



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

This document contains the opinions of the author(s) at the time of original publication. Permission to quote or publish in any other form must be sought from the author.

LATIMER COMMENT 06

THE USE OF SCRIPTURE

(A review of G-S 525: The Use of Scripture, a discussion paper by Professor Barnabas Lindars S.S.F. prepared for debate in the General Synod. His paper is published by the C.I.O. at 25p, and is available from Church House Bookshop, Great Smith St., London SW1P 3NZ).

Professor Lindars' primary concern is, of course, with the use which may be made of Scripture in General Synod debates on theological and moral issues. On the basis of modern academic study of Scripture, he counsels caution. However, the arguments he employs are of much wider application than simply to Synod debates, and the advice he gives, if right, should be heeded by all Christians.

His attitude to the Bible is not negative, as one might infer from the report on his paper in the Church Times for 16.4.82. He acknowledges that the Bible is the 'primary source of Christian truth' (paragraph 1), is 'in a true sense the Word of God' and is 'inspired by the Holy Spirit' (para. 8); he condemns the subordination of the Bible to tradition (para. 11); and lines of argument which 'can lead to direct contradiction of what appear to be clear moral statements by Jesus himself' (para. 19); and he even commends Evangelicals for their recent attention to the conditions for right biblical interpretation (para. 7). However, his emphasis is on the difficulty of applying the Bible to either doctrine or ethics (paras. 13, 20, 29 etc.) and on the danger of a naive approach (esp. para. 7).

The reasons which Professor Lindars gives for his caution are the following:

(a) Some modern problems are not envisaged by the Bible (para. 3). This is true, but the Bible often provides general principles which can be applied to new problems. Moreover, it is difficult to see on what grounds the writer can say that remarriage after divorce is a new problem, which the moral teaching of Jesus cannot be used to settle (para. 21). The truth is, perhaps, that he oversimplifies Jesus' teaching, by ignoring the Matthaean evidence (Matt. 5:32; 19:3,9).

(b) Biblical criticism has 'undermined the basis of confidence'¹ in the Bible and its prima facie teaching (para. 4). He recognises, however, that the approach of the conservative evangelical to biblical criticism is somewhat, though not entirely, different (cp. also para. 7); and this is indeed so. For if 'biblical criticism' just means studying the Bible in its historical context, conservative evangelicals accept biblical criticism and do not find that it undermines the basis of confidence in the Bible. It is only if 'biblical criticism' includes scepticism about the teaching of the Bible that it has this injurious result.

(c) The Bible must not be seen through the spectacles of unexamined assumptions in its readers' minds (paras. 5-6, 25). Indeed not. As he says, we must be self-critical and not take its statements out of their contexts. Similarly, as he goes on to say, we should not read back later doctrinal formulations into the Bible, but make the effort to interpret the Bible in its own terms, and then see how far it supports later formulations (paras. 11, 13, 26). But he recognises that the task, though difficult, is not impossible, and that its results will not necessarily be revolutionary.

(d) It is necessary to take account of the 'cultural assumptions' of the biblical writers (paras. 7, 29). If this just means that we must read the Bible in its historical context, against the background of contemporary Judaism and not of some quite alien or anachronistic background, this is undoubtedly true. But if it means that wherever the New Testament

agrees with contemporary Judaism, it can be discounted, this is false. The latter interpretation seems to be implied in the statement that biblical ethics are time-bound by the cultural conditions of their setting' (para. 29) and especially in the author's rejection of Paul's condemnation of homosexual practices, simply because contemporary Judaism also condemned them (paras. 22-23). There was much good in contemporary Judaism, which Jesus and the apostles endorsed, as well as much bad, which they corrected. Those moral teachings which had grown out of the Old Testament revelation, such as this one (cp. Lev. 18:22; 20:13 etc.), they naturally endorsed, for they were not introducing the gospel out of the blue, but were building on the Old Testament foundation.

(e) There is much diversity in Scripture, on which contemporary scholarship lays emphasis (paras. 12, 27). This is true, and should put us on our guard against a simplistic approach. Nevertheless, the underlying unity of Scripture should also be stressed, and more than it is in contemporary scholarship, which is reacting against the 'Biblical Theology' movement of a few years ago, with its great emphasis on the unity of the Bible's teaching.

(f) On ethical matters we must take account of modern psychology, as well as the Bible (para. 18). This is only a half-truth. Modern psychology helps us to understand human behaviour, but not to assess it as right or wrong. It may tell us what is 'natural', but to assume that what is 'natural' is good is to forget the fallen state of humanity.

(g) The inspiration of the Bible must not be confused with 'verbal inerrancy', which is a belief dating only from the nineteenth century, when it resulted from an irrational and un-Anglican reaction against the scientific method (paras. 11, 26). It is tempting to ask Professor Lindars whether his own somewhat existential account of biblical inspiration (para. 9) can even be traced back to the nineteenth century, or how belief in verbal inerrancy can at once be irrational and (as other critics urge) rationalistic? But it is more important to point out that the belief was merely reasserted in the nineteenth century, not newly devised then, that it goes back to Christian antiquity, and has a most respectable Anglican pedigree. In the sixteenth century the great Bishop Jewel, author of the Apology of the Church of England, wrote, 'it is not possible the scriptures may err' (Works, Parker Society, i 79), while Archbishop Whitgift wrote, 'I have learned with St. Augustine to give this reverence only to the writers of canonical scriptures, that I think none of them to have erred in writing' (Works, P.S., i 173). Similarly, the official Anglican Book of Homilies repeatedly calls Scripture 'infallible', and so do Cranmer (Works, P.S., i 24, ii 19) and Ridley (Works, P.S., p.16) in the sixteenth century, Laud (Conference with Fisher 26:4f; 38:5) and the translators of the A.V. (preface) in the seventeenth century, Waterland (Works v 89) in the eighteenth century, and any number of others.

All in all, it seems clear that the professor 'doth protest too much'. Those who read him discerningly will agree that Scripture should be handled with discretion, but they will not be deterred from applying it with faithfulness and confidence to the issues with which it deals, either directly or by clear implication.

R.T.Beckwith