

TOWARD A REFORMED-LIBERATION
BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

With a Particular
focus on Karl Barth's
View of Scripture and
its Interpretation

by
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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
PREFACE	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. JOHN CALVIN: TOWARDS A REFORMED VIEW OF SCRIPTURE.	
1. An Ambiguous Doctrine.	6
2. The First Trajectory: The Bible <i>is</i> the Word of God.	11
3. The Second Trajectory: Scripture, the Spirit and the One Word of God.	17
4. Concluding Remarks.	26
CHAPTER 2. THE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY.	
PART 1: PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS	
1. <i>A New Way</i> of Doing Theology.	28
2. Martin Heidegger: Pre-Understanding and the Hermeneutic Circle.	31
3. Karl Marx: Knowledge and Social Structure.	34
4. Soren Kierkegaard: Faith, and the Engagement of Truth.	41
5. The Appropriation of the Critique Of Objectivity.	45
PART 2: LIBERATION HERMENEUTICS.	
1. Some Key Ingredients.	50
2. The Hermeneutic Circle and Hermeneutic Circulation.	56
3. Entering the Circle.	61
4. Verification and Critical Biblical Studies.	65

5. Conclusions and the Challenge to Reformed Biblical Hermeneutics.	71
CHAPTER 3. THE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF KARL BARTH.	
PART 1: KARL BARTH AS MEDIATOR OF A REFORMED-LIBERATION HERMENEUTIC	
1. Socialist Commitment and Hermeneutics.	76
2. Affirming Calvin's Second Trajectory.	88
PART 2: BARTH'S REFORMED HERMENEUTICS	
1. Prolegomena to Interpretation.	106
2. Toward a Method for Interpretation.	116
3. The Locus of and Responsibility For Interpretation.	126
Chapter 4. TOWARD A REFORMED-LIBERATION HERMENEUTIC.	131
BIBLIOGRAPHY	139

ABSTRACT

This thesis arises out of the recognition that Reformed theology in South Africa needs to respond creatively to the challenges of Liberation theology. One of the more pressing areas in which this challenge and response is felt is the area of the Bible and its interpretation, and hence we take as our focus the possibility of a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic.

To ground the thesis in the Reformed tradition we begin by analysing John Calvin's view of Scripture. What becomes clear is that there are two 'trajectories' within Calvin's doctrine of Holy Scripture as presented in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The first equates the words of the Bible with the very Word of God, while the second argues that the Bible becomes the Word of God to the person of faith through the action of the Holy Spirit. This first chapter argues that these two trajectories are held side by side without being synthesized, and for this reason Calvin bequeaths to the Reformed tradition an ambiguous view of Holy Scripture.

We turn next to the challenge laid down by the Biblical hermeneutics of Liberation theology to the Reformed (and any other) tradition. Liberation regards itself as a 'new way' of doing theology. In order to understand the radical nature of its challenge, the first part of Chapter Two explores the philosophical roots of Liberation hermeneutics in the work of

Heidegger, Marx and Kierkegaard. From there we turn to the writings of various Liberation theologians especially Juan Luis Segundo, Jose Miguez Bonino, Jose Miranda and Gustavo Gutierrez, and attempt in an eclectic manner to present a basic Liberation hermeneutic. Arising out of our study we present four fundamental challenges to Reformed theology from Liberation hermeneutics.

The first part of Chapter Three argues that Karl Barth is a suitable mediator in the search for a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic because (i) he has important affinities with the concerns of Liberation theology in the area of political praxis, and (ii) he is a true heir to the Reformed Tradition. Having made clear Barth's socialist commitment, and how he appropriates Calvin's second trajectory in the search for a 'new hermeneutic', we turn in the second part of this chapter to Karl Barth's view of Biblical interpretation. Here we consider the wider context of the work of the Spirit and the relationship of faith and understanding; Barth's three-fold method for interpretation; and the relationship between the Church and Biblical interpretation.

Our fourth and final chapter reflects on our analysis of the thought of Calvin, the Liberation theologians and Barth, and suggests in a brief and preliminary manner the contours of a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic.

PREFACE

This thesis has been researched and written under the most trying of circumstances both personal and national. That I have managed to produce it at all is due to the tremendous amount of support that I have received from friends and family. To all of them, and they know who they are, a big thank-you. Special thanks to my supervisor Professor John de Gruchy for his support and encouragement. Thanks also to Rob Purvis for providing accomodation and friendship while I was doing research in Pretoria, to Paul Germond for his support in the past few months, and to Helen Moffett for proof-reading the text. Needless to say, I take responsibility for the final product both in terms of substance and style, including of course any errors that remain. In particular I draw your attention to some problems with the footnotes. At times the Word processor's capabilities were severely taxed and it could not deal adequately with them. If the footnote number appears on the first line of a page, its corresponding note will usually be found on the previous page. I trust the usefulness of having easy access to the footnotes outweighs this inconvenience.

I also wish to acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the Human Sciences Research Council, and by the University of Cape Town. All opinions expressed or conclusions reached are those of the author, and are not to be regarded as those of the

HSRC, or UCT.

This thesis is dedicated to two people who have been instrumental in my growth both theologically and politically.

Douglas Bax who has had a tremendous influence on my theological growth, particularly in introducing me to the 'real' Reformed tradition, to John Calvin and Karl Barth, and providing me with the tools to integrate Christian faith and political concern.

Debora Patta who has made it clear for me that the accumulation of theological and political knowledge is worth naught save it be integrated with a liberating praxis.

I pray that God will give both of them, and others who share their concern for a just and peaceful liberated, South Africa, the strength we all need in the coming hour.

INTRODUCTION

South African theology is at the present time caught between two major traditions and 'ways of doing theology'. On the one hand there is the *Reformed Tradition* which has been and is dominant from a demographical and political perspective. Historically this tradition has been a bastion of theological and political conservatism, but at the present time it is being appropriated by those who would understand themselves as being involved in the South African liberation struggle [1]. On the other hand, precisely because South Africa is a Third-World country involved in a liberation struggle, there is a natural affinity with and appropriation of *Liberation Theology* [2]. Many of the concerns are shared: the struggle for a just society; affirmation of a socialist future; talk of a 'church of the poor'; a concern to give praxis priority over theory; and a critique of the ideological hegemony that the liberal agenda has exercised over the life of the South African Church.

There are four possible options in regard to the relationship between the *Reformed Tradition* and *Liberation Theology* in South

1. Here one thinks of ABRECSA, the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa; theological works like Allan Boesak's *Black and Reformed*; the Belydende Kring; and the Belhar Confession of the N.G. Sendingkerk.

2. This is also happening in other traditions eg. the Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist.

Africa. We could chose the Reformed Tradition in a confessionalistic sense and refuse to be engaged in anything other than reactionary or reformist politico-ethical engagements. We could opt for the Liberation Theology model and reject the powerful heritage of the Reformed Tradition in the hope that this would disengage our praxis from reaction. We could ignore both traditions in favour of another tradition; or we could develop a creative synthesis between the two. This last option is our choice for the following reasons.

(i) The Reformed Tradition is our heritage both by birth and rebirth. There is far too much in this tradition that is satisfying at both an experiential and an intellectual level to throw it overboard; (ii) The Liberation model enshrines so much of what we have come to want and expect from faith, praxis and theology, that its creative insights and gains need to be affirmed; and (iii) It is our conviction and thesis that Reformed theology is in principle open to the challenge of Liberation Theology. There is the possibility of a creative synthesis which, as mentioned, has already begun. What we are seeking is not a new, 'third' model or tradition, but a contemporary Reformed model that takes the concerns of Liberation Theology seriously. This will mean that Reformed perspectives will influence the reading of Liberation Theology and even provide a necessary critique. We shall speak therefore of a Reformed-Liberation project.

We are seeking to respond then to the challenge of Liberation Theology from the perspective of the Reformed Tradition. This immediately raises many questions about the nature and role of

tradition in the life of the Church, which are beyond the scope of this thesis. However at the outset it should be stated that we understand tradition in an 'organic' sense i.e. as a core or constant which has entered into dialogue with culture and other traditions, and accordingly has grown, developed and adapted itself. John Leith has written that

All traditions must continually be critically reviewed and open to self-reformation. They must live and develop not only in terms of their own internal principles, but also in dialogue, even debate and confrontation, with other traditions, movements, and events [3].

Following Leith, we regard the Reformed Tradition as such an 'Open Tradition'. Since its beginnings, the Reformed tradition has grown and adapted, it has accepted some challenges and rejected others; but it has only remained a Reformed Tradition, when a 'constant' has been retained, an 'internal principle' which has reorganised and re-expressed itself in new historical epochs. When the Reformed Tradition meets the challenge from Liberation Theology, it does so then on such an understanding of tradition.

One of the key 'internal principles' of the Reformed Tradition is the concern to hear God's Word in Holy Scripture. If we are to engage in a Reformed-Liberation project then the area of hermeneutics demands attention. For this reason, we have chosen as the specific focus of this thesis the need to explore the possibility of a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic. This requires, first of all, a consideration of the Reformed understanding of Scripture in order to ascertain whether or not

3. J. Leith *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p.31

it is open to such a project. Our focus here will be upon the father of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin. Secondly we will examine the challenge presented to contemporary Reformed theology by Liberation hermeneutics. This will involve a discussion of the philosophical roots of Liberation hermeneutics, a discussion which will indicate the radical nature of its challenge.

Thirdly in an attempt to meet this challenge, and to lay the foundations for the project of which we have spoken, we will discuss Karl Barth's understanding of the Bible and its interpretation. Barth was, of course, never engaged in a theological discussion with Liberation Theology for the simple reason that he belonged to an earlier generation. Indeed it was only in the year of his death, 1968, that the Latin American Catholic Bishops met at Medellin and the concerns of Liberation theology first came to be expressed. We have chosen Barth for three reasons: (i) Recent scholarship has indicated the extent to which Barth's theology and hermeneutic is grounded in socialist political praxis and a concern for a better, more just world. This immediately suggests the possibility of fruitful engagement with Liberation theology. (ii) He consciously affirms the creative side to Calvin's view of Scripture, and is a true heir to the Reformed Tradition. (iii) It is our contention, that the synthesis to which we have referred, is in fact possible on the basis of his work. Indeed, Barth, of all Reformed theologians holds out most promise for this engagement.

We have mentioned that Barth never knew 'Liberation Theology'

in the sense that we understand it. His hermeneutic could not therefore, have finally laid to rest the search for a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic. So while Barth helps to make the project *possible*, as well as providing some examples of how it may be developed in historical situations, we recognise that a contemporary Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic needs to go beyond Barth. We have to respond to what he could not and did not see as important questions, and to chart the possibilities for the future. This is the substance of our final chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD A REFORMED VIEW OF SCRIPTURE:

JOHN CALVIN

1. AN AMBIGUOUS DOCTRINE.

a. The text as the starting point.

Due to historical and theological factors, the nature and authority of the Bible is possibly the fundamental concern of Reformed theology. Reformed hermeneutics arise out of a 'Doctrine of Holy Scripture', and are to a large extent informed and controlled by the prior and more fundamental question as to the nature of the Bible [1]. Karl Barth expresses this so:

If we turn our attention now to the question *how the encounter of His revelation with man is real in the freedom of God*, then the very first point to be made is that this question is and must be the primary one. For there is also a second question regarding the incarnation of the Word of God. It concerns the possibility of revelation: How is the encounter of His revelation with man possible in the freedom of God? This second question, too, has its propriety and its necessity. It is the question of interpretation,

1. We should not be so naive as to believe that this relationship does not at times flow the other way. To a large extent the doctrinal understanding of Holy Scripture of Liberal Protestantism was the logical outworking of Nineteenth century objectivist and historicist hermeneutics rather than the other way round. See F. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, and H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

the question of exegesis, which must certainly follow the question of fact, the question of the text. But it can only follow it. It must not claim to precede it [2].

Our attempt to explore a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic must therefore be grounded in an appreciation of Reformed Tradition's answer to the question of the text', i.e. what the text is.

b. A Divided Debate

We have to recognise immediately that there is considerable dissension on precisely what this 'Reformed' answer is. Fundamentalists, Liberals, Evangelicals and Neo-Orthodox might all claim to stand in the Reformed tradition by accepting the importance of listening to the Word of God and therefore taking the Bible seriously in doing theology, but they differ precisely on the issue of *how* the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God should be understood.

Insofar as each of these views is an attempt to relate the essentials of the tradition to the new challenges of each age, we need to go behind these views to reach for the origins of the distinctively Reformed view of Scripture. Here we are driven back to reflect again on the theology of the 'father' of the Reformed Tradition, John Calvin. Undoubtedly one of the greatest theologians of the Church, Calvin was deeply involved in the struggle to establish Scripture as the true and only authority in the Church. A Biblical exegete, preacher, teacher, theologian and systematiser, his mind ranged far and wide on

2. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I,2* p.3

the question of the meaning of Scripture, and we can only profit by examining his position on this issue.

Two basic interpretations of Calvin's view of Scripture are clear, and these are held together in four possible ways. (i) There are those who see Calvin arguing an exclusive view of the objective authority of Scripture, (the view that the Bible is the Word of God), and hence for verbal inspiration and inerrancy [3]; (ii) those who deny this position in Calvin, and argue that he supported the view that Scripture was authoritative only to those who had faith, and that he was unwilling to equate the Bible and the Word of God, and held no view of verbal inspiration and inerrancy [4]; (iii) those who argue that Calvin held these two views just mentioned in a dynamic dialectic which he was able to synthesize [5]; and (iv) those who maintain that he held both positions, but that he never saw them as conflicting and thus never sought to reconcile them [6].

In the light of these divergent interpretations we can affirm with T.H.L. Parker that

Calvin's concept of Scripture as the Word of God presents probably the most difficult problem in all his theology, one which much has been written about and about which there is considerable disagreement [7].

3. See for example, B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*.

4. See for example, W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*.

5. See for example, H.J. Forstman, *Word and Spirit*.

6. See for example, E.A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*.

7. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. p.56

Nevertheless, it is our opinion that the fourth position of those outlined above is the correct understanding of Calvin on these matters: Calvin bequeaths to the Reformed tradition an ambiguous view of Scripture an ambiguity that he never attempts to resolve. There are two coherent trajectories within Calvin's thought on Scripture, and one can legitimately hold on to either one as the basis of a *Reformed* tradition. In this chapter we shall indicate how these trajectories arise and what they are. We will provide some brief reasons as to why the second trajectory should receive priority in Calvin's thought.

c. The Roots of the Ambiguity: Two Reasons for the Sufficiency of Scripture.

In the opening chapters of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin sets out his basic thesis: A natural knowledge of God can only lead to condemnation, whereas Scripture gives us a true and saving knowledge of God. Scripture is the *only* way to obtain this true knowledge, and it *alone* is necessary for this knowledge:

If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture [8].

Of vital significance for our study is that Calvin advances two distinct reasons for this sufficiency of Scripture, and as we shall see, these give rise to the two divergent trajectories which we have noted above. The first of these reasons is given

8. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (I,3,3) Vol 1, p.66

primarily in Book I of the *Institutes* and is made contextual in the polemical section of Book IV. The second is advanced primarily in Book III where he is dealing with Scripture in the context of faith in Jesus Christ.

The first reason is this: because of our forgetfulness and tendency to drift into error, God has provided us with a written proof of heavenly doctrine. The Scriptures stand before us in black and white, and can continually remind us of God and of his will.

For if we reflect how prone the human mind is to lapse into forgetfulness of God, how readily inclined to every kind of error, how bent every now and then on devising new and fictitious religions, it will be easy to understand how necessary it was to make such a depository of doctrine as would secure it from either perishing by the neglect, vanishing away amid the error, or being corrupted by the presumptuous audacity of men [9].

The second reason is less obvious, but it lies at the heart of Calvin's understanding of the 'duplex cognitio Dei', the two-fold knowledge of God. This knowledge is two-fold in that it is knowledge of God as creator and of God as redeemer. While chronologically and historically God is initially presented to us in Scripture as creator, we must first know God as redeemer if we are to come to a proper knowledge of God as creator. This is because the true (saving) knowledge of God is not to know *that God is*, but rather to know *who God is for me*.

God is presented to us as redeemer in Jesus Christ alone, first in the Law, as is made clear in the title of Book II of the *Institutes*: "Of the Knowledge of God the redeemer, in

9. *Ibid.* (I,6,3) Vol 1, p.66

Christ, as first manifested to the fathers under the Law..." then Christ is presented to us in the flesh through the Incarnation, and finally to all the world through the Gospel. In short, Jesus Christ is God the redeemer; Scripture alone bears witness to Christ, hence Scripture is sufficient to know God as redeemer, and thus for the true knowledge of God.

It is important to note that these two reasons are not in opposition at all. The point, however, is this: they *allow* for two different readings of Scripture. The first *allows* one to place an importance on the physical object of the Bible itself, and to see the Word of God and the words of the Bible tied together so that they are ontologically *one* thing. This is at the heart of the first trajectory that we shall explore below. The other *allows* one to maintain the importance of the words of the Bible only insofar as they bear witness to the one Word of God, Jesus Christ and thus to maintain a distinction between the Word of God and the words of the Bible. In this case, the sufficiency of Scripture lies in the fact that the Bible is the only way to come to a true knowledge of God as redeemer.

2. THE FIRST TRAJECTORY: THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD.

a. The Struggle for Authority: The Primacy of Scripture over the Church.

It was not the Reformers' emphasis on the authority of Scripture which distanced them from medieval and scholastic theological concerns, but rather their exalting of the

10. See B. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New*, p.54

authority of Scripture over that of the Church [10]. This much is clear in Luther's famous statement at the Diet of Worms: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God" [11].

This emphasis on the authority of Scripture over and above that of the Church became the battle cry of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura!* Calvin followed Luther in this regard, and throughout his life he was involved in a polemic on this issue against the Roman Catholic Church. For example he writes of the Council of Trent:

... they contend that owing to the ambiguous meaning of scripture, we ought to stand solely on the judgement of the Church. Who, I pray, does not see that by laying aside the word of God, the whole right of defining things is thus transferred to them [12].

The first reason why Calvin stressed the authority of Scripture over the Church was to avoid this error of listening to our own word instead of God's. The second was occasioned by the need to establish for the Reformed tradition an independent and objective authority, for behind his writing is the conscious awareness that with the break from the Mother church, the question of authority had become acute: "It was the task of ... Calvin to provide them with new and secure moorings. This [he] did by replacing the authority of the church by that of

11. Cited in R.H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*. p.144

12. Dedication to Edward VI in J. Calvin, *Hebrews and I and II Peter*. p.225

13. A.M. Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*. p.55

Scripture... [13].

This is clear in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I,7). Against those who held to the 'most pernicious error' of believing that Scripture is dependent for its authority on the Church (due to its acceptance of the canon), Calvin quotes Ephesians 2:20: The Church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets". From this he draws the conclusion: "If the doctrine of the apostles and prophets is the foundation of the Church, the former must have had its certainty before the latter began to exist" [14].

b. The Doctrine of Inspiration.

In arguing for the primacy of Scripture as an authority greater than the church, Calvin's key pillar was his Doctrine of Inspiration: "The Bible is the Word of God as over against the word of man as found in the papacy" [15]. In Book IV,8, Calvin spells this out. The doctrine of the apostles and prophets, which Calvin has pointed out is 'the foundation of the Church' (Eph. 2:20) is really their testimony. Yet these very people bear testimony that it is God's Words, rather than their own, that they speak: "...whenever they are called to office, they are enjoined not to bring anything of their own but to speak by the mouth of the Lord", [16] and they "must not speak their own pleasure, but faithfully deliver the commands

14. J. Calvin, *Op. cit.* (I,7,2) Vol 1, p.69

15. J. Haroutunian (Ed.), *Calvin Commentaries.* p.34

16. J. Calvin, *Op. cit.* (IV,8,2) Vol 2, p.390

of him by whom they are sent" [17].

Scripture is the 'doctrine of the apostles and prophets' [18], and this doctrine is spoken by the 'mouth of the Lord' [19]. Scripture itself is therefore nothing but the commands of God spoken by his mouth. Put another way: the recorded speech of those who spoke God's Word must also be God's Word - "But when God determined to give a more illustrious form to the Church, he was pleased to commit and consign his word to writing" [20].

Calvin writes of the Old Testament:

The whole body, therefore, composed of the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Histories, formed the Word of the Lord to his ancient people [21].

With the addition of the apostles, the "sure and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit [whose] writings are to be regarded as the oracles of God" [22] to the Law which is doctrine "summed up by God" and the priests who are "to teach from the mouth of the Lord" [23], the historical details which are "dictated by the Holy Spirit" [24], and the prophets, whose

17. *Ibid.* (IV,8,4) Vol 2 p.391

18. *Ibid.* (1,7,2) Vol 1, p.69

19. *Ibid.* (IV,8,3) Vol 2, p.391

20. *Ibid.* (IV,8,6) Vol 2, p.392

21. *Ibid.* (IV,8,6) Vol 2, p.393

22. *Ibid.* (IV,8,9) Vol 2, p.395

23. *Ibid.* (IV,8,6) Vol 2, p.392

24. *Ibid.* (IV,8,6) Vol 2, p.393

25. *Ibid.* (IV,8,3) Vol 2, p.391

lips were "organs of the Holy Spirit" [25], we have the Bible. Considering the make-up of all its constituent parts, the Bible cannot but be the Word of God.

Calvin backs up this major argument with reference to salvation and damnation. Because the Bible brings the message of redemption it cannot be the words of humans, for then, 'how can we be sure?' "In other words, if faith depends on the Word of God alone, or if it regards and reclines on it alone, what place is left for any word of man? He who knows what faith is can never hesitate here, for it must possess a strength sufficient to stand intrepid and invincible against Satan, the machinations of hell and the whole world. This strength can only be found in the Word of God" [26].

We are thus left in no doubt that what Calvin is saying is quite simply that the Bible is the Word of God and the Word of God alone!

But since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority of which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognised unless they are believed to have come from heaven as directly as if God could be heard giving utterance to them [27].

c. Objective Authority, Inerrancy, and Infallibility.

If the Bible is the Word of God in its very being as it sits before the observer in black and white, then it must be the Word of God in appearance. We can affirm that it can be seen

26. *Ibid.* (IV,8,9) Vol 2, p.395

27. *Ibid.* (I,7,1) Vol 1, p.68

to be the Word of God. It has a objective authority, and can be acknowledged as such through natural reason. For this reason Calvin includes a chapter in Book I on "The credibility of Scripture proved, in so far as natural reason admits". (I,8)

If we can assert, firstly, that for Calvin the Bible is objectively the Word of God, then secondly as we draw the threads together we can understand Hunter's affirmation that

the logical concomitant of such a view was the assertion of the inerrancy of scripture ... for the assurance of faith it was necessary to be able to trust the accuracy of every word of the record [28].

And furthermore, apart from symbolic, parabolic, or poetic passages

The inerrancy of scripture ... implied the indisputable accuracy of assertions of a scientific nature. In such a vade-mecum of truth, there could be nothing that would mislead or misinform; the truth of its statements regarding things seen must be as reliable as that of those regarding things unseen [29].

This we can affirm. There seems no need to deny that it is a 'logical concomitant'; that it is suggested by Calvin himself; and that it is a legitimate reading of Calvin's thought on Holy Scripture. We therefore need to question statements such as Farrar's that Calvin "did not hold to the theory of verbal dictation" [30], and Wendel's that "in fact Calvin himself never affirmed literal inspiration" [31]. This may not be the only view that Calvin supported, but it is our contention that

28. A.M. Hunter, *Op. cit.* p.72

29. *Ibid.* p.72

30. F. Farrar, *Op. cit.* p.345

31. F. Wendel, *Calvin.* p. 159

it is a legitimate position that cannot be wished away or glossed over. It needs critical examination not indignant dismissal.

3. THE SECOND TRAJECTORY: SCRIPTURE, THE SPIRIT AND THE ONE WORD OF GOD.

a. Exegesis and the Word of God.

It is Calvin's own exegetical method that alerts us to the probability of another understanding of the relationship of the Word of God to the words of the Bible. McNeil puts it bluntly: "his oft-quoted designation of the apostles as 'authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit' and his statement that the Scriptures are given to us 'by the very mouth of God' must be read in the light of his commentaries which exhibit no such assumption of verbal infallibility as these words seem to imply"! [32] As Farrar notes, "he will never defend or harmonise what he regards as an oversight or mistake in the sacred writers" [33], and Hunter, who as we have seen above argues that Calvin holds to a view of verbal inspiration and inerrancy, says with reference to his commentaries:

One may say that never did the idea of verbal inspiration of the Scriptures receive such emphatic refutation as at the hands of this vehement champion, whose frequent transparent evasions, jugglings, and violence are in themselves a confession of its futility [34].

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a full

32. J.T. McNeil in *The Interpreter's Bible*. Vol I, p.125

33. F. Farrar, *Op. cit.* p.345

34. A.M. Hunter, *Op. cit.* p.76

examination of all the instances in which Calvin acts thus [35], suffice to quote him commenting on Hebrews 10:6 in which the writer has used the Septuagint and in the event misquoted Psalm 40:

They [the apostles] were not overscrupulous in quoting words provided they did not misuse Scripture for their convenience. We must always look at the purpose for which quotations are made... but as far as the words are concerned, as in other things which are not relevant to the present purpose, they allow themselves some indulgence [36].

We must admit that it is impossible to reconcile this passage with the position outlined above which sees Calvin arguing for verbal inspiration and inerrancy. This alerts us to the fact that Calvin had another view of Scripture, and it is this second trajectory that we will now examine.

b. Scripture and the Spirit.

We have seen that Calvin declared that 'no-one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture'; and while he argued for the sufficiency of Scripture alone, there is a fundamental position argued in the *Institutes* which goes beyond this. For Calvin, Scripture by itself will not bring us to a saving knowledge of God. There needs to be also the Work of God himself - the Holy Spirit. It is of vital importance to note that within Calvin's thought

35. For a fuller treatment see for example, F. Farrar, *Op. cit.* pp. 343 - 350; A.M. Hunter, *Op. cit.* pp. 76f.; J.B. Rogers and D.K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible, An historical Approach.* pp. 97f.; J. Haroutunian, *Op. cit.* p.30

36. J. Calvin on Hebrews 10:6 in *Hebrews and I and II Peter* p.136

there exists a dialectic between Spirit and Scripture which is never resolved. He reacts against those who would give primacy to the Spirit - both the Libertines who feel that they as individuals possess the Spirit and thus can dispense with Scripture, and the Roman Church which in a similar vein argues that they as a community possess the Spirit and have sole rights to the correct interpretation of Scripture. He argues in the *Institutes* (I,9,2) that the Holy Spirit is recognised in his agreement with Scripture, and thus any spirit which fosters another doctrine upon us other than God's Word is vain and lying.

If he will not have the Spirit without the Scriptures, he will also not have the Scriptures without the Spirit. Scripture by itself can have no authority with the individual. In book I,7 entitled, 'The Testimony of the Spirit Necessary to give Full Authority to Scripture', Calvin writes, "Our conviction of the truth of Scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgements or reasons, namely the secret testimony of the Spirit" [37]. Further, in the very chapter in which Calvin speaks of 'the Credibility of Scripture Sufficiently Proved, insofar as Natural Reason Admits' and in which he runs through all the human conjectures, judgements and reasons that he feels establish this credibility, the opening sentence is clear:

In vain were the authority of Scripture fortified by argument or supported by the consent of the Church, or confirmed by any other helps, if unaccompanied by an assurance higher and stronger.

37. J. Calvin, *Institutes*. (I,7,4) Vol 1, p.72

than human judgement can give [38].

Calvin's basic point is this: without the work of the Spirit, the Bible is just like any other book to us. With the intervention of the Holy Spirit, it becomes for us the Word of God. For the same Spirit who guided the original speech, its transmission and its commitment to writing must now interpret these written words for us. There is thus "one necessary and indissoluble bond between the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit" [39]. Calvin writes:

For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore who spoke by the mouth of the prophets, must penetrate our hearts in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely entrusted [40].

c. Scripture and Jesus Christ.

The question is now: 'Do we have a true knowledge of God if we have the Scriptures opened for us by the Spirit?' On the one hand *no*, for we still need something else - to look behind the words of the Bible to the One Word of God, Jesus Christ; yet on the other hand, *yes*. For if it is the true Spirit, we *will* be led without further ado to that one Word of God. Calvin makes it absolutely clear that the true message of Scripture is the message about Jesus Christ, God the redeemer:

We ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them. Whoever shall turn aside from this object though he may weary himself throughout his whole life in learning, will never

38. *Ibid.* (I,8,1) Vol 1, p.74

39. F. Wendel, *Op. cit.* p.156

40. J. Calvin, *Op. cit.* (I,7,4) Vol1, p.72

attain the knowledge of the truth [41].

This applies to the whole Bible, for Calvin holds together in one covenant of Grace mediated by Jesus Christ the Law-Gospel tension and the Old and New Testaments. "For the authority of God's Word is the same from the beginning" [42]. In the preface to Olivetan's New Testament (1535/43) he gives fine expression to this:

This is what we should seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and offered to us by him from God the Father. If one were to sift thoroughly through the Law and the Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not draw and bring us to him. And for a fact, since all the treasures of wisdom and understanding are hidden in him, there is not the least question of having or turning toward another goal... Our minds ought to come to a halt at the point where we learn in Scripture to know Jesus Christ and him alone, so that we may be directly led by him to the Father who contains in himself all perfection [43].

We can see how this trajectory arises out of the second reason for the sufficiency of Scripture as spelled out above. The Scriptures present Jesus Christ, God the Redeemer to us, and unless we hear and know him in and through the Scriptures, they remain a dead book for us.

d. Faith and Understanding.

Being led by the Spirit to hear the one Word of God, Jesus Christ, in the Scriptures, i.e. to have a true knowledge of God the Redeemer, can only happen in the act of faith. Faith

41. J. Calvin on John 5:39 in *The Gospel According to St. John, Part One* p.139

42. J. Calvin on 2 Peter 1:19 in *Hebrews and I and II Peter* p.340

43. Quoted in J. Haroutunian, *Op. cit.* p.70.

for Calvin, and here he stands in the tradition of Augustine and Anselm as against that of Aquinas, comes before a full understanding of the appreciation of the authority and meaning of Scripture. Faith is always seeking understanding, rather than being the acceptance of a reasoned argument [44]. Thus Calvin can write of a people who even accept the objective authority of Scripture as an infallible oracle, but who do not respond with all their beings to it, that "to such the testimony of faith is attributed but by *catachresis*... but as this shadow or image of faith is of no movement, so it is unworthy of the name" [45]. Even in Book I he has clarified the relationship between faith and Word:

But it is foolish to attempt to prove to infidels that the Scripture is the Word of God. This it cannot be known to be except by faith [46].

Not only do Calvin's words describe this relationship between faith and the Bible, but his whole theological enterprise does so as well. Calvin it is clear, is involved in a circular argument that one can only enter upon the assumption of faith in Jesus Christ. For Calvin, Scripture is the basis for theology, yet at the same time it is an element in that theology, something to be theologized about. There can be little wonder then at the fact that in the pages of the *Institutes*, which is meant to be nothing other than a summary

44. See J.B. Rogers and D.K. McKim, *Op. cit.* for a discussion on this. pp.105f.

45. J. Calvin, *Institutes*. (III,2,9&10) Vol 1, p.477

46. *Ibid.* (I,8,13) Vol 1, p.83

47. See the 'Preface' to the 1545 French Edition and the 1559 Edition of *Ibid.* pp.23, 25

of the Bible' [47], there exists a legitimation of the primacy of Scripture in the terms explored above. The authority of Scripture is used to prove the authority of Scripture. There is no way into the circle save by faith.

This is made all the clearer when one takes seriously Calvin's whole structure of his theology around the 'duplex cognitio Dei', and the inability of humans to find God in all his glorious manifestations in the World around us. The Bible is one such manifestation, and because of our sin it does not allow us an adequate knowledge of God. The Bible is part of the created order, and due to sin, faith cannot come from the evidences of creation. In a manner strikingly similar to the way he rejects nature as a way to the true knowledge of God in Book I,5 of the *Institutes*, Calvin rejects the Bible as an object being able to produce faith in book III,2:

A simple external manifestation of the Word ought to be amply sufficient to produce faith did not our blindness and perverseness prevent it. But such is the proneness of our mind to vanity that it can never adhere to the truth of God, and such its dullness that it is always blind even in his light. Hence without the illumination of the Spirit, the word has no effect [48].

We cannot therefore equate the Bible with the Word of God because the Bible is part of creation, and the Word of God is God himself. Through the action of God himself - the Spirit - the Word of God speaks to us through the words of Scripture and this happens only in the attitude of faith.

Two important points flow from this. Firstly, we must

48. *Ibid.* (III,2,33) Vol 1, p.498f.

recognise that it is not Scripture alone which has authority. It is rather Scripture bearing testimony to Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit which has authority. As Calvin summarises in book I,9,3 of the *Institutes*: "But if it [the dead letter of Scripture] is effectually impressed on the heart by the Spirit; if it exhibits Christ, it is the word of life, converting the soul and making wise the simple" [49]. Secondly, with regards to the words of the Bible - these are important in so far as they point to the one Word of God, Jesus Christ. They have no authority save in that capacity. We cannot equate the two, otherwise we deify a part of creation, and we become the advocates of Bibliolatry. The Word of God must be understood as something other than the words of Scripture, as something that belongs not to the created order but to God alone.

This means that the task of Biblical interpretation goes beyond a mere interest in the words of the Bible, and the "attempt to illuminate the literal word is preparatory and subordinate to the working of the Spirit through the Word" [50]. The task is to hear the message of Jesus Christ through the words of the Bible, so as to be able to present him here and now in this historical epoch.

e. The Bible in the Church.

One final point to make clear in this second trajectory, is

49. *Ibid.* (I,9,3) Vol 1, p.86

50. P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture.* p.34

that for Calvin there was a very deep relationship between the Church and the Bible. The fact that the rediscovery of the message of the *Bible* led to a reformation of the *Church* should alert us to this fact, and Calvin's famous dictum that "wherever we see the Word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence" [51], ties together the very existence of the Church to the Word of God. Reflecting on this, Alan Lewis has written:

For what is spoken, whenever God speaks, is a covenantal community-creating summons such that the content of God's Word immediately directs us to the possibility, reality and nature of the Church [52].

When we speak of the role of the Spirit in the task of interpretation, we are moving in the area of the Third Article of the Creed, which is about the Work of the Spirit *in the life of the Church*, the community of faith. With this in mind Gerrish comments that Calvin was careful to assert "the collective, ecclesial nature of hearing the Word" [53]. The interpretation of the Bible is hence something which takes place in the Church, and as part of the Church's mission to present Christ the Redeemer to the world. Outside of this function, the Reformers can see no place at all for study and interpretation of the *Bible*, and thus "the third article of the

51. J. Calvin, *Op. cit.* (IV,1,9) Vol.2 p.289)

52. A. Lewis, "Ecclesia Ex Auditu: A Reformed View of the Church as the Community of the Word of God" in the *SJT*, Vol 25 p.24

53. B. Gerrish, *Op. cit.* p.67

Apostles Creed is the decisive framework for all hermeneutical effort" [54].

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter there are a number of ways of responding to this ambiguity within Calvin's thought. One could deny that one or other trajectory is a legitimate interpretation of Calvin. On the basis of our reading of Calvin we are unwilling to do this. One could argue that Calvin managed to synthesize the two trajectories, yet this too is not indicated by the sources. Both trajectories exist side by side. How then is the Reformed tradition to draw on Calvin in response to the contemporary hermeneutic challenge?

It is our contention that the second trajectory is the one that should receive priority for two reasons. Firstly, this trajectory has an internal coherence with Calvin's thought on such issues as the 'Duplex Cognitio Dei', Faith, and the Spirit. Also, the circular nature of Calvin's own argument indicates the role of 'faith' in the doctrine of Holy Scripture, minimising the argument for the external objective authority of Scripture.

Secondly, when Calvin's thought is placed within its historical context, we can see two reasons why recourse was made to the first trajectory. The first lies in the struggle for authority in the Church in the wake of the break from Rome

54. P. Stuhlmacher, *Op. cit.* p.32

and its Magisterium. We have seen that the doctrine of Verbal Inspiration was utilised in this struggle. But, secondly, Calvin, being a theologian of the age, "continued to work with the Bible in the medieval fashion - as an external and formal authority" [55]. There was no real attempt to work out and argue a coherent doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy [56]. The really creative and important legacy to theology, and his pioneering work on the Bible is the articulated relationship between Word and Faith and the Spirit.

55. B. Gerrish, *Op. cit.* p.62

56. *Ibid.* p.299n.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF
LIBERATION THEOLOGY

PART ONE: PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

1. A NEW WAY OF DOING THEOLOGY.

'Liberation theology' is the name give to the specific way of doing theology that has arisen in the Latin American context [1]. It is not just doing theology with 'liberation' as a theme, even a dominant theme, but a *new way* of doing theology [2]. What Liberation theologians mean by this is that the methodology of Liberation theology is unique - there is an 'epistemological' break from the way that theology has traditionally been done in North Atlantic countries. Theology is consciously done in dialogue with social and political events, engaging critically in the struggle for liberation.

1. We would do well to note before we proceed further, that while 'Liberation Theology' refers specifically to the theology that has grown up in Latin America, we can legitimately speak of 'Liberation theologies' - i.e. Feminist theology, Black theology, Asian theology. While these various 'types' of theology insofar as they approximate Liberation theology proper in the area of methodology are part of the broader class of 'Liberation theology', they are not the main focus of this chapter.

2. See, G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. p.15

Even with its *new way* of doing theology, Liberation theology does not escape the question that the 'Scriptures' pose for Christian life and theology. Liberation theology recognises that if it is to remain a 'Christian theology' it has to take the Bible seriously in doing theology. Segundo writes:

Christianity is a *biblical* religion. It is the religion of a *book*, ... This means that theology for its part cannot swerve from its path in this respect. It must keep going back to its book and reinterpreting it [3].

Indeed, rather than evade the question of the interpretation of the Bible, Liberation theology poses a radical challenge to contemporary Reformed (and any other) hermeneutics.

At this point in the discussion we need to make clear what we mean when we speak of hermeneutics. We define it as follows:

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation of a thing-at-hand, in our case the Biblical text. When we speak of an individual's hermeneutic or hermeneutical theory we mean his or her specific theory of interpretation.

To understand fully the radical hermeneutical challenge from Liberation theology, we need to grasp its philosophical roots which are to be found in the critique of objectivist hermeneutic theory. This theory is built on the eighteenth century Enlightenment belief that given the correct *method* an interpreter could sift the evidence and discover the *objective*

3. J.L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*. p.7

4. Cartesian metaphysics resolved the question of true knowledge with the statement, *I think therefore I am*. This exultation of *me* over and against the rest of world found expression in the methodology of Newtonian physics with its radical divide of reality into object and subject. Francis Bacon recognised that objectivity was difficult for the *human* sciences due to various 'idols' which interfere with understanding. Nevertheless, he too believed that one could

truth [4]. Notwithstanding their creative insights into the task of hermeneutics, even Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey could not transcend these objectivist assumptions [5]. Today these concerns are still expressed in Classical Hermeneutic Theory in which hermeneutics is understood as the task of using the correct methods to bridge the gap between a subject (interpreter) and an identifiable object (text), enabling the object to be what it intrinsically is [6].

This concern to be objective has, however, come under vigorous critique from a number of sources. Sigmund Freud has, through his psycho-analysis, shown that what we consciously think we are doing and believing is not necessarily the case. Social Anthropology has warned us of the dangers of 'ethnocentrism' and shown how cultural symbols are 'relative' rather than absolute. Even physical science itself has begun to negate these idols with the correct method. See J. Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, p.21

5. Richard Palmer writes that Dilthey failed to extricate himself "from the scientism and objectivity of the historical school which he had undertaken to transcend". (R. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, p.123). It is Josef Bleicher's view that, "Dilthey's metascience failed to escape from its Cartesian presuppositions and thereby remained unable to do justice to its interest in guiding hermeneutical cognition". (J. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, p.24)

6. For two contemporary expressions of this see the work of Emilio Betti, *Teoria Generale della Interpretazione*. (See J. Bleicher *Op. cit.* pp.51ff. for a condensed English translation of this. Also pp.27 ff. for a discussion of Betti's hermeneutical theory.) and E.D. Hirsch Jr. *Validity in Interpretation*. (See R. Palmer *Op. cit.* pp. 60ff. for a discussion of Hirsch's theory.)

7. Anthony Thiselton notes, "Many scientists themselves adopt an approach to knowledge which is very different from that of Descartes, and from that which is implied by the era of Newtonian physics". A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, p.159

to provide a devastating critique of objectivity in method [7].

The philosophical roots of Liberation Hermeneutics are to be sought, however, not so much on these grounds as in the work of Martin Heidegger, Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard. It is true to say that reliance upon these thinkers is at a very basic and almost 'vulgar' level, and that they have not been appropriated in any thorough-going manner. For this reason, and due to the fact that we are here only attempting to grasp the roots of this hermeneutic, our examination of the seminal ideas of these critical thinkers will be short and at times, simplistic.

2. MARTIN HEIDEGGER: PRE-UNDERSTANDING AND THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

a. *The Fore-Structure of Understanding.*

The German Philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976) asserted that in relating to Being, humans engage in *Understanding* - the grasping of the possibilities of existence within one's world:

Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses itself what its Being is capable of [8].

Humans cannot exist without this primary understanding, making sense of their possibilities of existence in the world. Any attempt to understand entities in the world is secondary to and a derivative of the fundamental hermeneutic.

For Heidegger this means that the act of interpretation

8. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.184

cannot therefore be something which happens across a subject-object divide. On the contrary, the interpreter has an existential involvement with the thing-at-hand which is prior to any such divide. This involvement is disclosed in primary understanding, and when we interpret the thing-at-hand we are simply laying out this understanding [9]. Heidegger calls this the 'as-structure' of interpretation: in understanding we see things as this or as that, and in interpretation we render the as explicit:

the 'world' which has already been understood comes to be interpreted. The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into the sight which understands" [10].

Because the 'thing-at-hand' is already related to us, it means that there is a 'fore-structure' to understanding which involves *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorgriff* [11]. *Vorhabe* means 'fore-having', and by this Heidegger means the "context and anticipation of meaning" [12] that we have in advance of focussing on the 'as-structure'. *Vorsicht* is translated as 'fore-sight' or 'point of view' [13]: "In every case", writes Heidegger, "interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance - in a fore-sight" [14]. *Vorsicht*, like *Vorhabe* also occurs in advance of examining the explicit 'as-structure'.

9. See M. Heidegger, *Op. cit* p.191

10. *Ibid.* p.189

11. *ibid.* p.191

12. J. Bleicher, *op. cit.* p.102

13. See M. Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time.* p.95

14. M. Heidegger, *op. cit.* p.191

Vorgriff, the 'fore-conception', is "something we grasp in advance" [15], which enables us to interpret the 'thing-at-hand'; to conceive of it 'as' something, and thus to render the 'as-structure' explicit. Heidegger can thus make the following claim:

Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded existentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal to what 'stands there', then one finds that what 'stands there' in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting. In an interpretative approach there lies such an assumption, as that which has been 'taken for granted' with the interpretation as such — that is to say, as that which has been presented in our fore-having, fore-sight, and our fore-conception [16].

b. The Hermeneutic Circle

This leads Heidegger to say that, "any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted" [17]. And by this he means that interpretation takes place within a 'hermeneutic' circle:

But if interpretation must in any case already operate in that which is understood, and if it must draw its nurture from this, how is it to bring any scientific results to maturity without moving in a circle, especially if, moreover, the understanding which is presupposed still operates within our common information about man and the world? [18].

15. *ibid.* p.191

16. *Ibid.* p.191f.

17. M. Heidegger, *Op. cit.* p.194

18. *Ibid.* p.194

For Heidegger this is not a vicious circle, but rather a creative one: There can be no interpretation or understanding outside of it. "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.... It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing" [19]. Heidegger can thus assert that should we try to avoid the circle, or see it as an inevitable imperfection, we will have misunderstood the whole act of understanding [20]. The circular nature of understanding also makes clear that the pre-structuredness of understanding is not simply "a property of consciousness over against an already given world" [21]. A change in world will lead to a change in pre-structure and consciousness in a dialectical manner.

3. KARL MARX: KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE.

Karl Marx (1818 - 83) saw the link between existence and understanding in that he saw the historicity of all consciousness. For him, however, 'existence' meant existing in the real world, and participating in the struggle to control the means of production.

a. Human Alienation, and Class Struggle.

Marx did not explicitly outline his theory of consciousness,

19. *Ibid.* p.195

20. See, *Ibid.* p.194

21. R. Palmer, *Op. cit.* p.136

but it is implied in his basic theory of historical materialism. This theory is expounded most adequately in the "Theses on Feuerbach", and *The German Ideology* [22].

For Marx, the first premise of history is real people, their activity and "the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" [23]. This is a deep break with two major philosophical traditions: against Idealism, Marx propounded a basic materialist theory and against Feuerbach he did not conceive of the material as 'static'. At a philosophical level, Marx argues for a unity between subject and object (contra Feuerbach) and yet located that unity not in an act of consciousness of the subject (contra Idealism) but in the subject's practical activity. Marx spells this out in his First thesis on Feuerbach:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the *active side*, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism - but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects really differentiated from the thought objects, but

22. F. Engels co-operated with him, but from all accounts it was Marx's handiwork. *The German Ideology* serves as the basis for any understanding of his theory of historical materialism and of consciousness. Marx's comments in his 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in 1859, that he and Engels had "abandoned the manuscript [*The German Ideology*] to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose - self clarification" should not be taken as a rejection of this major work, but rather as a recognition of its theoretical importance.

23. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, p.42

he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity..... Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical' activity [24].

This is the real key to Marx's theory of historical materialism, and thus his theory of consciousness.

In the first moments of history, real people produced the means to satisfy their primary needs, and this led to new needs and new forms of production. At the same time they remake their lives by relating to other people and propagating their kind [25]. Since the dawn of history humans have always been related to nature and to human beings. These two relationships are themselves fundamentally related: a certain way of relating to nature, of gaining a living, a certain type of labour, i.e. a certain mode of production, goes hand in hand with a certain way of relating to other people, i.e. a certain mode of co-operation:

the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society [26].

Over time, as people undertake, or have thrust upon them, different responsibilities in the production process, a 'division of labour' emerges, and the 'nature of society' reflects this division. In the event, society starts to shape and control the lives of people rather than people shaping and controlling society. Human beings become alienated from the

24. K. Marx, "Thesis on Feuerbach" in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, p.243

25. Marx sees these as the three "moments which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men". K. Marx and F. Engels, *Ibid.* p.50.

26. *Ibid.* p.50

produce of their labour, and because creative activity is part of what it means to become human, they become alienated from the 'species being' [27].

At the heart of human existence, then, there is an inverted social relationship which finds itself expressed in the conflict between one human and another, which neither wills but from which neither can escape. Because it is the division of labour which exercises this control, this conflict is expressed in its most obvious form as class conflict. Hence Marx can say that history is really a history of class struggles [28].

b. Practical Activity and Conscious Existence.

It is while engaging in production and in relating to other people that consciousness first appears, argues Marx. This consciousness moves through three stages. First there is a consciousness of the immediate sensuous surroundings; then a 'herd-consciousness' - of the necessity of associating with others; and finally when the division of labour has reached a developed stage and there exists a division between mental and material labour, consciousness may emancipate itself from the world. But even this pure form of consciousness has arisen from the material conditions.

Marx draws two implications from this which radically challenge the notion of objectivity in understanding. (i) He

27. See, *Ibid.* p.54

28. See the section on "Civil Society and the Conception of History" in *Ibid.* pp. 57ff.

argues that "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence" [29], and while pure consciousness might not seem to arise from existence, it does. This is Marx's basic polemic against the German Idealists [30], and he points out that in "direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth (and has thus misunderstood the nature of things), here we ascend from earth to heaven" [31].

Keeping in mind Marx's critique of Feuerbach's *old* materialism, we can appreciate that when Marx speaks of consciousness arising out of existence he does not mean consciousness is a pure emanation from a static existence, (i.e. an independent object), but from practical activity, from a dialectical engagement in history. Consciousness arises from praxis. As Marx puts it:

This conception of history [i.e. historical materialism]... does not explain practice from the idea, but explains the formation of the idea from material practice [32].

The material practice of a person will always 'control' his ideas and hence shape his understanding and interpretation, making objectivity impossible.

(ii) Consciousness arises from praxis, but due to the division of labour, this is an alienated and alienating praxis. Ideas embody or carry within themselves this

29. *Ibid.* p.47

30. *Ibid.* p.41

31. *Ibid.* p.46

32. *Ibid.* p.58

alienation, and because they know no reality other than this inverted social relationship, they cannot question it. As the existing reality benefits the ruling class (for that is the definition of a ruling class), these ideas, in turn, benefit the ruling class.

When Marx wrote that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" [33] he was expressing no more than a truism in that, as he points out:

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it [34].

Ways of understanding and interpreting reality are thus radically engaged in the political and economic power struggles of the day. They can therefore never be neutral or objective for they are always related to human interests.

c. Criticism, Revolution and History.

Due to the relationship between praxis and consciousness, Marx emphasises that praxis rather than consciousness must be altered if one is going to make any difference at the level of real conditions. Ideas themselves cannot overcome the basic inversion in society, because it is an inversion at the level of reality rather than consciousness.

For this reason, Marx asserts that Historical Materialism

comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental

33. *Ibid.* p.64

34. *Ibid.* p.64

criticism, by resolution into 'self-consciousness' or by transformation into 'apparitions', 'spectres', 'fancies', etc., but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory [35].

Marx thus sets up revolutionary praxis as the way to change the real relations at ground level. Unlike normal praxis which leads to the alienation we noted above, revolutionary praxis seeks to overthrow the inversion in society allowing humans to control their own destiny: overcoming the alienation of the labourer from the product of his labour and man from his 'species-being'.

Although criticism alone will not free society from alienation, Marx makes it clear that it has a role to play. One needs both the "criticism of the weapon" and the "weapon of criticism" [36]. Therefore Marx argues that two basic things are needed for revolutionary praxis. On the one hand, the existence of the right material conditions, and on the other the beginnings of an awareness of the task that is to be done. Neither is sufficient in itself. The two need to find a unity in the active praxis of individuals and groups of people working for a new social order. Marx finds this unity of consciousness

35. *Ibid.* p.58f.

36. K. Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Religion*. p.50

37. For example, "As philosophy finds its *material* weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapon in philosophy... The emancipation of the German is the emancipation of man. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the

and conditions in an historical class - the proletariat [37].

Marx makes himself clear: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" [38]. The concern is that the 'truth' of history cannot be established at the level of ideas but only at the level of reality:

The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world* [39].

Marx's theory of consciousness therefore makes it clear that understanding and interpretation are located within the concrete struggle for a new social order.

4. SOREN KIERKEGAARD: FAITH AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF TRUTH

Marx's biting criticism of the exaltation of 'ideas' over reality, and his fundamental concern to locate truth at the level of conscious action, finds an echo in the work of his contemporary, Danish philosopher-theologian, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55). Kierkegaard also had a highly critical reaction to Hegelian idealism, and was likewise highly critical of contemporary Christianity. Yet whereas Marx never saw the possibility of 'redeeming' Christianity, this was Kierkegaard's proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality". *Ibid.* p.58f.

38. K. Marx, "Thesis on Feuerbach" in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, p.245

39. K. Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Religion*, p.42

40. See for example, D.B. Forrester, "The attack on Christendom

prime concern [40].

a. Truth and Existence

Kierkegaard saw the problem with Christianity as lying in its wholehearted acceptance of 'speculative philosophy'. In particular he was critical of its cold, detached 'objectivity' which believed that truth could be discovered only if the seeker remained neutral and indifferent, and did not take sides in any conflict between interests and values. He saw his task as providing a radical critique of this objectivity from a *religious* perspective.

The key to his critique lies in his understanding of the human thinker as an "existing spirit" [41], a person who is involved in life, and thus in a state of 'existing' or 'coming into being' [42]. Once again we meet the concern to locate understanding and consciousness within existence.

Kierkegaard advances two reasons for his rejection of objectivity. (i) There can be no 'final' or 'complete' identity between thought and being because it is an existing, living person who is engaged in seeking 'truth':

... the notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction, in its truth only an expectation of the creature; not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is an existing individual for whom the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time [43].

in Marx and Kierkegaard" in the *SJT*, Vol 25 pp.181ff.

41. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.170

42. *Ibid.* p.172

43. *Ibid.* p.176

For Kierkegaard then, truth never *is*, it is always in a process of coming into being.

(ii) Kierkegaard turns to the question of indifference. He accepts that for an existing human being there is some knowledge to which he can remain indifferent. This he calls 'accidental knowledge' [44]. For issues of fundamental importance, however, the way to objective truth - indifference and neutrality - defeats the whole significance of that truth: it "transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing" [45]. Thus in contrast to 'objective' speculative philosophy, Kierkegaard maintains that it is precisely in its effect upon the subject that real truth is *known*: "knowledge has a relationship to the knower, who is essentially an existing individual, and that for this reason all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence" [46]. Kierkegaard goes on to say that ethical and ethico-religious knowledge has this essential relationship to the existence of the knower.

b. Inwardness, Passion, and Faith.

Against 'speculative philosophy' which saw truth in the Christian faith as 'objective knowledge' about something, Kierkegaard locates truth in the depth to which the subject engages in the knowing. This is the main thrust in his 'attack

44. *Ibid.* p.176

45. *Ibid.* p.173

46. *Ibid.* p.177.

upon Christendom': against those who seek the "true God objectively" or the "approximate truth of the God-idea", Kierkegaard argues that having an experience of God, i.e. engaging oneself subjectively in the search for truth, is far more important, and gives one a far deeper knowledge of God. [47]. Put another way: the challenge is to be a disciple, rather than merely to know what discipleship means. Unless the truth affects the knower inwardly it is of no consequence; and being of no consequence it can not make any claims to truth.

'Infinite Truth' or 'truth about God', is grasped in passion, argues Kierkegaard, rather than in indifference and neutrality. In being passionate, one is being radically subjective, "and thus subjectivity becomes the truth" [48]. The moment one dispenses with subjectivity in favour of an objective certainty, one can no longer claim to know the truth. This is the substance of Kierkegaard's definition of truth: "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness" [49]. Kierkegaard, has no hesitation in calling this passionate appropriation process, faith:

Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over

47. *Ibid.* p.179

48. *Ibid.* p.181

49. *Ibid.* p.182

seventy fathoms of water, still preserving my faith [50].

God, argues Kierkegaard, can only be known in faith and the more one seeks objective knowledge about him by defining more and more the 'God-idea', one takes away the element of risk replacing it with objective security. This denies the subjective inwardness of truth and ultimately, faith:

An objective knowledge of the truth of Christianity, or of its truths, is precisely untruth. To know a confession of faith by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness [51].

Truth for a Christian is not a summary of 'doctrinal results', but on the contrary lies in the process of struggle, searching and passionate engagement. Furthermore, this truth cannot be 'owned' by the believer, it must be 'leapt into' time and again, "on the road of authentic commitment" [52].

5. THE APPROPRIATION OF THE CRITIQUE OF OBJECTIVITY.

Contemporary hermeneutic theory has undoubtedly been influenced to a very large degree by the thought of Martin Heidegger and Karl Marx. Heidegger's ideas on the relationship between existence and thought, on the fore-structure of understanding (preunderstanding) and the hermeneutical circle, pose a fundamental critique of objectivist hermeneutics. His work entered the mainstream of contemporary hermeneutics through the work of Rudolf Bultmann in the area of New Testament interpretation, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Philosophical*
50. *Ibid.* p.182

51. *Ibid.* p.201

52. A. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology.* p.47

Hermeneutics [53].

The development of Marx's thought on consciousness has been as varied as it has been extensive [54]. In the specific realm of hermeneutics it has perhaps been most ably developed by Jurgen Habermas in his major work, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, and his project of *Critical Hermeneutics*. Habermas argues that one must treat the text as an ideological product, and thus seek to unmask the human *interests* behind it.

It is not our task to engage in a discussion of Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics* or Habermas' *Critical Hermeneutics*, interesting though this may be, for there is no direct appropriation of their work by the Liberation theologians. Here we simply need to recognise that Liberation hermeneutics share the same philosophical roots, and hence some of the same concerns of *Philosophical* and *Critical Hermeneutics*. To these concerns, however, it has also added Kierkegaard's 'passion' and 'engagement', enabling it to mould a distinctive Christian hermeneutic.

Borrowing from Heidegger, it concentrates its attention on the interpreter and consciously appropriates such notions as pre-understanding and the hermeneutical circle. However, using the insights of Marx it raises questions about the relationship

53. See H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. and *Reason in the Age of Science*. A.C. Thiselton *Op. cit.* examines the interrelationship between the thought of Heidegger, Gadamer and Bultmann, and also of the philosopher Wittgenstein.

54. See for example L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism, Vol 3: The Breakdown.*; A. McGovern, *Marxism, an American Christian Perspective.*; J. Larrain, *Marxism and Ideology.*

of the interpreter to society, and thus grounds the 'circle' and pre-understanding in real history. Weir has commented that:

Form criticism has taught us to seek the *sitz im Leben* of the text. The hermeneutics of Liberation theology are challenging scholarship to discuss the *sitz im Leben* of the interpretation" [55].

Heidegger argued convincingly that no one can come to the text without presuppositions, and he saw these presuppositions in existential terms. The Liberation theologians, also make clear that there is no possibility of coming to the text with a *Tabula Rasa* in that we all bring our own agendas to the study of the Bible which cloud everything from our initial approach to the Bible to the 'truth' we discover in its pages. However, it is recognised that these agendas are clouded not by the philosophical category of existence, but by the concrete realities of life in which the interpreter is living:

What Bultmann has so convincingly argued concerning a *preunderstanding*, which every man brings to his interpretation of the text, must be deepened and made more concrete, not in the abstract philosophical analysis of existence, but in the concrete conditions of men who belong to a certain time, people, and class, who are engaged in certain courses of action, even out of Christian action, and who reflect and read the texts within and out of these conditions [56].

What Miguez Bonino recognises here is that the historical praxis that we are engaged in is intimately bound up with our interpretation of the Bible, and it is not something that we can escape. Some theologians attempt to be neutral, and thus

55. J.E. Weir, "The Bible and Marx" in *SJT*. Vol 35, p.344

56. J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. p. 90f.

to discover the 'pure' meaning of a text. The Liberation theologians recognise that this is a futile task, - it cannot be done. However, they go further and say that because it robs hermeneutics of a vital key - it must not be done!

Here we can see the significance of Kierkegaard's critique of objectivity [57]. This dilemma is creatively defined in his 'paradox of objectivity', namely, that in the process of trying to be objective about 'essential knowledge' one actually loses the possibility of knowing. A real knowledge of God's message in the Bible will be found in passionate engagement in existence. Liberation Theologians go beyond Kierkegaard's understanding of existence at an individual level, and understand it as historical praxis. Truth is disclosed not in the abstract but through praxis.

As we turn now to an examination of the Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology, it must be pointed out that this survey is an eclectic one, and that the hermeneutic theory that will be described is taken from the work of a number of theologians, and is thus necessarily synthetic. It goes without saying that these theologians will not always agree with each other, and it also needs to be noted that to some extent there is, on the issue of reading the Bible, a

57. It should be pointed out that while Kierkegaard's thought is 'borrowed' by the Liberation Theologians, none of them actually acknowledge this. This is due in part to the fact that his thought has to a large degree become accepted in much contemporary theology. It is Kierkegaard's critique of Objectivity that enables the hermeneutics of Liberation theology to use Heidegger and Marx and yet remain a *Christian* hermeneutic.

broad division between the more 'grass-roots' and 'academic' theologians [58].

58. In a way fascinatingly similar to the broad division sketched by Segundo in a recent article. See J.L. Segundo, "The Shift within Latin American Theology", in the *JTSA* No. 52, pp.17ff.

PART TWO: LIBERATION HERMENEUTICS

1. SOME KEY INGREDIENTS.

a. Ideological Captivity: A Hermeneutics of suspicion

As the above philosophical insights are applied to the way that the Bible is interpreted there arises a suspicion about the results. J.L. Segundo, argues that ideological suspicion about the way that contemporary society is explained, leads on to an exegetical suspicion about the way that the Bible has been explained [59]. Miguez Bonino captures this need for suspicion in this following comment:

Every interpretation of the texts which is offered to us (....) must be investigated in relation to the praxis out of which it comes.... Very concretely we cannot receive the theological interpretation coming from the rich world without suspecting it and, therefore, asking what kind of praxis it supports, reflects or legitimises [60].

In other words, the 'Western Sciences of Interpretation', or the 'Historical Critical Method', are forever open to suspicion precisely because of the praxis out of which they arise. Miguez Bonino continues to write: "Even a cursory reading of the history of interpretation in European Theology since the eighteenth century leaves little doubt in this respect. 'Scientific', 'historical', or 'objective' exegesis reveals

59. Steps one and three in his *hermeneutical circle* - to which we shall return in due course. See, *The Liberation of Theology*. p.8

60. J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.91

itself as full of ideological presuppositions" [61].

Factors that are advanced for 'clouding' the Scriptures include *conceptual* weaknesses such as the use of non-Biblical Greek categories for interpretation [62], and *methodological* weaknesses such as the attempt to read the Bible from an interclass perspective, dealing with the vague category of *humanity*, "rather than with *workers* as they try to wrest from the dominant class its hold on the means of production and its hold over the vital spheres of human life" [63].

These weaknesses are so much part of the 'western science of interpretation', that they have in fact kept hidden from the Church a number of important issues that are contained in the Scriptures. For example, Miguez Bonino asks why it has taken so long for the political motifs in the life of Christ to surface in the work of Biblical scholars, and why for so long God was understood as impersonal and timeless [64].

Perhaps the greatest expression of 'ideological captivity', is the way that exegesis seeks to spiritualise the message of the Bible. It is here that suspicion must be strictly exercised:

Every interpretation which seeks to minimise or spiritualise the project for man's liberation in contemporary history (eg. every dualistic notion of salvation) is ideologically suspect for its hidden

61. J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.91

62. See J.A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology.* p.90

63. S. Rostagno, "The Bible: Is an Interclass Reading Legitimate?" in *The Bible and Liberation.* p.62.

64. J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.91

political motivations [65].

Questions need to be asked about the 'praxis' out of which this 'theory' of spiritualising comes. More often than not it is from a praxis that supports the status quo, and attempts to evade the radical nature of the Biblical message. [66]. R. McAfee Brown gives an example of a personal experience in which he was challenged about the ideological influences behind his interpretation, and acknowledges that "what we brought to our thinking massively influenced what we took from it. The fact that we were unaware of all of this only underlines how deep our ideological captivity was" [67].

The result of exegesis being controlled by First World scholars, writes George V. Pixley, is that, "the Bible has often been used against the lives of ordinary people" [68]. The hermeneutics of suspicion is thus a key task for liberation theology in its task to recapture the Bible for the struggle for liberation.

b. Privilege: A Hermeneutics from Below

65. J.A. Kirk, *Op. cit.* p.40

66. R McAfee Brown gives some examples of the way that Luke 4:16-30, the Magnificat, and the Beatitudes have been interpreted. For example, the commentator in *The Interpreter's Bible* (!) on the verse which speaks of 'release to the captives' says: "The captivity referred to is evidently moral and spiritual. Thought is not moving now on the plane of opening doors of physical jails, but rather of setting men free from the invisible but terribly real imprisonment into which their souls may fall". In R. McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, p.82f.

67. *Ibid.* p.78

68. G.V. Pixley, "Biblical Embodiments of God's Kingdom" *The Bible and Liberation*, p.114

If it is recognised that everyone brings their own bias to Scripture when they come to interpret it, is there any way of discovering 'truth' in the Bible? J. Miguez Bonino captures this dilemma very neatly when he says that due to the fact that in the Latin American situation there are only 'reactionary, reformist and revolutionary engagements' there are therefore only reactionary, reformist, and revolutionary readings of Scripture [69]. The point is made: it is impossible to seek a 'bias-free' vantage point for Biblical interpretation as some would have us believe. This, as we saw, was one of the key points in Heidegger's attack on 'objectivist' interpretation, and of Kierkegaard's attack on 'objective religious knowledge'. Rather, the task is "to seek to make one's own bias come as close to that of the Scriptures as possible" [70]. It is the strong contention of the Liberation Theologians that due to the conditions in which the Bible was written, and due to God's particular concern for them, the poor have the closest 'bias' to that of Scripture.

Shussler Fiorenza writes: "To truly understand the Bible is to read it through the eyes of the oppressed, since the God who speaks in the Bible is the God of the oppressed. For a correct interpretation of the Bible it is necessary to acknowledge the 'hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed', and to develop a

69. See, J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.99

70. R. McAfee Brown, *Op. cit.* p.84

71. E. Schussler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation theology, in *The Challenge of Liberation theology: A First World*

hermeneutics 'from below' [71]. This is summed up by Carlos Mesters, who works with Christians in the base communities as they seek to read the Bible from their own perspective:

Biblical exegetes, using their heads and their studies can come fairly close to Abraham; but their feet are a long way from Abraham. The common people are very close to Abraham with their feet. They are living the same sort of situation. Their life-process is of the same nature and they can identify with him [72].

Because consciousness and pre-conceptions arise out of experience, it is true then that those who read the Bible from below, have a different perspective to those who view it from above. What Liberation Theology claims is that due to the fact that the Bible was written 'from below' by people who knew the struggles, hardships and pain of such life, it is those who have an affinity with that struggle, hardship and pain, who can best understand the text of the Bible, and understand it in a way that Western Academics never could.

c. Partiality: A Hermeneutics of Engagement

For those who are 'non-poor' is there ever a hope then of capturing a true understanding of the Bible? This is possible, argue the Liberation Theologians, if one is prepared to adopt a "clear, political, sociological or theological stance, 'a partiality that is consciously accepted'" [73], and this partiality is obviously a partiality towards the poor and
Response, p.100

72. C. Mesters, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People", in *The Bible and Liberation*, p.125

73. J.E. Weir, "Marx and the Bible, A Discussion of the Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology" in the *SJT* Vol 35, 1982 p.343

oppressed. This is also known as the 'advocacy stance' [74]. In the light of this, J. Weir notes that, "far from seeking to get rid of their presuppositions, [Liberation Theologians] regard them as essential to the interpretive process, as the very basis of that conviction grounded in a perspective essentially and unashamedly necessary for the creative interpretation of Scripture" [75]. In Kierkegaardian language, it is passionate engagement in the struggles of life that alone holds the possibility for true understanding [76].

In summary, then, the Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology, involves (i) a *hermeneutics of suspicion* - a critical awareness of the way in which the praxis of the interpreter always clouds the text, making the interpretation 'suspect'; (ii) a *hermeneutics from below* which accepts that this being the case then it is clear that those whose praxis approximates that of the writers of the texts (i.e. the oppressed-poor) can best understand the message of the text; (iii) and a *hermeneutics of engagement* which challenges all interpreters to take an 'option for the poor' [77], and to accept this

74. E. Schussler Fiorenza. *op. cit.*, p.107

75. J.E. Weir, *Op. cit.* p.343

76. It is this lack of engagement which is the key point in Charles Villa-Vicencio's critique of the hermeneutics of Ferdinand Deist. While Villa-Vicencio sees this as an ideological difference rather than a hermeneutical one, a case can be made that it is in fact a hermeneutical difference: i.e. a refusal to participate in the *hermeneutics* of engagement. See, "The Use of Scripture in Theology: Toward a Contextual Hermeneutic" in the *JTSA*, No. 37 pp.3ff.

77. See, A. Nolan, "The Option for the Poor in South Africa" in *Resistance and Hope* for a discussion on what this option is and is not.

partiality as the key to opening up Biblical reflection on the Christian mission and witness. Mesters speaks of this conscious 'taking of an option':

If you do take sides with the poor, you will discern things in the Bible that an exegete does not see [78].

2. THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE AND HERMENEUTICAL CIRCULATION

a. *Segundo's Hermeneutical Circle.*

When we speak of the way that social forces control our interpretation of the Bible, and when we recognise that it is only through the conscious taking of an option that we can really comprehend the Bible, we are in effect doing no more than recognising that our understanding and experience of reality provides the grounding for understanding of the Bible, and that the 'truth' of the Bible is discovered in passionate engagement rather than in objective indifference. Now at the same time, the Liberation Theologians recognise that the Bible does play a role in the shaping of Christian praxis - that the motivation and direction we receive from the Bible can help us to respond to that reality. This is really the model of the hermeneutical circle which is suggested by Heidegger. At the same time, however, there is a recognition of the role which social and economic forces play in the circle.

It is Segundo who has articulated this circle most fully, and we shall examine his proposal at some depth here. This is his 'preliminary definition' of this circle:

It is the continuing change in our interpretation

78. C. Mesters, *Op. cit.* p.130

of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal [79].

For this to happen, Segundo sees the need for two preconditions. The first is that there be a healthy set of questions arising out of the reality around us, questions which challenge our conceptions. The second is that we be willing and open to change our interpretation of Scripture [80].

There are four stages or 'decisive factors' in Segundo's circle. (i) As one experiences reality, one becomes suspicious that all is not as it seems. Ideological suspicion arises, and one recognises, for example, that behind the veneer of peace and order lurks violence and exploitation. One has to become critical of one's society in order to begin to participate in the circle: "A human being who is content with the world will not have the least interest in unmasking the mechanisms that conceal the authentic reality" [81]. (ii) This critical awareness of society then spills over into the second 'decisive factor' which is the application of this suspicion to all areas of life and thought including theology. One recognises that theology and other forms of consciousness fail to deal adequately with reality. Segundo cites Karl Marx as an example of an individual who reached this point.

(iii) Marx, however, could not go beyond step two, because this requires a commitment to theology - but one that involves

79. J.L. Segundo, *Op.cit.* p.81

80. *Ibid.* p.8f.

81. *Ibid.* p.10

exegetical suspicion, "that is, the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account" [82]. (iv) This leads in turn to the fourth decisive factor - namely the appropriation of a new way of reading the Bible - a new hermeneutic. James Cone in his *A Black Theology of Liberation*, is one who moves to this stage, argues Segundo. By immersing himself fully in and committing himself to the black struggle for liberation, Cone is able to understand the Bible in a new way, in a way that is not possible for one who is not so immersed and committed [83].

b. Hermeneutic Circulation.

Now precisely because this is a circle and not a straight line, factors four and one are related in such a way that the affirmation of a new hermeneutic - the grasping of new possibilities in the Biblical text - leads on to a deeper commitment to the struggle for liberation [84]:

New human possibilities lead us to enlarge our understanding of the Biblical witness - indeed, in

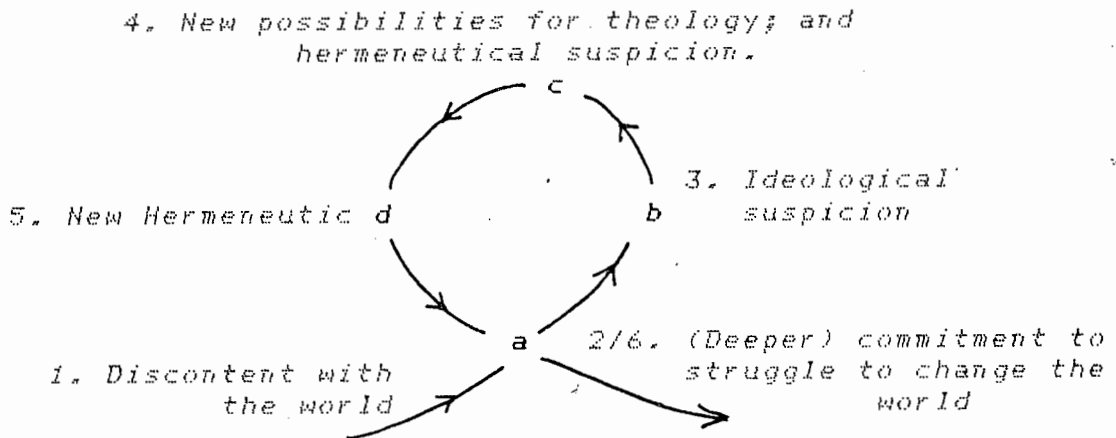
82. *Ibid.* p.9

83. Steven G. Mackie's contention that none of the Liberation Theologians themselves actually meet the four criteria of this circle should be borne in mind here. See "Praxis as the Context for Liberation: A Study of Latin American Liberation Theology" in the *JTSA* No. 24, pp.31ff.

84. It should be noted that this circle also receives support from a study of the way that the Scriptures themselves were written. Croatto has, for example, indicated how this happened for New Testament Christology: "The primitive church interpreted Jesus from the perspective of the scriptures, but at the same time it interpreted the scriptures from the perspective of the Jesus event. In fact, the event (Jesus) that generates the word (New Testament) comes first; but the New Testament, in turn, was possible only as a re-reading of the Old Testament. In J.S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*. p.2

evangelical terms, the Spirit discloses Jesus Christ to us as we engage in the concrete witness to his redeeming love. But also the love which belongs to God's Kingdom suggests further horizons for human life which act as magnetic poles or horizons of hope for kindling man's analytical and ideological imagination [85].

To picture it graphically, we have the circle which looks like this:



Because the stress is on action in the world in response to God's Word, rather than merely contemplating it from afar, Miguez Bonino suggests the use of Georges Casalis' term - '*Hermeneutical Circulation*'. This linguistic change carries with it a change in emphasis, in which it is recognised that the interpreter does not sit still and let his mind go round a carousel of thought, but is actively moving, i.e. circulating in real life. This also enables Liberation Theology to sufficiently distance itself from Heidegger-Gadamer-Bultmann project, and to indicate just where it differs.

85. J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.151

c. The Church as Hermeneutic Community.

A crucial point to be grasped is that while this circle/circulation is something through which an individual moves, the task of interpreting and responding to Scripture is a communal task - a task for the church. "A Christian hermeneutics is unthinkable as a purely individual undertaking. It necessarily presupposes a 'hermeneutical community'" [86]. Due to the primacy of praxis in the circle, it is recognised that the experience of a group or a community is as a matter of course a much deeper one to start from. So much of the Biblical text arose within the faith-community, that the communal perspective is a vital key to understanding. Croatto writes of 'the dialogical word', in 'the communitarian group: or community based hermeneutics': "Anyone who has had the least experience of grassroots communities knows the richness and depth of the people in understanding the kerygma" [87]. Mesters puts it like this:

The community is the resonance chamber; the text is a violin string. When the people pluck the string (the Biblical text), it resonates in the community and out comes the music. And that music sets the people dancing and singing. The community of faith is like a big pot in which Bible and community are cooked just right until they become one tasty dish [88].

As we examine this circle/circulation, there are two questions that arise from it. Namely that of 'entrance' and that of 'verification'. It is to these two issues that we shall

86. *Ibid.* p.154

87. J.S Croatto, *Op. cit.* p.11

88. C. Mesters, *Op. cit.* p.131

now turn as we examine in more depth the workings of such a hermeneutical circle/circulation.

3. ENTERING THE CIRCLE.

a. Reading the Signs of the Times

In a way, it is impossible not to be involved in a hermeneutical circle/circulation - this we have seen was established by Heidegger: all thought is circular. Simply by being human we enter into such a circle/circulation. Nevertheless, there are different types of circulation, and the question is how one enters specifically into one that leads to and supports a liberative praxis. Liberation theologians argue that it is our reading of everyday reality that is the key to a re-reading of the Biblical text.

Apart from the influence of Marx which is evident here in the insistence that social reality influences thought, the Liberation theologians have also reworked the concept of God acting in history in the present, so that the discerning hearer will be able to hear his Word in the events of the present, or in the 'Signs of the Times'. The phrase comes from Matt. 16:3 [89] in which Jesus charges that the Pharisees and Saducees could not discern the 'signs of the times' (*semeia ton kairon*), meaning the significance of God's act in Jesus' life and ministry. This was brought into contemporary Catholic thought by Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, and has been used by the

89. J.S. Croatto, *OP. cit.* p.8 incorrectly gives the reference as Luke 11:56!

Liberation Theologians to support the call to take the signs of God in the world seriously. Human history is the locale of God's revelation "so if we wish to identify the liberating God who still saves us today, we will be hard put to find God outside the *human* process of liberation. And that is an act of faith....." [90]. For this reason, Liberation ~~Th~~ology argues very forcefully that one needs to read from two books: the Bible and Life, or History.

This of course is readily seen in the hermeneutical circle/circulation in which there is a constant dialogue between life and the text. Vidales writes

It is one dialectical activity, not two separate, parallel tasks. On the one hand, theologians are constantly referred back to the original happening embodied in Jesus and his message because they must be able to explore and understand the fact of history from the standpoint of the Christ happening. On the other hand, theologians are immersed wholly in the process of concrete history because they are obliged to appreciate the pulse of the Word that has been sown into the ground of history. It is useless and meaningless to do one part of the job and neglect the other. Both phases are part and parcel of one operative totality [91].

b. Starting with the World.

With an awareness that human history does have something to say to Christians, and with a methodological awareness of the role real history has in shaping our thoughts, there comes the recognition that events of the present are the starting place, i.e that the hermeneutical circulation/circle starts with such

90. *Ibid.* p. v

91. R. Vidales "Methodological Issues in Liberation Theology" in *Frontiers in Liberation Theology*. p. 40f.

a reading of the 'signs of the times'. For this reason Weir argues that the first fundamental principle which informs the hermeneutics of the Theology of Liberation is that "it begins with an analysis of contemporary reality rather than an examination of the ancient historical context" [92]. Thus Croatto can write of his work on the Exodus:

In order to write these pages from a hermeneutical and Latin American perspective, I do not first carry out an exegesis of the biblical passages and subsequently relate it to the facts of our world or our oppressed continent. Rather the facts must be and are, prior to my interpretation of the biblical Word" [93].

This is what he means when he says that "to be attentive to history is to better understand the Gospel" [94], and why Mesters can say that "Life, the life we all live has helped me to understand the Bible better" [95].

To be able to read the 'book' of life, one needs access to the sciences that open it up, or in Segundo's words, "to go in search of Sociology" [96]. Sciences which explain the present are thus more important for helping us understand the Bible than those which open up the past. "Thus the fundamental difference between the traditional academic theologian and the Liberation theologian", writes Segundo, "is that the latter feels compelled at every step to combine the disciplines that

92. J.E. Weir, *Op. cit.* p.339

93. J.S. Croatto, *Op. cit.* p.11

94. *Ibid.* p.8

95. C. Mesters, *The Road to Freedom.* p.9

96. J.L. Segundo, *Op. cit.* p.69

open up the past with the disciplines that help explain the present. And he feels this necessity precisely in the task of working out and elaborating theology, that is to say, in the task of interpreting the Word of God as it is addressed to us here and now" [97].

In the Latin American situation these sciences would need to deal with the situation of oppression and injustice enabling hermeneutics to be "open and sensitive to the history of our peoples, the geography of hunger, the culture of violence, the language of the voiceless masses, the world of oppression, and the structures of an unjust social order that is badly in need of God's message of freedom" [98]. And it would need to be a theory capable of giving rise to an ideological suspicion - in such a way that Biblical interpretation would constantly be moving around the circle, between its sources and present reality. For many Liberation theologians Marxist-influenced political-economy provides the backdrop for critical awareness and understanding of reality and enables the interpreter to be constantly suspicious of society.

For the circle to really become a circle, there needs to be acceptance of points three and four in Segundo's model - i.e. the specifically Christian points. This of course raises the issue of whether one's faith influences points one and two. It must be clear that the mere fact that one is a Christian and a member of a Christian community means that one's praxis and

97. *Ibid.* p.8

98. R. Vidales, *Op. cit.* p.48

experience is automatically different from one who is not a Christian. Even the concern to seek the signs of the times is a *Christian* concern. In talking about entrance to the circle, then, we assume that there has already been a 'step in faith'. Segundo is critical of Assmann's contention that one can jump straight into the revolutionary process i.e. a praxis that will lead to a new hermeneutic, without 'getting' that commitment from somewhere: "The fact is that personal commitment to revolution is preceded by some ideology or other, whether it comes from Marx, or Mao's sayings, or the gospel message" [99].

Entrance into the circle, then, really begins at that point in which the Christian, through an experience of the world realises the need for changes in it, and turns to Scripture in the light of having this awareness. This stepping into the circle in the search for 'Christian knowledge' about the situation is akin to Kierkegaard's passionate engagement of an objective uncertainty - the initiating of a process of struggle in which truth is grasped subjectively rather than objectively.

4. VERIFICATION AND CRITICAL BIBLICAL STUDIES.

a. The need for Verificaiton.

In his examination of James Cone's interpretation of the Scriptures Segundo writes that with Cone

99. J.L. Segundo, *Op. cit.* p.101

the hermeneutic circle will be completed. Remember that this fact in itself is not a sufficient proof of the truth of the theology in question. The hermeneutic circle itself merely proves that a theology is alive [100].

What this suggests is that two people who both affirm the hermeneutic circle can disagree on Biblical interpretation, and indeed Segundo in fact goes on to say that in some respects he disagrees with Cone's interpretation. If you reject any notion of absolute 'truth' and objectivity the question then becomes: how does one verify the interpretation of Scripture that any particular person may have, whether they be reactionary, reformist or revolutionary [101]? Is everyone allowed to plunder the Scriptures for their own justification of an already accepted praxis? "Is the path of this circle in any way verifiable? In other words, can the correlation between the text in its own historicity and our own historical reading of it be in any way controlled, verified, or falsified?" asks Miguez Bonino [102]. The question is obviously a crucial one, particularly in the task to move the Church onto the side of the struggle for liberation.

Certainly in some strands of Liberation Theology there is a very naive approach to the text that has to be challenged simply in terms of the text itself and on the grounds of intellectual honesty. For example in his *The Road to Freedom*, Carlos Mesters takes a very superficial look at the Exodus

100. *Ibid.* p.25

101. See, J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.99

102. *Ibid.* p.102f.

event and story. There is no questioning at all of the traditions which have grown up around the event and then collected at various times over a period of 600 years to give us the story as we know it in Exodus 1-15. There is very little exegetical work, resulting in the far fetched comment on Exodus 2:11-15 that "Moses had been a guerilla leader and had taken part in an abortive coup" [103]. Such a comment requires a tremendous amount of reading into the text even to the extent of falsifying the record!

b. Critical Exegesis.

It can be seen that the key task in the quest for verification is the use of rigorous Biblical Study. Miguez Bonino deals with this issue at length, arguing that because one accepts the objective historicity of events in the Bible, "theological hermeneutics cannot forgo the effort to gain access to the text by means of the critical (historical, literary, traditio-history, linguistic) instruments which the sciences of interpretation have created" [104]. He notes that such a study has helped unmask ideological readings and liberate the text for its use in a new way.

The fourth point of Segundo's circle, in which the interpreter seeks a new hermeneutic, must thus be a controlled and disciplined task. For it is here perhaps more than anywhere else that Liberation Theology has come into

103. C. Mesters, *The Road to Freedom*, p.12

104. J. Miguez Bonino, *Op. cit.* p.101f.

theoretical conflict with other strands of theology, and it is the anvil upon which the legitimacy of Liberation Theology will be forged. The opening words of Miranda's *Communism in the Bible*, indicate this challenge:

This is a manifesto. But it is a Biblical manifesto, which submits to all the rigour of scientific exegesis and accepts its challenge. If the thesis is not demonstrated by meticulous scholarship, consider the thesis unposited [105].

This concern to 'prove' their case through exegetical work is the assumption behind, for example, Croatto's *Exodus*, and Gutierrez's chapter on Poverty in *A Theology of Liberation*. The section on the 'Biblical Meaning of Poverty' [106] is basically one of detailed exegesis.

It is Miranda, perhaps, more than any other who recognises the role of Critical Exegesis in the task of verification. His position seems to be that exegetes misinterpret the Bible due to their a priori philosophical positions - such as 'progressivism' [107] - rather than due to their method i.e. the historical critical method. For example in speaking of a matter that needed *philosophical* attention (Namely, contemporaneity with Christ in the New Testament) Miranda writes:

To investigate the matter with scientific rigour, philosophy must employ the historical critical method, which is the method employed by modern exegesis. This method, to be sure, possesses greater scientific control than philosophy itself....But objectively to investigate the precise nature of their [i.e. the New Testament writers] solution is a

105. J.P.Miranda, *Communism in the Bible*, p. ix

106. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p.291ff.

107. See for example, J.P.Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, p. 112f.

task to be carried out on the basis of demonstrable documentary evidence, which is the basis for the exegetical method.... Exegetical questions must be solved with exegetical methods and philosophical questions resolved by philosophical methods [108].

It is for such reasons that Kirk comments that Miranda's hermeneutic is *orthodox* "in the sense that he is convinced that the historical-critical method of exegesis is objective, rigorous, and controllable" [109]; and *optimistic*, in that he believes that objective methods can uncover the real sense of Scripture. This of course does not detract from the fact that his hermeneutic is still one of suspicion with regards to the use of critical exegetical methods.

c. Defining the Proper role for Critical Exegesis.

Having said all this, it is the case nevertheless that for a number of Liberation Theologians, the hermeneutics of suspicion is aimed not only at the philosophical and ideological presuppositions which impinge upon the method, but also at such presuppositions which give rise to the method. Both suspicions however, lead to the concern that critical exegesis be kept under control and in its proper place. Gutierrez comments:

I am not suggesting that scientific exegesis is invalid. But we do have to be careful not to exaggerate its importance. We have to remember that its purpose is the proclamation of the good news to the poor [110],

This concern is echoed by Mesters when he speaks of the proper role and function of scientific exegesis as being in service to

108. *Ibid.* p.73

109. J.A. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p.90

110. G. Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p.4

the people's search for the present meaning of the text [111]. It is also symbolised by an event described in Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname*. It captures a poignant moment in one discussion in which Antidio Cabal, a scholar and friend of Cardenal, realises that his academic and intellectual interpretation is beyond the average person in the church. He apologizes and says, "I have a great fear of talking because I have been very corrupted by the university"! [112]

In reflection then, what Liberation Theology demands is that Critical Biblical Scholarship be put in its correct place within the Hermeneutic circle/circulation, and thus within the hermeneutic community. Biblical studies is not the *first* task, nor is it the *only* task of the Church. It must rather be part of the ongoing mission of the Church in the world.

Hence it is not in the use of Critical Biblical Scholarship that Liberation Theology parts company with the 'Western Sciences of interpretation', but in the demand to keep it in check by placing it within the circle/circulation: (i) It rejects its arrogance in claiming to be able to exegete the 'truth' while not recognising its ideological captivity to inhuman praxis and ideology, and it makes clear that truth can only arise in a situation of praxis, and not simply of theory; (ii) It demands that critical Biblical studies be of service to the community of faith and its mission, and thus enable the

111. C.Mesters, "The Use of the Bible in some Christian Communities of the Common People", in *The Bible and Liberation*, p.131.

112. E. Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, p.3

common 'theologically illiterate' Christian to use the Bible in his daily life; and (ii) It calls on Biblical Studies to affirm its partiality, by taking an 'option for the poor', enabling the concerns of the poor to set its agenda: "Exegesis is being called upon to concern itself, not with the questions it raises, but with the questions that the common people are raising" [113].

5. CONCLUSIONS AND THE CHALLENGE TO REFORMED BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

a. The Bible in the Mission of the Church.

The basic thesis that we have argued in this chapter is that for the Liberation theologians the meaning of the Bible for today can really only be grasped in the living out of the challenge of faith. What this indicates is that the correct role of the Bible is as a challenge and spur to the mission and witness of the Church, rather than as an independent object which demands intellectual enquiry for its own sake. This recognises a number of fundamental points that have been made by Liberation Theology: The need to *do* the truth not just to *know* it; the primacy of praxis in the hermeneutic circle/circulation; the fact that the Bible is to be read in the Church² i.e. within the community of the faithful; and the subordination of critical Biblical scholarship to the life and witness of the Church. Rather than Scripture being interpreted on its own ground, "Scripture is once again becoming the vital

113. C. Mesters, *Op. cit.* p.132

and formal principle and wellspring of theology; and *the interpretation of Scripture is being oriented around the missionary task in its concrete historical context*" [114]. (My italics.) This is in accordance with what Gutierrez sees as the general task of theology: "making the Christian's commitment within [historical events] more radical and clear" [115], and is what is happening amongst the Christians of the 'base' communities:

... when they read the Bible, basically they are not trying to interpret the Bible; they are trying to interpret life with the help of the Bible. They are altering the whole business. They are shifting the axis of interpretation [116].

In the Biblical hermeneutics of Liberation theology then the task of interpreting the Bible is placed firmly within the church - as a task to take place within the community of the faithful as it seeks to live out its mission in the world.

In that role, the Bible continues to question and challenge us: "The Bible study we need must question our faith in the light of the strategic requirements of the struggle for life and freedom" [117], writes Pixley because, as Croatto indicates;

The Bible does not discuss 'notions' but enunciates and announces a message. If the Bible discusses anything it is to challenge human activities. Therefore, whenever we read an account of the liberation of the people of Israel, we are being instructed on a call to us and we are being prompted

114. Vidales, *Op. cit.* p.37

115. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* p.13

116. C. Mesters, *Op. cit.* p.128

117. G. Pixley, "Biblical embodiments of God's Kingdom: A Study Guide for the Rebel Church" in *The Bible and Liberation*. p.115

to embark upon a quest for the "meaning" of what God did and therefore 'said' as Word [118].

Gustavo Gutierrez in his latest major work, *The Power of the Poor in History* provides a summary of what he sees to be the main thrusts of understanding the Bible [119], and we shall allow him to have the last word on the matter. Firstly, because 'our' reading will start with Christ who is 'the fulfilment of the promise of the Father', and the unity of the Old and New Testaments, it will be a *Christological* reading. Secondly it will be a reading *in faith*, within a community that recognises Christ as Lord 'both of history and its own life'. Thirdly because God reveals himself in history, it will be a *historical* reading engaging us in our own history. Gutierrez goes on to say:

Hence, finally, our reading of the Bible will be a *militant* reading. The great questions about the word of the Lord arise out of Christian practice. It is time to reclaim this militant reading of the word of God in faith. It is time to open the Bible and read it from the perspective of 'those who are persecuted in the cause of right' (Matt. 5:10), from the perspective of the condemned human beings of this earth - for, after all, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It is for them that the gospel is destined, it is to them that the gospel is preferentially addressed. But they will receive it only insofar as they carry it with them [120].

b. The Challenge to Reformed Hermeneutics.

The Biblical hermeneutics of Liberation theology, based as they are upon ^{the} Philosophical critique of objectivity, and arising out of the practical struggle for liberation in Latin

118. J.S. Croatto, *Op. cit.* p.4

119. G. Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History.* p.4

120. *Ibid.* p.4

America, pose a number of very deep questions and challenges to Reformed (or any other) Biblical hermeneutics.

Firstly, there is the challenge to go beyond the subject-object divide that is assumed in traditional exegesis and interpretation. The Bible is not a document from some past age 'out there', but its horizon is able to be fused with ours and to become radically contemporary in the act of interpretation. God speaks through the Bible today, so that the truth of the Bible is not 'available' in the text in any objective way, but only subjectively through hearing God's Word in the Bible while engaging in the struggle for liberation.

Secondly, this leads on to the challenge to recognise that interpretation takes place in a hermeneutical circle/circulation in which the praxis of the interpreter is fundamental. Thus there is the challenge to recognise that to a large degree Reformed interpretation has been clouded by the context in which it has taken place - usually from a first world, ruling class perspective. This challenge includes the demand to 'hear' how those whose praxis and social experience is radically different - the poor, the marginalized, the woman, the Asian and others who are victims of exploitation, and have been excluded from Church leadership. In doing so, our understanding of the truth of the Biblical message can only be enhanced.

Thirdly, arising out of the above, we have the most fundamental challenge: To place the Bible well and truly within the life and witness of the Church. This means the challenge to

read the Bible from within the community of faith, and out of praxis. It indicates that the Christian *response* to the Word is radical obedience, and indeed that it is only as one 'does' that one can really say one has 'heard'.

Fourthly, this leads to the demand to read the Bible militantly (as outlined by ~~the~~ Gutiérrez above). As one reads the Bible in the way outlined above there is a recovery of the powerful liberatory motifs within Scripture and hence a greater and greater challenge to take the side of the poor in the struggles of the world. With this is the recognition that the interpretation of the Bible cannot happen save in tandem with a 'doing of Justice' and a participation in God's acts of liberation in this age.

CHAPTER THREE
THE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF
KARL BARTH

PART ONE: KARL BARTH AS MEDIATOR OF
A REFORMED-LIBERATION HERMENEUTIC

1. SOCIALIST COMMITMENT AND HERMENEUTICS.

In the introduction to this thesis we spoke about the possibility of using Karl Barth as a mediator in the search for a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic. We shall now examine the first reason we gave for choosing Barth to play this role, namely that Barth shares a number of important concerns with Liberation theology.

a. *Barth's Socialism.*

In an illuminating article, George Hunsinger has compared Karl Barth's theology with Liberation theology, and in particular, that of Gustavo Gutierrez. There is, he says, a divergence between them which stems from "two very different controlling passions" [1]. Barth's controlling passion is "to love God" and hence to give unqualified precedence to the Word

1. G. Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology" in the *Journal of Religion* Vol 63, No4, 1983.

of God. Liberation theology's controlling passion is "to love one's neighbour" and hence to bring liberation to the oppressed [2] Yet, argues Hunsinger, these are ultimately complementary rather than exclusive passions and there are three important concerns that unite them: (i) a belief that reactionary politics is a sign that the Gospel has been left behind; (ii) a refusal to indulge in whole-sale anti-communism; and (iii) a highly critical response to capitalism [3]

In 1972, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt set the theological world abuzz with his four theses on Karl Barth's theology and radical politics. Marquardt maintained that:

I. Karl Barth was a socialist.

II. His theology has its life setting in his socialist activity.

III. He turned to theology in order to seek the organic connection between the Bible and the newspaper, the new world and the collapsing bourgeois order.

IV. The substance of his turn to theology was the construction of a concept of 'God' [4].

The fact that this thesis was initially rejected by the *Kirchliche Hochschule* in Berlin [5], symbolises that much of Barth's radical political commitment has been obscured by First-World theologians. Georges Casalis writes,

... the dominant theologians and the ecclesiastical powers, having an inkling of the danger represented by an outstanding man who refused to be confined in

2. *Ibid.* pp.253ff.

3. See *Ibid.*

4. F-W. Marquardt, "Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth" in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. p.47

5. See *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* p.10

the accepted political, academic, and ethical framework, took steps to reclaim him.... As a result, conformist theologians and pastors could declare themselves 'Barthian' without in any way calling into question the structures and values of social orders and ecclesiastical establishments [6].

Through the work of Marquardt, Gollwitzer, Casalis and the like there has been a growing awareness of the radical nature of Karl Barth's political commitments which has helped us understand his theology better. In order to appreciate the roots of his hermeneutic we need to explore this commitment further.

There is no doubt that in his years as a pastor at Safenwil, Barth was highly committed to socialism at a practical level. Gollwitzer notes that:

In 1915 he had joined the most leftist party of the time, the Social Democratic, and was always active in the party's left wing... In Safenwil he established three unions, organised strikes, travelled up and down the countryside as a party speaker, offended the factory owners and the well-to-do in his community, urged his presbyters to join the party, formed a 'red' presbytery, was decried (...) as the 'red pastor' ... [7].

This socialist commitment and praxis continued throughout his life surfacing again at such times as the 'Dehn Affair', his joining the SPD again in 1931 and refusal to resign in 1933, his critique of capitalism in the *Church Dogmatics III/4*, and

6. G. Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don't Fall From the Skies* p.80

7. H. Gollwitzer, "Kingdom of God and Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth" in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* p.79

8. See R. Petersen, "An analysis of the Nature and Basis of Karl Barth's Socialism" (Unpublished MA thesis, UCT 1985) and the essays by Marquardt, Gollwitzer and Hunsinger in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* for a fuller discussion of these events and their significance.

his response to East-West tension in the Cold War [8]. It is this commitment to socialist praxis which makes Barth a mediator between Liberation theology and the Reformed tradition. The work of Georges Casalis, a 'left wing Barthian' [9] indicates the potential of such a mediation.

b. Barth and Segundo's Hermeneutic Circle.

It is our contention that Segundo could have chosen Barth instead of James Cone to illustrate all four points of the hermeneutic circle. The fact that this movement through the circle is grounded in socialist praxis further suggests the suitability of Barth as a mediator. As a way of exploring the development of Barth's hermeneutic we shall examine each of Segundo's four points in turn.

As a point of departure we need to appreciate that Barth's hermeneutical position before he moved to Safenwil was defined to a large extent by German Liberal Protestantism [10]. He could say of his teachers at Berne:

They gave me such a thorough foundation in the earlier form of the 'historical-critical school' that the remarks of their later successors could no longer get under my skin or even touch my heart - they only got on my nerves [11].

9. See *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* p.10.

10. For example, Barth wrote: "I had made myself a committed disciple of the 'modern' school, which was still dominant up to the time of the First World War, and was regarded as the only school worth belonging to. In it, according to the teaching of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Christianity was interpreted on the one hand as a historical phenomenon, and on the other hand as a matter of inner experience, of a predominantly moral nature". In E. Busch, *Karl Barth* p.46

11. In *Ibid.* p.34

(1) Segundo is clear that one has to be critical of one's society before one can enter the circle. Here we recognise the *fundamental* importance of Barth's socialist commitment and understanding of the prevalent socio-economic situation from a Marxist perspective [12]. We have mentioned this commitment above so we need not develop it further.

(2) This led to an ideological suspicion of all areas of life including theology. For Barth this suspicion arose most dramatically with the advent of the first World War. Not only was the whole 'Social Gospel' project aimed at bringing in the Kingdom of God thrown into disrepute, but Barth was deeply shocked at the moral support his theological teachers gave to the German war effort [13]. This was an 'ethical failure', that had its roots in theology. He wrote

The unconditional truths of the gospel are simply suspended for the time being and in the meantime a German war theology is put to work, its Christian trimmings consisting in a lot of talk about sacrifice and the like [14].

Ideological suspicion about theology also arose in the area of his day-to-day praxis of *preaching*. The responsibilities Barth faced as a preacher in a working-class congregation

12. See K. Barth, "Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice" and the correspondence with Herr Hussy in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics..*

13. On the very day that the war broke out, 93 German intellectuals, including Harnack and Hermann, issued a manifesto in support of the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg.

14. In *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*. p.26

raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the theology that he had been taught. He communicated to his friend Eduard Thurneysen his "increasing realization that our preaching is impossible from the start" [15]. It must be remembered that in both these cases Barth's suspicion received its primary stimulus from his socialist commitment. Hunsinger has written that "the problem of the sermon was for Barth a problem of praxis and praxis for him included socialist politics" [16]. Barth speaks of his theological suspicion when he writes

A whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations, and with it all the other writings of the German theologians [17].

(3) The third point in the circle involves commitment to theology and an 'exegetical suspicion'. Against Marx, who would have had similar views to him on the first and second points above, Barth believed that the failure of Liberal Protestantism did not mean a failure of the Christian faith. For Barth, with his commitment to theology, it meant that the Christian faith had to be redeemed and restated. This involved having an 'exegetical suspicion' that what his teachers propagated as 'Christian' did not in fact have its roots in the Bible. Thurneysen refers to this suspicion:

It happened as something basically very simple: the Bible struck us in a completely new way. It was already familiar to us, but we read it through certain filters and interpretations. When the theology and the world view which created those

15. In Busch, *Op. cit.* p.81

16. In G. Hunsinger, "Toward a Radical Barth" in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* p.202

17. In E. Busch *Op.cit.* p.81

filters were shaken, the interpretation began to fall apart [18].

(4) The fourth point in Segundo's circle is the appropriation of a *new hermeneutic*. Involved in this appropriation for Barth was the stimulus he received from his 'hermeneutic community', i.e. those friends who were also struggling with the relationship of faith to the world. These included the religious socialists, Hermann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz, the 'prophet' of Bad Boll, Christoph Blumhardt, and his life-long friend and confidant, Eduard Thurneysen. The community stretched back in time to include people like John Calvin and Soren Kierkegaard [19]. The content of Barth's new hermeneutic will be examined in more detail in the next section due to its specific importance to our thesis.

Segundo was clear that one moves round the circle again and again. Barth continued to do so while at Safenwil and beyond. New issues such as the 1918 Russian Revolution, the

18. Quoted in F-W Marquardt, *Op. cit.* p.60. See also Thurneysen's letter to Barth in October 1921 which looks back on Barth's years at Safenwil: "What kind of an earthquake region is this into which we have stumbled quite unconsciously in the very moment that we decided we had to read the New Testament a little differently and more exactly than our teachers who were men worthy of honour, or the moment when we could no longer be deaf to Blumhardt and could *no longer* share the faith of Schleiermacher (do you remember the evening rendezvous in Lentwil when we first said that aloud?) In *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*. p.75

19. For example, Barth writes of Kierkegaard: "...What we found particularly attractive, delightful and instructive was his inexorable criticism, which went on snipping and snipping. We saw him using it to attack all speculation which wiped out the infinite qualitative difference between God and man. Thus in that second phase of our revolution he was one of the cocks whose voice seemed to proclaim to us from near and far the dawn of a really new day." In E. Busch, *Op. cit.* p.116.

Swiss General Strike, the rise of Nazi Germany, and the 1948 Hungarian Invasion led to new suspicions and new insights into the reading of the Bible [20]. Marquardt quotes Barth himself as recognising this: If "political relationships change, then Christians will simply take that as an occasion to read the Bible anew.... And quite certainly this: a new understanding of Scripture ... is the community's decisive participation in the change of the political order [21].

c. The Strange New World in the Bible.

In the period 1916 to 1921, Barth began to give expression to his new understanding of the Bible. It is our contention that most of his major hermeneutic concerns were already expressed in this period and that therefore his mature view of Scripture and hermeneutics was decisively shaped by his socialist praxis at Safenwil.

What Barth had discovered, and what he voiced in a lecture in 1916, was "the Strange New World within the Bible". The first concern evident here is his belief that the content of the Bible is God's Word to us rather than history, morality and religion.

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men... the Bible tells us not how we should talk with God, but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us.... It is this which is in the

20. For a short discussion on this see F-W Marquardt, *Op. cit.* pp.60f.

21. In *Ibid* p.61

22. K. Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible" in *The*

Bible. The Word of God is within the Bible [22].

A second concern is the role of faith in interpretation. Barth makes himself clear: in spite of all our human limitations, the Holy Scriptures will interpret themselves for us if we "read it in faith" [23]. One can only understand the Bible if it is read in faith because to really understand it means to recognise that it "makes straight for the point where one must decide to accept the sovereignty of God. ... One can only believe ... or not believe." There is no third way" [24].

Two years later, in August 1918 the 'Strange New World' exploded on the wider public in the form of Barth's commentary on Paul's epistle to the *Romans* [25]. We meet Barth's third concern here: to have the Bible speak with importance in the Twentieth Century.

What was once of grave importance is so still. What is today of grave importance ... stands in direct connexion with that ancient gravity. If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours [26].

This concern led Barth to assign the historical-critical method to its "place" as mere "preparation of the intelligence", and to admit that were he driven to choose between the historical-critical method and the classical Reformed doctrine *Word of God and the Word of Man*, p.43

23. *Ibid.* p.34

24. *Ibid.* p.41

25. Barth was branded by Harnack as being in line with Thomas Munzer, and according to one of the highly regarded New Testament professors, Julicher, with Marcion!

26. K. Barth, Prefaces to the First Edition of *The Epistle To the Romans*. p.1

of inspiration, he would "without hesitation adopt the latter" [27]. The concern surfaces again in another lecture in 1920. Once again Barth wants to assign historical-critical work to a preliminary stage: "For it is clear that intelligent and fruitful discussion of the Bible begins when the judgement as to its human, its historical and psychological character has been made and *put behind us*" [28].

Just before Barth left Safenwil, the second and wholly revised edition of *Romans* was published, a revision influenced to a large degree by events in Russia and the Weimar Republic [29] and a discovery of Kierkegaard [30]. While he saw fit to re-write the commentary, the concerns were still there. In his foreword to this edition he responded to the basic criticism that he was an enemy of historical-criticism, by arguing that he was more critical than others because he took the concern of the text as his fundamental key to interpretation. In this context he uttered his famous comment that "the critical historian needs to be more critical!" [31]. Also in this edition were his other concerns - to hear the message of the Bible today [32] and to hear the Word of God in the words of

27. *Ibid.* p.1

28. K. Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp.60f.

29. See Marquardt, *Op. cit.* p.57

30. See Busch, *Op. cit.* p.116

31. K. Barth, *Romans* p.8

32. *Ibid.* p.7

33. *Ibid.* p.8,9

the Bible [33]. At the same time, he explicitly refers to a fourth concern that underlines this work, namely the responsibility of Biblical theology towards the life of the Church and its proclamation:

I myself know what it means year in, year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret, and longing to fulfil it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well known 'Awe in the presence of history' which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation has been surrendered [34].

These four works then, (the two addresses and the introductions to the first and second editions of *Romans*) in the period 1916 to 1921 provide a clear insight into Barth's basic hermeneutic concerns, concerns which remained with him for the rest of his life.

d. Towards a Theological Foundation.

With the realization that "what was needed was a 'wholly other' theological foundation" [35], Barth entered the theological world and attempted to systematize his views. Moving out from the grass-roots praxis of a parish minister to the world of a university professor also meant less direct involvement in socialist praxis. Nevertheless Barth understood that becoming a professor of theology was "his political task" in that "a theologian's socialism without a solid theological foundation was to him a way of losing everything through a lack

34. K. Barth, *Romans*. p.9

35. E. Thurneysen in E. Busch, *Op. cit.* p.97

36. H. Gollwitzer, *Op. cit.* p.81

of substance" [36]. We need to recognise that Barth did not lose his socialist concern while a professor of theology and that this concern undergirds his mature theology and hermeneutics.

Barth taught at three universities: Göttingen and Münster (1921-30); Bonn (1930-35); and Basle (1935-62). Little seems to have come from his period at Göttingen and Münster however [37], save his 'false start', *Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik* in 1928. The decisive step towards what we know as Barth's theology came with his move to Bonn in 1930. His book on Anselm, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* was published in 1931, and his grappling with the question of faith and understanding in relationship to this medieval English theologian provided the key to his future theological work. Also at this time, Barth came to affirm his links with the theology of the Reformation, and of interest for our study, with what we have called Calvin's second trajectory regarding Holy Scripture.

All these influences enabled him to publish in 1932 the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics* - the "Doctrine of the Word of God". It was seven years later that the second part of this 'Prolegomena' was published [38]. Nevertheless, *Church Dogmatics I* form the hub of Barth's thinking about Scripture

37. He was engaged in a show-down with Harnack in the pages of *Christliche Welt*, which achieved nothing much save indicating how completely different their understandings of Scripture were - so different in fact that further debate was meaningless. See M. Rumscheidt, *Op. cit.* We shall return to this debate.

38. And those seven years saw the rise of Nazi Germany, the Barmen Declaration and the deportation of Barth from Germany.

and hermeneutics. They systematise his earlier thinking and provide the basis for his future use of Scripture (for example, in the other volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*) and his thinking on hermeneutics, with one possible exception [39]. The *Church Dogmatics* will thus necessarily be the backbone of our study. There are, however, numerous other lectures and articles by Barth which give us insight ^{into} and illustration of his doctrine.

2. AFFIRMING CALVIN'S SECOND TRAJECTORY.

While the first reason for regarding Barth as a mediator between Reformed and Liberation Hermeneutics was his socialist commitment, the second reason is that his view of Scripture made him a true heir to the Reformed tradition. Barth discovered that the Reformed view of Scripture captured in Calvin's second trajectory provided a satisfactory framework for his search for a new hermeneutic which would also accommodate his socialist commitment. At the same time Barth was able to affirm Calvin's second trajectory while dispensing with the first. We turn now to an examination of Barth's ^{restatement} of the Reformed view of Scripture.

a. *The Bible is a Human Document.*

Barth would respond in a three-fold manner to the question,

39. E. Busch argues concerning Barth's lectures on *Evangelical Theology* (1963): "A new feature in the first section was the distinction between the Word of God on the one hand and the word of the Bible and the church (as the mere testimony -primary and secondary to the Word of God) on the other. The distinction was evidently a correction to his earlier doctrine of the three-fold form of the Word of God (in Revelation, Bible and Preaching)." *Op. cit.* p.455

'What is the Bible?' The first reply would be that 'the Bible is a thoroughly human document'. By this Barth means that it is historically conditioned and speaks in human words and thoughts about specific events in time - for example, the political position of Israel between Egypt and Babylon, or the confusions in the church in Corinth at c.AD 50 [40].

The Bible is a collection of human documents. It was written by men in the language of men, at a definite time in human history, and in a definite human situation [41].

From this it follows that the words of the Bible are conditioned by the human relativity and limitations of the authors. We find their views of science primitive, and their conception of history far from the critical discipline we expect of it today. Furthermore, there is ample evidence of error and contradiction within the text.

This is not something to be mourned, argues Barth, but rather, it simply clarifies the fact that there is, in the words of Kierkegaard, an 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and humans, and what is a human document is and will always be a *human* document. One cannot ascribe to the document any divinity because divinity belongs only to God the creator, and is never invested in the creation itself.

It is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human words of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality itself and as such, and the reality of God the creator..... The human element does not cease to be human, and as such and in itself

40. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I,1*. p.113

41. K. Barth, *Against the Stream*. p.221

42. K. Barth *Church Dogmatics I,2*. p.499

it is clearly not divine [42].

The link between this argument and that in Calvin's second trajectory is clear. The Bible is part of the created order, and along with nature, cannot point the way to the true knowledge of God. It cannot have 'divinity' ascribed to it as an objective component.

Barth is at all times conscious that there is a long history to this debate, and at this stage he is sensitive to the development of Protestant Orthodoxy which came to enshrine Calvin's first trajectory. Orthodoxy minimized the human side of the Bible and began to see the Bible as divine. It argued that the technical phrase, *theopneustia* (of the Spirit of God) meant that the words of the Bible were exclusively God's Words dictated by the Holy Spirit to humans who acted simply as dumb secretaries. Against this Barth argues that *theopneustia* is a reference to the election and response of the Biblical writers, not to an abrogation of their freedom [43].

They speak as *auctores secundarii*. But there can be no question of any ignoring or violating of their *auctoritas* and therefore of their humanity. We can only say that they themselves thought and spoke and wrote what they did think and speak and write as genuine *auctores*. They did so individually each within his own psychological, biographical, and historical possibilities and therefore within the limits set by those possibilities [44].

Having challenged the 'mechanical inspiration' thesis of

43. He responds to them with an exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:14-17 and 2 Peter 1:19-21, the two key texts used to legitimate the 'fundamentalist' position. The texts, he argues, give ample proof that the Holy Spirit commanded them to speak, but nowhere do they deny that it was the Biblical preachers or authors who spoke or wrote.

44. *Ibid.* p.505

Protestant Orthodoxy, Barth now challenges its corollary, viz. the infallibility of the Bible. The Bible as a human document is fallible for there is no such thing as human infallibility. The Bible writers "speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves" [45], and we must dare to 'face this fallibility' [46]. They are just as much human as we are, and just as subject to sin and failure. [47]:

According to the scriptural witness about man, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word [48].

The writers shared the culture and spirit of their age and environment, and we of another age and environment can contest their knowledge of "all things in heaven and earth, natural, historical and human" [49]:

... the biblical authors shared the outlook and spoke the language of their day - and therefore whether we like it or not, they did not speak a special language of revelation radically different from their time... Not only part but all that they say is historically related and conditioned [50].

It is important for Barth, that this capacity for error is not just in the areas of history and science or geography and

45. *Ibid.* p.507

46. *Ibid.* p.533

47. Barth reminds us of Paul's all encompassing statement: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

48. *Ibid.* p.529f.

49. *Ibid* p.508

50. K. Barth, *CD I,2.* p.509

51. In this regard there is a fascinating point made by Barth in the preface to the third edition of *Romans*. Bultmann in his favourable review of the second edition, feels that Barth should have criticized Paul because at times "other spirits make themselves heard, as well as the Spirit of Christ".

biology, but also in the area of religion and theology [51] so that the fallibility of the Bible "also extends to its religion or theological content" [52].

b. The Bible is the Canon, the Witness to God's Revelation.

If we are to argue that the words of the Bible are human words, then "we must also take quite definitely the fact that as a human word it points away from itself, that as a word it points towards a fact, an object" [53]. When we examine the words of the people who wrote the Bible, we discover that the object to which they constantly point is God the redeemer - Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture is in sum, "the words of men who yearned, waited and hoped for this Immanuel and who finally saw, heard and handled it in Jesus Christ" [54]. This, argues Barth, is why, even though they may be fallible and open to error, the writings of the Bible demand our attention.

The people who waited and finally saw were of course what we understand as the Prophets and the Apostles. They stand at a midpoint between God's original speech and our proclamation as the Church. They do not, however, occupy this midpoint because

Barth's response is to reject this not, as might have been expected, with the argument that *all* comes from the Spirit of Christ, but rather because "There are in the Epistle no words at all which are not words of those other 'spirits' which he calls Jewish or Popular Christian or Hellenistic or whatever else they may be." Is it really legitimate to extract a certain number of passages and claim that there the veritable Spirit of Christ has spoken?" In K. Barth, *Romans*, p.16

52. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.509

53. *Ibid.* p.464

54. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I,1*. p.108

of any greatness of their own, by virtue of their openness to revelation, or their depth of faith experience [55]. They are not the religious or moral heroes 'liberal' Protestantism would have us believe [56].

The factor that sets them off from us is 'time'. Insofar as the historicity of revelation is to be taken quite seriously, then the historical period in which one lives makes a difference to the experience of revelation. The Biblical witnesses were "contemporaries of the history in which God established his covenant with men. In fact they became contemporary witnesses by virtue of what they saw and heard of this history" [57]. It goes without saying that there were other people who were contemporaries of this history but who never proclaimed what they saw and heard; were never commanded and empowered to do so; were never elected to do so. Thus the witnesses differ from us and others both passively, because they saw and heard the unique revelation, and actively, because they proclaimed this revelation [58].

Barth places these witnesses in the second of a three-fold time schema [59]. The first 'time' is that of the original direct speech of God, the time of Jesus Christ, heard and

55. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. pp.31f.

56. "This thesis we must oppose" states Barth, K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.213.

57. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. p.26

58. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.490

59. *Ibid.* p.490

experienced by the prophets and apostles. The second is the 'time' of the witnesses of these prophets and apostles, the beginnings of the Church and the rise of the canon. The third time is the time of the Church, our time in which we witness to God, not on the basis of an experience such as the prophets and apostles (i.e. of the direct speech of God) but on the basis of what we hear in the recorded speech of the original witness. It is here that we can understand the significance of the canon, argues Barth. The canon encompasses the text of those witnesses, *only and alone*. While the establishment of the Canon is a task of the Church, it is a 'confession' of the Church [60] i.e. a recognition of a truth greater and beyond the control of the Church because the limits of the canon are derived from the nature of the witness of the text itself, rather than from another authority such as the Church or Pope. The Bible, argues Barth, "constitutes itself the canon" [61].

c. The Bible is God's Word.

In answer to the question, 'what is the Bible?', Barth would want to go beyond the two parts of the answer that we have looked at; indeed, he would maintain that in themselves these two parts have not really answered the question decisively. For if this is all, we who live today would have only second-hand communication with God, or we would have to create new channels of revelation for today - the Church or human

60. K. Barth, "The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses" in *God Here and Now*. p.49

61. K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.107

consciousness. Against this the Reformed tradition affirms that in and through the Bible, God can speak to us today in a first-hand manner.

The Word of God in the revelation of it attested in Holy Scripture is not limited to its own time, the time of Jesus Christ and its Old and New Testament witnesses. In the sphere of the Church of Jesus Christ it is present at all times and by its mouth it wills to be and will be present at all times [62].

Barth is, however, aware of the questions this raises and he lists them at the beginning of the decisive chapter of the *Church Dogmatics I* (19,2), in which he deals with this issue: "But is this really so? How can it be? How does it come about that it is?" The whole thrust to Barth's understanding of the Bible is that these questions cannot be answered by the previous two statements. (i.e. the Bible is a human document; the Bible is the canon, the witness of God's revelation). The 'proof' of the statement, 'the Bible is the Word of God' comes from elsewhere. Here we shall examine four basic 'keys'.

(1) The Bible does not possess God's Word, nor is it that in itself, rather it *becomes* the Word of God. "It is easy to say, or to read somewhere that the Bible is the Word of God without knowing what this really means. It is in fact not true in the sense that the Civil Code embodies the thought of the State. A more precise statement of the truth would be to say that the Bible *becomes* God's Word, and when it becomes this for us, then it is so" [63]. The emphasis is not on our experience of the

62. *CD I,2*, p.573. This affirmation, we have seen, was already clear in Barth's 1916 lecture on 'The Strange World within the Bible'.

63. K. Barth, *Prayer and Preaching*, p.92

Bible 'out there'; but on God's action in the Bible. When God so wills it, through his work, understood as a miracle, the human words of Scripture become his Word. But this is a "free divine decision" for "we cannot regard the presence of God's Word in the Bible as an attribute inhering once for all in this book as such and what we see before us of books and chapters and verses" [64].

Even from within the Church, God's Word is not 'available' in the human words of the Bible. This Barth indicates is the "naturalistic error of the doctrine of Inspiration of the late Seventeenth Century" [65]. This error has persisted into the life of the Church in this century, and Barth takes issue here with Protestant Orthodoxy [66].

(2) At the most simple and yet most profound level, the Bible is the Word of God to us today because God wills it to be.

64. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.530

65. K. Barth, *God Here and Now*. p.54

66. Orthodoxy had placed the stress of the Authority of the Bible on its being objectively the very words of God. This 'error' is still prevalent in fundamentalism and some forms of Evangelicalism, and now Barth argues against it. We have already seen him take issue on the humanity and hence the fallibility and openness to error of the words of the Bible. In his view the doctrine of infallibility placed 'man' on too high a pedestal, robbed the 'event' of revelation of its act by God as a miracle, and ultimately equated part of the created order with the creator. When the very content of Revelation establishes the chasm between God and humans, the notion of humans speaking a 'Word of God' as understood by 'Mechanical Inspiration' is patently absurd. Barth offers this definition: "Verbal inspiration does not mean the infallibility of the biblical Word in its linguistic, historical and theological character as a human word. It means that the fallible and faulty human word is as such used by God and has to be received and heard in spite of its human fallibility." K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.533

Barth makes it clear that "there can be nothing to prevent God from turning even such utterance concerning him into proclamation of his Word to us..." [67]. In fact, Barth maintains that God can speak to us through a dead dog, Russian communism or a flute concerto if he really wants to [68]. Insofar as God wills it, the Bible is his word, but conversely, the Bible is the Word of God only insofar as God wills it [69] God's power, through which this happens is, of course the Holy Spirit. We shall in due course return to the act of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to hear the Word of God in the Bible.

(3) While Barth maintains that it is God's act through the Holy Spirit alone which enables his Word to be heard he does not undermine the validity of human experience in which this takes place - the experience of faith. 'Faith' is of course an obvious key, in the sense that unless one believes in God, the notion of a 'Word of God' is incomprehensible. And likewise, the precise moment at which an unbeliever *really hears* the Word of God in Scripture, he or she believes, i.e. has a faith experience:

67. K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.54

68. *Ibid.* p.55

69. This fundamental point is underlined at two important points in the *Church Dogmatics I*. Under the heading of 'The Word of God Written' (4,2); Barth points out that: the fact that God's own address becomes an event in the human word of the Bible is however, God's affair and not ours... [it] is God's Word to extent that God causes it to be his Word. *Ibid.* p.109. And the second place is under the title, 'Scripture as the Word of God' (19:2): "To say 'The Word of God' is to say the Word of God. It is therefore to speak about a being and event which are not under human control and foresight (*Ibid* p.527).... it does not lie ... in our power but only in God's that this even should take place and therefore this witness of Scripture be made to us." K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.531.

Thus it is in faith, as the possibility given in faith, that we have to understand the knowability of the Word of God. In the event of faith it is as it were, born, it comes into view, and it is to be sought and found [70].

We cannot prove that the Bible is the Word of God, we can only say 'we believe it to be so', thus "the statement that the Bible is God's Word is a confession of faith" [71]. Once again the affinity to Calvin's second trajectory is clear. Barth is clear however that the whole act of faith and recognition of the Word is an act of the Holy Spirit [72].

(4) In so becoming the Word of God, the Bible is the source from which the Church is open to revelation. Barth holds this relationship of the Bible to revelation together in his understanding of the three-fold form of the Word of God. There exists the Word of God itself - revelation - and this finds expression in the Word of God written, Scripture; and the Word of God preached, Church proclamation [73]. However, within this relationship, the Scriptures, due to their being a witness to revelation, have an authority over proclamation, so that it is

70. K. Barth, *CD I,1*.p.229

71. *Ibid.* p.110

72. This meets what Fuchs and Ebeling pose as a crucial question: "If the intelligibility of the New Testament is said to presuppose faith, how can it be said that the message of the New Testament serves to create faith?" (A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*. p.93). In response: From a Reformed perspective, the message of the New Testament alone cannot 'create faith'. Of this Calvin was clear (*Christian Institutes*, III,2,33). It can only do so if it is a servant of the Spirit. Thus it is the Spirit which creates faith, and which at the same time makes the New Testament intelligible by creating faith.

73. K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.121

really upon the Scriptures that the Church must rely if it is to hear the Word of God. "To put it quite plainly: what we have come to know as revelation in the Christian sense is to be found in a book, in the book of the Old and New Testaments" [74]. And because the Word of God is the Church's only succour and guide, it wanders from the Bible at its peril.

The Church is on the point of dissolution wherever it is forgotten that Holy Scripture is a valid, normative and authoritative testimony to the revelation, that is wherever the Church ceases to hold fast to the Bible and imagines it can know and acknowledge the revelation of God without reference to the Bible [75].

d. The Bible Assumes the Characteristics of the Word of God.

If the Bible is God's Word, then it really is God's Word, "we cannot suddenly mean a lesser, less potent, less ineffable and majestic word of God... There is only one Word of God... In Holy Scripture too, in the human word of this witness, it is a matter of *this* Word and its presence" [76]. We must be aware, however, that calling the Bible, 'the Word of God', begs the question, 'What then is the Word of God?' Until we have explored in full the nature of this Word we will not appreciate the significance of the Bible, and hence not fully understand the task of interpretation.

In the eighth thesis of his *Church Dogmatics* Barth states: "God's Word is God himself in his revelation" [77]. It is God's

74. K. Barth, *Against the Stream*. p.216

75. *Ibid.* p.226

76. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.513

77. K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.295

self-communication, his revealing of himself, and thus "we must understand it [revelation] in its identity with God himself. God's revelation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God" [78], and thus Barth calls Jesus Christ both the "Objective Reality" and the Objective Possibility of Revelation" [79], and hence he is the Word of God [80]. This affirmation is of course contained in the powerful first clause of the *Barmen Declaration* which Barth drafted:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the One Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death [81].

In what could very well be a commentary on this clause, Barth writes that "theology must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles as though he were a continuation of the knowledge ^{of the} Word of God, and not its root and origin ; not indeed the very Word of God itself" [82].

Through the act of the Holy Spirit and in the act of faith, the Bible presents Jesus Christ the Word of God to us. With Calvin, Barth wants to make clear that Christ is the centre of Scripture: "The content of the Bible, and object of its witness is Jesus Christ " [83]. To say that the Bible becomes the

78. *Ibid.*, p.137

79. See *CD I,2* p.1, 25

80. Thesis 10, *Ibid.* p.399

81. See D.S. Bax, "The Barmen Declaration: A New Translation" in the *JTSA* No 47, 1984 p.78

82. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II,2* p.4

83. K. Barth, *CD I,2* p.720

Word of God means that it comes to assume the nature of that Word, and it will become clear as we examine the characteristics of the Word of God, that these are in fact those of the one Word of God, Jesus Christ.

While the characteristics of the Word of God become those of Scripture, it is paradoxically to Scripture (and to Church Proclamation) that we must look if we wish to answer the question for there is no such thing as the Word of God 'in itself' [84]. This is the first 'source' for our task. The second 'source' is the recognition that while we never have revelation in itself, we do know that God's Word is communication or self-disclosure. From these two 'sources' then, we can draw together some understanding of the nature of the Word of God.

(i) There is no reason, argues Barth, not to consider the Word of God literally as God's Speech. What then can we say about speech? (i) While Barth points out that there is no Word of God without a physical event, nevertheless it must be maintained that the Word of God is 'spiritual' in that speech, words, are other than material. God is able to communicate with us "reason with reason..." and thus the Word of God "... is a rational and not an irrational event" [85]. (ii) The Word of God has a personal quality. God's Word is not a series of

84. As we noted above in speaking about the three-fold form of the Word of God, the Word of God in itself, 'revelation', while it underlies Scripture and Proclamation, *it* never meets us in abstract form. We can only draw its characteristics from the way in which it manifests itself.

85. K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.135

postulates, theses and statements, but his self communication, the revealing of his own person.

The equation of God's Word and God's Son makes it radically impossible to say anything doctrinaire in understanding the Word of God. In this equation, and in it alone, a real and effective barrier is set up against what is made of proclamation according to the Roman Catholic view and of Holy Scripture according to the later form of older Protestantism, namely, a fixed sum of revealed propositions which can be systematised like the sections of a corpus of law. The only system in holy Scripture and proclamation is revelation i.e. Jesus Christ [86].

The Word of God is purpositive. "God did not need to speak to us" [87], that he has chosen to do so, suggests that there is a purpose to his Word. This is to restore and renew the original relationship between God and us. Jesus Christ is this Word of reconciliation in which God "promises himself as the content of man's future" [88].

(2) God's Word is God's Act. Unlike human words which can change nothing, God's Word (as illustrated for example in Genesis 1), cannot only change the course of events but can in fact bring them into being from nothing.

The Word of God does not need to be supplemented by an act. The Word of God is itself the act of God. It is act to the degree that everything else that we usually call act, event, practice, life, etc, and that we usually miss and demand as a supplement to man's word, can only seem to be very questionable as real act in comparison with it. The Word of God makes history in the supreme sense [89].

(i) Because it is a word that creates history, it is a word in

86. *Ibid.* p.137

87. *Ibid.* p.140

88. *Ibid.* p.142

89. *Ibid.* p.144

history, spoken at a certain time, and not at another. This is what Barth calls "its contingent contemporaneity" [90]. We must never forget that the revelation of God was through the truly human person of Jesus Christ. (ii) The second characteristic is that of 'Power to Rule'. This is because God's Word is the action of the Creator of the universe and the Lord of history. To hear God's word is to be aware of the real power of his Lordship. "The sovereignty of God's Word is grounded and consists in this: that God's Word is his Son, Jesus Christ. We are not speaking, be it noticed, simply of the sovereignty of God. We are speaking of the sovereignty of God's Word" [91]. (iii) The Word of God means decision. This is in the first instance God's decision, God's choice to act in history but also, in the second instance, a situation of decision for us humans, either of obedience or disobedience.

(3) How do we know that the word we hear is God's word? Paradoxically it is precisely when we prove that it is God's Word that we deceive ourselves:

We must accept the fact that only the logos of God himself can provide the proof that we are really talking about him when we are allegedly doing so [92].

The Word of God is the mystery of God. It never comes to us directly, it is always hidden. Not only in order to speak to us (i.e. reveal himself) must God talk *human* talk, but he must

90. *Ibid.* p.145

91. K. Barth, "The Sovereignty of God's Word and the Decision of Faith" in *God Here and Now*, p.13

92. K. Barth, *CD I,1*, p.163

talk in a world of *sin*. This is the "two-fold indirectness" [93] in which God's Word comes to us. It can come to us in no other way save in this secular, hidden way. Further, this word is "one-sided" [94]. It comes to us either veiled in its unveiled form i.e. unhampered by human limits (unveiled), and yet precisely for that reason unintelligible (veiled) to humans or unveiled in its veiled form i.e. within human limits (veiled) but understandable to us (unveiled). Understanding the Word of God, can thus come only to ^{us by} faith, for the Word of God is a mystery in its spirituality. It remains a mystery to all unless God himself - the Holy Spirit - opens it [95], "hence one cannot lay down conditions which, if observed, guarantee hearing of the Word" [96].

In conclusion, it must be remembered that for Barth the Word of God as we have discussed it here has a unified nature:

We shall have to regard God's speech also as God's act and God's act also as God's mystery (and not any other mystery). So only God's speech is really God's act (and not any other act) [97].

But the fundamental reason why this has a unified nature, is because ultimately the nature of the Word of God is the nature

93. *Ibid.* p.168

94. *Ibid.* p.174

95. This, it will be remembered, is why Barth argues against the Mechanical Inspiration thesis which equates the human (and therefore 'unveiled') words of the Bible with God's direct (i.e. unveiled) form which is completely 'available' to our understanding. This denies the mystery of God's Word and hence its character as God's Word. Thus paradoxically, the mechanical inspiration theory actually destroys any concept of God revealing himself.

96. *Ibid.* p.183

97. *Ibid.* p.133

of one person, Jesus Christ, and the characteristics we have explored above can be seen to be those of Jesus Christ himself.

PART TWO: BARTH'S REFORMED HERMENEUTICS

1. PROLEGOMENA TO INTERPRETATION.

a. The Role of the Spirit.

At the beginning of chapter three, we indicated that to a large extent Reformed hermeneutics are based upon the Doctrine of Holy Scripture. We have now examined Calvin's ambiguous view of Scripture, and Barth's appropriation of his 'second trajectory'. The common concerns are clear: through the Work of the Holy Spirit the Bible becomes the Word of God to the person of faith. This Word of God is Jesus Christ the centre and meaning of Scripture. We have seen too how Barth is able to transcend Calvin's first trajectory while in no way undermining the Reformed view of Scripture.

From this understanding of what the Bible is, we can already discern the foundation of a Reformed hermeneutic. This hermeneutic would be aimed at allowing God to speak his Word in the present situation, and would take seriously the role of faith in interpretation. Interpretation would focus on Jesus Christ as the centre of Scripture, while still being able to use human critical tools in exploring the humanity of the text. We shall now examine Barth's attempt to build a hermeneutic theory upon his doctrine of Scripture.

A word of caution needs to be sounded at this stage. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine Barth's hermeneutic

from a specifically descriptive point of view. We shall concentrate on it from the prescriptive side i.e. what Barth set out to achieve [98].

The first and key understanding is that for Barth, as with Calvin, interpretation falls under the Third article of the Creed, i.e. under the Work of the Holy Spirit. He consciously appropriates Calvin's formula, 'Word and Spirit'. "God who according to the witness of the Scriptures has spoken 'the Word of Christ' speaks that Word also to me through the witness of the Scriptures empowered through the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, so that I hear it and by hearing it believe" [99]. And this, argues Barth, is the correct understanding of the doctrine of inspiration. It has to do, not with the ontology of the Bible, as fundamentalists believe, but rather with the interpretation of the Bible.

At first in the doctrine of Inspiration the emphasis was upon both the spoken and heard word, both the Biblical writer and the reader was 'inspired' (i.e. directed by the Spirit) to hear

98. Barth himself preferred not to speak of hermeneutics in the abstract, but rather in the act of an actual and specific case of interpretation. See for example, *Ibid.* pp. 349 and 390. This is borne out by Ford's comment that: "from the point of view of hermeneutics, the two parts of the *Church Dogmatics I*, are perhaps best read in retrospect when one can appreciate, for example, what Barth means by God's language being his Act, how he supports his claims for the incomparability and universality of the Biblical accounts, how he carries out his three operations for interpreting scripture... See, D.F. Ford, "Barth's Interpretation of the Bible" in *Karl Barth - Studies of his Theological Method*. p.60

99. In M. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*. p.47. Interestingly enough, this 'Reformed formula' is directed against the great Reformed scholar of the day, Harnack!

the Word of God. Over time this activity of the Spirit was shifted entirely, and was limited to the emergence of the spoken or written word. The Reformers recaptured the circle with the formula 'Word and Spirit', but again it was lost in Protestant Orthodoxy. Thus for example, in reference to Paul, "the circle which led from the divine benefits to the apostles instructed by the Spirit and authorized by the Spirit now closes at the hearer of the apostle, who again by the Spirit is enabled to receive it as necessary. The hearer too, in his existence as such is part of the miracle which takes place at this point". [100]. All interpretation thus takes place through the work of the Spirit.

b. Faith and Interpretation.

If we understand the Doctrine of Inspiration in this way, we can appreciate why Barth made the comment in the Preface to his first ~~Commentary~~ on Romans that if he were forced to make a choice, he would choose the 'venerable doctrine of Inspiration' before the historical-critical method. To this extent Barth is critical of the historical-critical project. Already we have seen in the first section of this chapter how Barth began to distance himself from these scholars, and this critical perspective was maintained throughout.

The quest for the Word of God cannot be accomplished even by the most exact critical 'science'. As indicated earlier, we can only hear the Word of God when God so wills it.

100. K. Barth, *CD I,2*, p.516.

"Interpretation itself can only be a pointer, not the discovery of the Holy Spirit, or the Christian principle in the Bible, nor the mediation of the Word of God spoken to it" [101]. The Word of God is the mystery of God and no amount of exegeting will unveil that mystery. This can only happen through God's decision to unveil himself to the person of faith. The Bible becomes the Word of God to those of faith. This small word 'faith' makes a tremendous difference to the formula for it means that 'faith' is the primary step before knowledge, before exegesis, before interpretation. It cannot be preceded, or dispensed with.

The true grasping of Holy Scripture is thus never the work of the exegete, but rather the work of the Spirit: the gift of God to the reader of the Bible in the event of faith. This opening of the Word to the exegete is, according to Barth, the Reformed principle, '*scriptura scripturae interpres* - Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture'. Already in 1916 this concern was uppermost in Barth's mind:

The Holy Scriptures will interpret themselves in spite of all our human limitation. We need only dare to follow this drive, this spirit, this river to grow out beyond ourselves towards the highest answer. This daring is *faith*; and we read the bible rightly, not when we do so with false modesty, restraint and attempted sobriety, for these are passive qualities, but when we read it in faith [102].

This concern also emerges clearly in question and answer 2 and 14 in the first Barth-Harnack correspondence. Harnack asks

101. K. Barth, *CD I,1*, p.263

102. K. Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p.34

whether the Bible is so clear that there is no need for critical work; or if perhaps it is so 'incomprehensible and indescribable' that only the human heart can grasp it. Harnack rejects both of these options in favour of 'inner openness, historical knowledge and critical reflection'. Barth's answer indicates the gap between the two 'hermeneutics':

'Inner openness, heuristic knowledge, experience, heart' and the like on the one hand and 'historical knowledge and critical reflection' on the other are possibilities which can be equally helpful, irrelevant or obstructive to the 'understanding' of the Bible. It is understood through neither this nor that 'function of the soul or mind' but by virtue of that Spirit which is identical with the content of the bible, and that by *faith* [103].

c. Faith, Knowledge and Understanding.

If faith is the key to interpretation, we need to explore how Barth understood the relationship between faith and knowledge, and furthermore, just what faith entails. This will help us to understand why Barth subordinates critical Biblical scholarship to faith.

The Reformed tradition is clear: one becomes a Christian not through family, not through Baptism or partaking in Holy Communion, not through work; but through faith alone. "This is to say, faith is the event and history without which none can become a Christian" [104]. Faith is the key to Christian expression and knowledge.

After his 'false start' with his *Christelike Dogmatik*,

103. M. Rumscheidt, *Op. cit.* p.32

104. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology.* p.100

Barth's theological method was given new direction through his study of Anselm's *a posteriori* proof of the existence of God [105]. Barth came to affirm with Anselm that knowledge arises out of faith, rather than being its presupposition. Faith is thus *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking or in search of understanding.

In his work, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, Barth makes six basic points about the relationship between faith and knowledge. (i) Knowledge follows faith in the sense that faith has a spontaneous desire to seek understanding just as it spontaneously brings forth joy: "... the *quaerere intellectum* is really immanent in *fides* [106]. (ii) Knowledge, because it follows faith, cannot establish the object of faith, "it can consist only of positive meditation on the object of faith" [107]. (iii) On the other hand, knowledge cannot decide the validity of one's faith. Because *intelligere* arises out of faith, the results of *intelligere* cannot influence that faith; the questioning of *intelligere* never questions the presupposition that the questioner is a Christian, or that he

105. See E. Busch, *Op. cit.* pp. 205, 210; D.F. Ford, *Op. cit.* p.59

106. K. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum.* p. 16f

107. *Ibid.* p.39. Hence, Barth's appreciation of Anselm that in the very 'proof' of God's existence, Anselm prays to God asking him for help in the task!

108. Barth writes, "Therefore the aim of theology cannot be to lead men to faith, nor to confirm them in the faith, or even to deliver their faith from doubt. Neither does the man who asks theological questions ask them for the sake of the existence of his faith; his theological answers, however complete they may be, can have no bearing on the existence of his faith". *Ibid.* p.17. One can of course understand why, in Barth's *Church*

or she has faith or not [108].

(iv) Not only is faith a human act that is in reality dependent on God alone, but even the knowledge that follows this faith is an act that is dependent on God. For this knowledge is the knowledge of God; the seeking of the 'very face of God', and is thus utterly dependent upon God showing himself through the work of the Spirit. It has "always to be bestowed on human reason as surely as *intelligere* is a *voluntarius effectus*" [109]. (v) This means that knowledge is dependent on God's revelation, which is the Word of God in the Scriptures. The interpretation of the person of faith will thus "not on any account be able to set itself in explicit contradiction to the bible, the textual basis of the revealed object of faith" [110].

(vi) Barth then looks to the 'other side' of the equation. We have seen that for a Christian, true knowledge can only follow faith. Now Barth makes it clear that Christian knowledge can only follow true faith. "Now, where this right

Dogmatics I,1, published a year after his *Anselm*, there is a powerful polemic against apologetics i.e. the attempt to bring people to faith through reason and argument.

109. *Ibid.* p.37

110. *Ibid.* p.40. Thirty years later in his lectures on *Evangelical Theology* this is still a prime concern of Barth's. Speaking about the then current trend towards demythologising, Barth charges: "The theologian might, instead, do well to ask himself seriously whether he really believes - as he supposes he does - in the God of the Gospel when he thinks he can overlook, delete, or reinterpret these and similar points. It might be quite another God in whom he would then actually believe". K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. p.103

111. K. Barth, *Anselm*. p.34

faith is absent, there can be no right knowledge" [111]. This raises the question of what true faith is, i.e. the nature of faith (as distinct from the relationship of faith to knowledge, which we have been dealing with thus far). What Barth hears Anselm making clear is the dedication of the theologian, or interpreter of Scripture. "What is required is a pure heart, eyes that have been opened, child-like obedience, a life in the Spirit, rich nourishment from Holy Scripture..." [112].

Having explored the relationship between faith and knowledge, we can appreciate Barth's critical attitude towards the historical-critical method. As a preparatory tool it is excellent; it is when it claims to be the only and true way to read the Bible that it must be once and for all put in its place. The real content, meaning and message of the Bible are shrouded or veiled in mystery, and as he notes in *Anselm* "we can grasp them only by a special effort of understanding that goes beyond mere reading" [113]. One cannot start off 'neutral' hoping to hear the Word and so become committed by pursuing the historical critical method alone. Only reading from a committed position, i.e. with faith, enables you to really

112. *Ibid.* p.34

113. K. Barth, *Anselm*, p.42

114. This concern of Barth's is illustrated well in his work on the resurrection of Christ. For Barth the resurrection is the key to the New Testament witness, and should it fall away then the question of belief in Christ is absurd. The resurrection thus has to be believed, just as Christ has to be believed in faith prior to knowledge. The resurrection thus does not stand or fall upon the whim of any exegete, because exegesis can only begin with the commitment of faith on the part of the exegete, and this necessarily involves believing that Christ rose on the third day. Thus "to strike out the resurrection of

hear and see beyond the mystery. [114].

d. Faith and Subordination.

The Biblical message makes a claim upon the reader. One cannot understand that content in its own right except by hearing that claim. No doubt the Bible can be read like any other text, but this would really miss the point of it. Indeed, "to be understood in their own sense, the Biblical texts call for either the No of unbelief, or the Yes of faith" [115].

The meaning of faith as subordination is captured well by the great Reformed creed, the Heidelberg Confession which Barth quotes:

'that with body and soul, both in living and dying, I am not my own but the possession of my faithful saviour, Jesus Christ' ... that the Word be loud while I remain quiet; that the Word lead and I follow; that the Word be great and above while I be small and beneath; that the Word of God stand in its sovereignty and thus its omnipotence, exclusiveness and freedom, whereas I in all those secondary determination, I in the completely natural and historical concretion of my humanity, I for the first time and only in this relationship to the sovereign Word of God find my true manhood [116].

Christ from the Credo, could only be the demand of a very untheological exegesis" i.e. an exegesis outside of faith and the community of faith. (K. Barth, *Credo*, p.178). Now all of this does not mean that Barth wants to be unhistorical, uncritical or sacrifice intellectual integrity. On the contrary he argues that the resurrection of Christ is exactly the historical message of the texts, and that "any reconstruction which denies this is contradicting all the sources and engaging in imaginative story-telling on its own account". (D.F. Ford, *Op. cit.* p.80. For a discussion on Barth's hermeneutics and the resurrection of Christ see pp.70ff.)

115. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. p.177

116. K. Barth, "The Sovereignty of God's Word and the Decision of Faith" in *God Here and Now*. p.21.

Thus to really hear the message of the Bible, one has to submit oneself to God - that he would unveil its mystery, that Scripture would interpret *itself*, and that one recognises that no human endeavour can 'obtain' the Word of God. And more than this, one has to submit to the content, the claim of the Word of God if it is really to be understood. We are reminded that all of this happens in *faith*. Indeed what is faith in God if it is not submission to his Word? From this *position* of faith flows what Barth calls the "fundamental principle of biblical hermeneutics", *subordination*. This is so because the "content of the Bible imperatively requires it" [117].

God is not an *attribute* of something else, even if this something else is the Bible. God is the Subject, God is Lord. He is Lord even over the Bible and in the Bible [118].

Subordination is the overarching attitude in *interpretation*, and as we examine Barth's three-fold method for interpretation this will become clear. Let us be clear, however, that for Barth subordination does not mean abandoning one's ideas, thought, or convictions so that we should speak the language of Canaan, but that in the act of interpretation, "Scripture itself as a witness to revelation must have unconditional precedence over all the evidence of our own being and becoming, our own thoughts and endeavours, hope and suffering, of all the evidence of intellect and senses, of all axioms and theorems, which we inherit and as such bear with us" [119].

117. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.720

118. *Ibid.* p.513

119. *Ibid.* p.719

2. TOWARD A METHOD FOR INTERPRETATION.

In his fullest discussion on the *method* of interpretation in *Church Dogmatics I* under the heading of the 'Freedom of the Word' (21.2), Barth outlines three steps he sees necessary in the task of interpreting Scripture.

a. *Observation and Presentation.*

This for Barth is the stage in which use is made of the historical-critical method. In taking the humanity of the Biblical text seriously, there comes a demand that the Bible be read, understood and expounded historically:

It is still quite clear that when and wherever the Bible has been really read and expounded, in this sense it has been read 'historically' and not unhistorically. i.e., its concrete humanity has not been ignored. To the extent that it has been ignored, it has not been read at all [120].

In a little book, *Prayer and Preaching*, Barth recommends to pastors that the first step in preparing a sermon involves coming to grips with the text in its historical setting. "Close and detailed attention to the text is indispensable", and "... this will require scientific exegetical methods, involving accurate historical and linguistic study, for the Bible is a historical document which came into being in the

120. *Ibid.* p.464.

121. K. Barth, *Prayer and Preaching* p.90. Such comments in a little book in which Barth is hardly trying to defend himself against the 'exegetes' (i.e. the Professional Biblical scholars, who in the main accept the historical-critical method) should make us cautious of labelling Barth 'an enemy of Historical-Criticism'. He has of course been subjected to such attacks ever since the first commentary on *Romans*. Julicher in his review called him a 'bitter enemy of historical criticism',

context of human society" [121].

Barth affirms the "methods of Source criticism, lexicography, grammar, syntax and appreciation of style" [122]. One of the tasks of this study is to make sure that errors of interpretation and understanding do not creep in either knowingly or unknowingly. "All too many things can be imprecisely or even wrongly heard (or perhaps not even heard at all). The science of biblical theology must clarify, with ever renewed impartiality and care, what is actually written in the Scriptures and what is meant by all that is written" [123].

It should be clear from Barth's view of the relationship between faith and understanding that this method, and the human endeavour cannot reign supreme. It is to serve, to be subordinated. This is the substance of a highly negative verdict passed upon the 'exegetes' by Barth in *Church Dogmatics III,2* in his discussion of anthropology.

The time does not yet seem to have arrived when the dogmatician can accept with a good conscience and confidence the findings of his colleagues in Old Testament and New Testament studies... So long as so many exegetes have not better learned or practiced their part in this common task, so long as so many still seem to pride themselves on being utterly unconcerned as to the dogmatic presuppositions and consequences of their notions, while unwittingly to which Barth responds in the preface to the second edition of *Romans*, p.9. Minear points out ^{that} the chasm between Barth and the 'exegetes' was just as wide in 1972 as it was in 1922. (P.S. Minear, *Op. cit.* p.23). Yet even a cursory glance at Barth's hermeneutical theory must make us affirm with Stuhlmacher that "though to this day exegetes and historians regard Barth as an enemy of historical criticism, he himself did not intend to be such". P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, p.50.

122. K. Barth, *CD I,2*, p.723

123. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, p.175f.

reading them into the picture, the dogmatician is forced to run the same risk as the non-expert and work out his own proof from scripture [124].

The criticism arises because critical exegesis is not being done in the service of the Church and the service therefore of dogmatics. For Barth, if historical-critical study is going to be of service to the Church it is not to be kept away from theological work, but rather the point is to fit it into that work "in a meaningful way" [125].

The real success of observation and presentation will depend on how well we communicate the message of the text. This of course means that the reader will have to grasp the message - will have to allow the text to speak to him, or her - even to the extent of challenging and shattering preconceived understandings of history. Here the practice of subordination is once more at work. The Bible shifts from being purely Object, to being Subject, one which claims absolute authority and freedom and we "must be prepared to submit to its law if we are not to renounce the task of observation and presentation" [126].

124. Quoted in P.S. Minear, *Op. cit.* p.21f.

125. H.M. Rumscheidt, *Op. cit.* p.42

126. K. Barth, *CD 1,2.* p.726. This includes not trying to cover up what we perceive as 'errors'. On the contrary our 'observation and presentation' "will not tolerate any restriction. It will allow the text to speak for itself in the sense that it will give full scope to its controlling object. It will not seek to conceal its ultimate determination for the sake of any preconceived notion of what is possible". (*Ibid.* p.726). This is so precisely because the moment we allow our preconceived ideas to control our exegesis and interpretation then we have reduced Scripture to the role of object, and denied its claim upon us.

b. Reflection.

The phase of reflection, while logically second to that of observation does not necessarily follow the first in time. Reflection is needed because there is no such thing as 'objectivity' in the Biblical reader. Barth dismisses the notion of the "complete impartiality and objectivity in the exegete" as "comical" [127] both in its descriptive and prescriptive senses. "An exegete's exposition is invariably a tissue of biblical material with a wrapping of imported personal association and consequently of possible meanings" [128], so that "there has never yet been an expositor who has allowed only Scripture alone to speak" [129]. If this were not so, then the Bible could be taken captive by the Church who could then control its freedom.

The problem of subjectivity is not solved by reliance on historical-critical scholarship, for the issue at stake is the fundamental fallibility of the human reader no matter how well trained or consecrated.

It is no more true of anyone that he does not mingle the gospel with some philosophy than that here and now he is free from all sin except through faith. [130].

The real task is thus to control the use of alien philosophies in exegesis. Barth lays down five guide-lines.

127. *Ibid.* pp. 469, 470

128. K. Barth, *CD I,1.* p.80f.

129. K. Barth, *CD I,2.* p.728

130. *Ibid.* p.729

(i) The exegete must be consciously aware that he or she is using a certain philosophy and thus of the distance between the thought of Scripture and his thought. (ii) The exegete can only advance these thoughts as hypotheses, ventured in obedience, and must therefore be open to new initiatives both from himself and from others.

(iii) The philosophy must never become an end in itself, such as Hegel's 'Absolute Spirit' - it can never be posited as an absolute, for this can only be an "act of unbelief which makes impossible the insights of faith and therefore a true interpretation of the Word" [131]. (iv) While there is obviously a great difference between different schools and traditions of philosophy, there is no essential reason for preferring one of these schemes to another. They both will have uses that the other does not, and they are both fallible. (v) We are reminded of the principle of submission, the ultimate authority must always be the text, so that "the use of a scheme of thought in the service of scriptural exegesis is legitimate and fruitful when it is determined and controlled by

131. *Ibid.* p.732

132. *Ibid.* p.734 This question of the proper role of philosophy dominates Barth's criticism of Rudolf Bultmann. In a letter to him in 1952 he writes: "I am not an enemy of all philosophy as such, but I have hopeless reservations about the claim to absoluteness of any philosophy, epistemology, or methodology. Occasionally I may cheerfully make use of existential categories ... but I simply do not summon up the ethical zeal to feel any consequent obligation to that philosophical approach. ... I see and understand that all this must be an 'abomination' to you... But this is how I am. You want to explain to me that what you are doing to the NT with existentialism is not measuring it by an alien canon, not putting it in a straight-jacket, etc., but engaging in the relevant exegesis. And that is what is not clear to me when I

the text and the object mirrored in the text" [132].

Elsewhere Barth suggests that another important way to prevent philosophy or the 'spirits of the age' from dominating exegesis and interpretation is listening to the Church Fathers, and to the tradition of the Church - the creeds and confessions. This certainly does not mean that these are of the same authority as Holy Scripture in the Church, but it does mean that they have relative authority. His favourite example here is of a child honouring his or her parents. In the same way, we honour the tradition by accepting it when it reflects Scripture and by rejecting it when it is not in accord with the witness of Scripture.

It is in the Church that the Bible is read; it is by the Church that the Bible is heard. That means that in reading the Bible we should also hear what the Church, the Church that is distinguished from my person, has up to now read and heard from the Bible. Are we at liberty to ignore all that?... 'Orthodoxy' means agreement with the Fathers and the Council. As that it can never be an end in itself. Repristination is nonsense. But where 'orthodoxy' is rejected in that frightened way the question arises whether this rejection does not spring from an 'orthodoxy' of one's own, connected perhaps with certain modes of nineteenth and twentieth century thought which are quite capable of forming dogma [133].

c. Appropriation.

Precisely because one can only really understand Scripture from the perspective of faith and subordination, this think about it. In your exposition I find the textual element concealed which, I believe, should not merely be brought to light, but brought to light first and decisively. And because this is connected with your principal philosophical presuppositions, this becomes really frightening to me as you apply it." In *Letters 1922/66* p.105

133. K. Barth, *Credo*. p.181f.

understanding must work itself out in the life of the believer. In one of his earliest lectures on the Bible, Barth said "the Bible tells us more, or less, according to the much or little that we are able to hear and translate into deed and truth" [134]. Without appropriation there is only idle speculation. The object reflected in the Biblical texts "wills to be appropriated by us. It wills not merely to master our thinking about it, but our thinking and life generally, and our whole existence" [135].

Previously Barth had spoken of 'Acknowledgement', in such a way that it really is a synonym for what he means here by appropriation.

The term 'acknowledgement' denotes an act or movement on man's part, a movement which only as it is made is the acknowledgement required so that it cannot be resolved into an attitude [136].

In his lectures on *Evangelical Theology*, Barth writes almost poetically about the Wonder [137], Concern [138], and Commitment [139], which are the basics of "Theological Existence" [140]. For Barth these three attitudes are the 'compulsory' attitudes of faith. Wonder, or astonishment

134. K. Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. p.95

135. K. Barth, *CD I,2*. p.737

136. K. Barth, *CD I,1* p.207. The emphasis is ours.

137. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. pp.63ff.

138. K. Barth, *Ibid.* pp.74ff.

139. K. Barth, *Ibid.* pp.85ff.

140. The heading of the section in which Barth deals with Wonder, Concern, Commitment and Faith.

captures the experience that we have indicated above as something that comes prior to reason. Simply, Wonder! Astonishment at what God has done, the "newness" of things, and especially astonishment at what God has done to me, "the new man" [141], the 'new creation'. And because this concerns me, the new person, my life becomes affected, I become concerned,, and ultimately *Committed*. "Commitment begins with the theologian's wonder and is directly related to his concern, It comprehends, indeed his whole existence" [142].

This is how subordination works itself out in real life. One is willing to submit to Scripture to the extent that it is appropriated into one's life, as a life of obedience. The life of obedience is of course the life of faith.

Faith itself, obedient faith, but faith, and in the last resort obedient faith alone is the activity which is demanded of us as members of the Church, the exercise of the freedom which is granted under the Word [143].

There is no doubt that 'subordination', 'wonder', 'concern' and 'commitment' - the praxis of 'obedient faith' cover the full spectrum of life both social and personal. For Barth, however, there is a deep emphasis on responsibility and service in the world. He sees himself standing here in line with the Reformers when he states that 'according to Reformed teaching, the knowledge of God and the service of God do not merely belong together, but like two co-centric circles with a

141. *Ibid.* p.70

142. *Ibid.* p.85

143. K. Barth, *CD I,2.* p.740

common radius, they are one. "Knowledge of God is obedience to God. Such knowledge becomes actual by man's becoming a new man through faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord" [144].

Hermann Diem gives a fascinating insight into Barth's fundamental concern to translate the message of the Gospel into political and social language, and then to apply it as 'obedient faith' in a practical manner:

In 1966 when he was asked by a convenor of the 'No Other Gospel' movement's Dortmund assembly to comment on the "confession" made there, Barth in a very brusque letter understandably refused to get involved in the dogmatic problems of such a 'confession', and instead posed a series of counterquestions. He asked whether the convenors were ready and willing "to start a similar 'movement' and 'great assembly' against the desire to arm the West German army with nuclear weapons, against the Vietnam war and the German government allied with the Americans who wage it, against the ever-recurring outbreaks of vulgar anti-Semitism (desecration of graves) in West Germany and, for a peace treaty between West Germany and the Eastern European governments that would recognise the borders existing since 1945." "If your correct confession", Barth wrote, "to Jesus Christ crucified and raised again for us according to the Holy Scriptures includes and expresses that in itself, then it is a genuine, valuable, and fruitful confession. If not, then for all its correctness, it is a dead, cheap, pharisaical confession which strains out gnats and swallows camels". [145].

For Barth, obedient faith in the area of socio-political activity was socialist praxis: "Real Socialism is real Christianity in our time [146]. This concern expressed in 1911

144. K. Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, p.114

145. In H. Diem, "Karl Barth as a Socialist: Controversy Over a New Attempt to Understand Him" in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, p.123

146. K. Barth, "Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice" in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* p.36

was carried over for the rest of his life and enables us to understand his involvement in the SPD in Nazi Germany and his refusal to resign from it in 1933; his political activity in the war years and involvement in the Church Struggle; his participation in the communist-led 'Committee for a Free Germany'; his 'Third Way' between Capitalism and Stalinist Communism, etc. [147]. All of this was concerned with practical political activity which was really the application of the Gospel. This stress on application confirms that his hermeneutic moves fully around the circle, and having arisen out of a practical commitment to change the world, it leads back into a deeper practical commitment.

The Bible is read very differently by the person of faith as opposed to the unbeliever. That faith is not, however, intellectual assent or pious feeling, it is the faith of a life of obedience.

Because revelation in the Christian sense is the Word of God, it is impossible to adopt the attitude of a mere onlooker towards it. The revelation of God can only be searched, understood and judged in the act of obedience, of listening which leads to decision - or it will not be searched, understood and judged at all [148].

In essence then we are justified in understanding faith, obedient and committed faith, as the vital clue to correct understanding and interpretation.

147. See *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*.

148. K. Barth, *Against the Stream*, p.215

3. THE LOCUS OF AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR INTERPRETATION.

a. *Interpretation and the Community of Faith.*

"When theology confronts the Word of God and its witnesses, its place", writes Barth, "is very concretely in the community, not somewhere in empty space" [149]. In his *Dogmatics in Outline* Barth argues forcefully that the person who would be involved in the theological task, "must take his stand in responsibility upon the basis of the Christian Church and its work. That is the *conditio sine qua non*" [150].

We do not have the time nor the space to deal with Barth's ecclesiology save to point out that for Barth the existence of the Church is absolutely dependent upon the preaching and the hearing of the Word of God. Where and when this takes place, the Church comes into being [151]. Once Barth has made clear that for the person of faith the Bible becomes the Word of God, that in its pages and in them alone does the Christian hear God's voice and meet Jesus Christ the head of the Church, then it follows quite naturally that for the community of faith, the Bible simply has authority. There is no logic, reason or

149. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. p.37

150. K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. p.10

151. See for example, H. Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*. p.41: "According to Barth's actualistic concept of the Church, the latter is primarily not an institution rooted in this world but an event, a continually fresh encounter in the power of the Holy Spirit between God and man in Jesus Christ as the Word of God proclaimed by this Church and ... received, believed and obeyed by the members of his Church. It is this preaching and hearing by the Church of Jesus Christ as the Word of God in and through the power of the Holy Spirit whereby the Church continually becomes afresh the true Church of Jesus Christ".

argument involved:

... every substantial proposition concerning the authority and significance of the bible expresses a situation about which no discussion is possible, a circumstance which, being grounded in itself, speaks for itself and therefore can only be elucidated by means of repetition and affirmation. This circumstance is the simple fact that in the congregation of Jesus Christ, the Bible has a specific authority and significance. He who would speak substantially on this matter must be aware of this intrinsic, fundamental relationship between Bible and congregation [152].

The existence of the Church depends upon recognising this authority of the Scriptures in its life and witness. It is "on the point of dissolution" [153], where and when it forgets this, and "its proclamation can only dissolve into pious smoke and all sorts of religious and moralistic odours"! [154].

In his *Church Dogmatics I* Barth draws together the discussion on the 'Nature of the Word' of God with his discussion on the 'Attributes of the Word of God' in the Bible, in the life of the Church. What Barth argues here is the Absolute Authority of the Word and also its Absolute Freedom in the life of the Church, in that Jesus Christ who is the Word, is one who rules and is free to be who he would be in the life of the Church. For the Church then, the Bible must be acknowledged as the

152. K. Barth, "The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses" in *God Here and Now*, p.45

153. K. Barth, *Against the Stream*, p.226

154. K. Barth, "The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses" in *God Here and Now*, p.58 This is true for Barth also of the ecumenical unity of the Church.

155. It is for the above reason that under the section on 'Holy Scripture' in *Church Dogmatics I,2*, Barth devotes two chapters (20, 21) to a discussion on 'Authority in the Church' and 'Freedom in the Church' respectively. For the Church, Holy

absolute authority and also as absolutely free [155].

b. Interpretation as the Responsibility of Every Christian.

This however does not mean that the Church lacks authority and freedom. On the contrary by confessing its faith in the Word of God in Holy Scripture, the Church itself receives authority and freedom. Thus the Church has authority in such areas as the decision of the canon, ecclesiastical teachers, and Confessions of Faith. But this is always a derived authority and subject to the absolute authority of Scripture. The Church and its members are also set free to study and proclaim the Word. Yet again this is a derived and thus secondary freedom [156].

Not only is the Church and its members given this freedom and authority, but Barth argues that it is only when they grasp this freedom and authority that their obedience to the authoritative and free Word of God becomes actual:

Holy Scripture is the ground and limit of the Church, but for that very reason it constitutes it. Having authority and freedom in the Church, it lends that authority and freedom to the Church. We have to take this into account. For *only as this takes place* does it actually come about that Holy Scripture is obeyed as the Word of God in the Church, and through the Church, in the world [157].

For the Church to be the Church then it has the responsibility both of confessing its faith and of engaging in the task of Scripture alone is absolutely authoritative and free. See Thesis Twenty in K. Barth, *CD I,2*, p.538; and Thesis Twenty-One in *Ibid.* p.661

156. See the discussion in *CD I,2* under 'Authority under the Word', pp.585ff. and 'Freedom under the Word' pp.695ff.

157. *Ibid.* p.539

exegesis, interpretation and application of Scripture. This provides the 'why' of Biblical interpretation which governs the 'how'. Exegesis is "the fundamental task of all theological study" [158]. It is this that brings the Church back time and again to its root and its source. It is this that challenges false practices in the Church, and it is this and this alone that can guarantee that the Church is the true Church. Indeed, "as long as exegesis is pursued, an over-insipid Christianity will not fail to be confronted by a number of conundrums" [159].

In the life of the Church this challenge and responsibility does not fall upon a specialised class of Biblical scholars, but upon all the members of the Church, *all* believers. This Barth understands as a corollary of human freedom under the Word. In fact to deny this part of Christian freedom, means in effect to deny the authority of the Word and hence to stand outside the Church. The role of the believer is thus to stand as a third party between the Word of Scripture and the World. This is really what Church proclamation is all about [160].

All members of the Church so far as they are open to the Word of God in Scripture have the resources to fulfil this function. We have seen that Barth rejects the thesis that there are degrees of openness in humans to the Word of God, or that some people by nature are more open to God's Word or

158. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*. p.175

159. K. Barth, *Against the Stream*. p.231

160. See, K. Barth, *CD I,1*. p.79

somehow innately religious [161]. The knowability of the Word of God is *not* an extraordinary art.

Its practice does not presuppose any special endowment whether natural or supernatural. The believer is the same ungifted and idle or gifted and busy man he was as an unbeliever and may become again [162].

161. *Ibid.* p.213. Incidentally this is a powerful argument in favour of women priests and ministers!

162. *Ibid.* p.237. In this regard Barth passes the delightfully ironical comment that the message of Scripture may be dealt with better by an "unknown country parson than in 'the most exact academic discussion imaginable" (*Ibid.* p.279). It was of course as an 'unknown country parson' from Safenwil that Barth was in effect saying that he dealt better with the message of Scripture than the academic heavy-weights of his day. The Barth-Harnack correspondence is a case in point (see, M. Rumscheidt, *Op. cit.*). Now of course, Barth is the academic heavy-weight, and too is open to correction from any 'unknown country parson'.

CHAPTER FOUR:

TOWARD A REFORMED-LIBERATION HERMENEUTIC

At the end of Chapter two, we listed the four basic challenges that Liberation Theology poses to the Reformed tradition in the area of hermeneutics. Having explored in detail the Reformed view of Scripture and its interpretation, particularly on the basis of the work of Karl Barth, we are now in a position to sketch the outlines of a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic. This hermeneutic obviously needs to be developed beyond the confines and limits of this thesis. Other Reformed theologians who are engaged in liberating praxis will obviously have much to offer such development, and in particular I think of the work of Georges Casalis in his book *Correct Ideas Don't Fall From the Skies*.

a. Beyond the Subject-Object Divide.

The first challenge from Liberation hermeneutics was to treat the Bible, not as some objective thing-at-hand, but as a living testimony to God. This enables the content of the Bible to become radically contemporary in the act of interpretation. It is clear that Calvin's first trajectory with its emphasis on the objective authority of the words of the Bible, does not provide the resources for the Reformed tradition to meet this

challenge. It thus falls prey to the philosophical critique of Heidegger, Marx and Kierkegaard.

Calvin's second trajectory, as developed by Barth, does however go beyond this objectivist tendency by locating the authority of the text in the subjective experience of faith and the work of the Spirit. On the basis of this, a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic would affirm that the truth of the Biblical message lies not in the attempt to interpret it 'objectively', 'scientifically', and in a detached manner, but rather 'subjectively', 'passionately', and in an attitude of engagement.

b. Recognising the Hermeneutical Circle.

Reformed Hermeneutics, on the basis of Calvin's second trajectory, recognises that the interpreter needs to interact subjectively with the text in order to discover its meaning. This means that to a large extent the nature of the interpreter will affect the nature of the interpretation. Barth was clearly aware that no-one could approach the text 'objectively', and he took pains to show how one could combat the clouding of the meaning of the text through the use of alien philosophies [1]. Barth, however, concentrates on *consciously adopted alien philosophies* rather than on unconscious world-views which are specifically shaped by social

1. We examined these under the heading 'Reflection' in Chapter Three, Part Two, Section 2b.

2. No doubt Barth's thinking on this matter was decisively shaped by his polemical situation with Rudolf Bultmann. See the section on 'Reflection' mentioned in the previous footnote. It

structure [2].

For this reason, a contemporary Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic would have to broaden Barth's categories of alien influences and affirm a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' with regards to the way that social structure and human interests affect the hermeneutic circle.

This move would not be at all alien to a Reformed anthropology at large, or to Barth's recognition that we meet the Biblical text in our full humanity. We would need simply to recognise that being human implies participation in political and economic power struggles and interests. Along with other aspects of our fallen nature, we bring such interests with us to the text. Allan Boesak, a South African theologian who is involved in engaging the Reformed tradition in the concerns of Liberation, makes this clear:

Each theological concept develops within a particular context, and our theological thinking - the way we read the Gospel, the way we understand the Gospel, the way we interpret the Gospel - has everything to do with what we eat and how many times a day we eat, what salary we earn, whether we own a home, whether we live happily with our family, and so on. The situation in which we live, the context in which we live profoundly influences the way we do theology [3].

A number of implications from the recognition of the hermeneutic circle are clear. (i) A Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic needs to stress the importance of listening to the should be remembered, however, that Barth was critical of the theological (and hence exegetical) justification of both World Wars, and he recognised that in these situations the Bible was being read out of a Nazi or German Nationalist commitment.

3. A. Boesak, "Liberation Theology in South Africa" in *African Theology en Route*.

interpretations of the Bible that come from the poor, the hungry, women, the marginalised in society. (ii) In that God has a particular love for the poor and marginalised, and in that much of the Bible is written from their perspective, a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic must recognise that the poor have a 'hermeneutical privilege' and that the Word of God is more likely to be heard in the word of a poor migrant labourer's wife than in the word of the most eloquent and highly-educated preacher. (iii) A Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic would need to make clear its unqualified support for the principle of women preachers. (iv) If for the Reformed tradition the Church comes into being where 'the Word of God is truly preached and heard', then a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic must raise ecclesiological questions. If the poor have a 'hermeneutical privilege' when it comes to understanding the Word of God, then the Church must be challenged to become a 'Church of the Poor'.

c. The Bible Must be Read from Within the Church.

Karl Barth and Liberation Theology are both adamant that the Bible is to be read from within the life and witness of ^{the} Church. Barth himself was aware, however, that Reformed Hermeneutics in the guise of critical exegesis does have a tendency to go off on its own and to become a law unto itself. Against this a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic must have *Love of God and Neighbour* and not *Love of Critical Exegesis* as its 'controlling

4. Here I have Hunsinger's characterizations in mind. See, "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology".

passion' [4]. For this reason, a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic would demand that those who engage in critical Biblical studies do so only as secondary to their engagement in the life and witness of the Church.

Both Barth and the Liberation Theologians recognise that 'application' is a vital aspect of interpretation, and that it is only as one does that one hears. This is the corollary of the belief that the Bible is to be read from within the Church, It is precisely as Christians read and apply the Biblical message that the life and witness of the Church can be said to be occurring, for the church is none other than the community of faith. Because faith is obedient engagement in the world in the light of God's Word, a Reformed-Liberation Hermeneutic would thus also need to be a ~~her~~meneutic of engagement'.

d. A Militant Reading of the Gospel.

Liberation Theology calls for a *militant* reading of the Gospel. Reformed hermeneutics, along with other traditions, have a particularly dismal track record in having promoted injustice and oppression, both personal and political. We think of the justification of slavery, of sexism and especially of Apartheid in South Africa. In the light of this, we are driven to pose the following as a fundamental question: *can a Reformed Hermeneutic ever be Militant* in the way that Gutierrez demands? Our response to this question will necessarily arise out of the Reformed view of Scripture.

It is our contention that the Reformed Tradition is pre-eminently suited to a militant reading due to its

understanding of *Christ as the centre and meaning of Scripture*. Calvin was clear: the Bible presents God the Redeemer - who is Christ to us. Redemption which involves both the personal and political is none other than liberation, and Christ is God the Liberator. If we say that Christ is the centre and meaning of Scripture, we are saying that the Bible needs to be read through the filter of Liberation offered in Christ. Two examples will illustrate the point. (i) On the basis of Ephesians 5:22f. one could justify sexist oppression in the home. Read through the filter of Christ, who is the centre and meaning of Scripture, this formula is thrown into disrepute due to his non-sexist and liberatory praxis toward women. (ii) On the basis of Romans 13:1 one could justify a quietist, status quo affirming, reactionary Christian political ethic. With Christ as the Centre of Scripture, and hence of one's interpretation we are challenged through his call to discipleship, and his radical challenge to the authority of the state, to a liberatory political ethic.

e. Strengths of the Reformed Tradition.

We have examined how a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic needs to grow out of the four-fold challenge that Liberation hermeneutics pose to Reformed hermeneutics. It must also be made clear that there are weaknesses within the Liberation hermeneutic, and that there is much in the Reformed tradition that transcends the four-fold challenge, and that would need to be appropriated by a Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic just as it is. Having dealt with these concerns in chapters one and three we will only briefly mention them here.

One of the greatest weaknesses of Liberation hermeneutics is that it does not have a 'theory', 'view' or 'doctrine' of the text itself. Against this, we have seen that a vital strength of Reformed hermeneutics is that it flows coherently out of a Doctrine of Holy Scripture. The strength of this can be seen if one considers, for example, how the understanding of Christ as the centre of Scripture provides a solid foundation for a 'militant reading'.

Another important weakness of Liberation hermeneutics is its almost complete avoidance of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. While Liberation hermeneutics recognise that interpretation takes place in the realm of the third article of the creed i.e. from within the life and witness of the Church, this does not excuse its failure to deal with the work of God himself in interpretation.

A Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic needs to be clear on the question of the authority and normativeness of Holy Scripture. This is not an 'objective' authority, but is rather the authority accorded by faith. Critical reflection on praxis, and the seeking of 'Signs of the Times' has always to be subjected to the authority of Scripture simply to prevent our whims and fancies, and ultimately our unshackled prejudices from taking over.

Finally, a strength of the Reformed Tradition arising out of Calvin's second trajectory is its recognition of the subversive 'knowledge' that the Bible has in its pages - Christ, the Redeemer, Liberator and the Lord of the universe. This is

appropriated by Barth and it must be the starting point for any Reformed-Liberation hermeneutic. There is nothing within Liberation Hermeneutics that can quite match the audacious, and yet powerfully telling claim made by Barth (on the basis of this trajectory) about the true knowledge of God in the Bible:

Knowledge of God in the sense of the New Testament message, the knowledge of the triune God as contrasted with the whole world of religions in the first centuries signified, and still signifies, the most radical 'twilight of the gods'..... There is a real basis for the feeling, current to this day, that every genuine proclamation of the Christian faith is a force disturbing to, even destructive of, the advance of religion, its life and richness and peace. It is bound to be so.... The figures of every religious culture are necessarily secularised and recede. They can keep themselves alive only as ideas, symbols, and ghosts, and finally as comic figures. And in the end even in this form they sink into oblivion. No sentence is more dangerous or revolutionary than that God is One and there is no other like Him.... It was on the truth of this sentence that God is One that the 'Third Reich' of Adolf Hitler was made shipwreck. Let this sentence be uttered in such a way that it is heard and grasped, and at once 450 prophets of Baal are always in fear of their lives. There is no more room now for what the recent past called toleration. Beside God there are only His creatures or false gods, and beside faith in Him there are religions only as religions of superstition, error and finally irreligion.... It is to be noted that on this knowledge, i.e. the practical and critical application of this knowledge of God as the unique, the one and only God, depends the Scripture principle of the Reformers.... [5].

5. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics II,1* pp.444f. The emphasis is ours.

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SJT The Scottish Journal of Theology.

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