translation. It may be an abridgement or summary: this, indeed, may be so when sayings are transmitted in the language in which they were uttered as well as when they are translated. (It is widely assumed, for example, that the speeches in Acts are summaries of what was originally said; we may compare J. B. Phillips' attempt to expand some of them to what could have been their original form in an appendix to *The Young Church in Action*.) The translation, again, may be an expansion. If it is an expansion, it will probably include a good deal of paraphrase or interpretation. If the effect of the paraphrase is to bring out the sense more fully, then the translation is all the better for taking this form.

Plutarch, in his *Life of Julius Caesar*, says that on the morrow of Caesar's assassination,

When Caesar's will was opened and it was discovered that he had left a considerable legacy to each Roman citizen, and when the people saw his body, all disfigured with its wounds, being carried through the forum they broke through all bounds of discipline and order.

In his *Life of Mark Antony*, he adds some further details:

When Caesar's body was being carried out for burial, Antony delivered the customary eulogy over it in the forum. When he saw that his oratory had cast a spell over the people and that they were deeply stirred by his words, he began to introduce into his praises a note of pity and indignation at Caesar's fate. Finally, at the close of his speech, he snatched up the dead man's toga and held it aloft, all bloodstained as it was and stabbed through in many places, and called those who had done the deed murderers and villains. This appeal had such an effect on the people that they piled up benches and tables and cremated Caesar's body there in the forum and then, picking up firebrands from the pyre, they ran to the houses of the assassins and attacked them.

So, hearing Caesar's will and listening to Antony's speech between them greatly excited the populace. But by far the most telling account of the scene comes in a well-known English translation of Plutarch—not a word-for-word translation but a dramatic expansion in which it is Antony who reads Caesar's will aloud *after* he has stirred up the fury of the crowd by exhibiting Caesar's torn and bloodstained mantle and exposing Caesar's wounded corpse. The whole speech, from its low-key exordium:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him—

to its ringing peroration:

Here was a Caesar! when comes such another?

is a translation of the freest kind, a "transposition into another key," but Shakespeare's genius enables him to put the right words into Antony's mouth, "endeavouring, as nearly as possible" (in Thucydidean fashion), "to give the general purport of what was actually said".

What Shakespeare does by dramatic insight, what Dr. J. S. Stewart does by homiletical skill, all this and more the Spirit of God is able to do in the authors of the Gospels, not least in St. John. It does not take divine inspiration to provide a verbatim transcript; but to reproduce the words which were spirit and life to their first believing hearers in such a way that they communicate their saving message and prove themselves to be spirit and life to men and women today—that is the work of the Spirit of God. It is through His operation that, as William Temple put it, "the mind of Jesus Himself was what the Fourth Gospel disclosed", and it is through His operation that the preacher and hearer can still recognize in this Gospel (not to speak of the three others) the *ipsissima vox Jesu*. Let critical inquiry be freely prosecuted: this is a position which it is

not able to subvert, and if the evangelist takes this position as his base, he is wise.

The relative importance of biblical criticism on the one side, and of the things which are the concern of the evangelist and pastor on the other, was set out a century ago as follows by a Principal of St. Andrews University, John Campbell Shairp:

I have a life *with* Christ to live,
But ere I live it, must I wait
Till learning can clear answer give
Of this or that book's date?
I have a life *in* Christ to live,
I have a death in Christ to die,
And must I wait till science give
All doubts a full reply?
Nay rather, while the sea of doubt
Is raging wildly round about,
Questioning of life and death and sin,
Let me but creep within
Thy fold, O Christ, and at Thy feet
Take but the lowest seat,
And hear Thine awful voice repeat
In gentlest accents, heavenly sweet,
Come unto me, and rest;
Believe me, and be blest.¹

Stockport, Cheshire

¹ Dr. Wedderburn thinks that Mr. Brinnington may have misunderstood the main thrust of his paper; he is not in disagreement with the positive points which Mr. Brinnington makes. (Perhaps we should have emphasized earlier that Dr. Wedderburn himself stands in the conservative and evangelical tradition; he is not attacking spokesmen of this tradition from the liberal lines.) "I am, for instance, not suggesting [he writes] that the evangelist should be up with all the latest trends, merely that he should be aware of the basic stance of what is after all the majority of scholarly NT work in this century. Nor that he should take his audience through a summary of scholarly opinion and a critique of the same; all I say is that *if* proof is what he wants then it will have to be truly compelling (cf. p. 86). And what he says of the four Evangelists speaking 'from faith to faith' and the modern evangelist doing likewise I would completely endorse (cf. pp. 88 ff.)."—Ed.