

A summary of a Lecture given by Professor James D G Dunn in Chichester Cathedral on 10 October 2011

How should the Bible Function in Today's Church?

How does the Bible/New Testament function in the church? How *should* it function in the church?

Different ways in which scripture is used in church/worship.

The canonical status of the Bible; how is it to exercise its canonical function?

- Back to the Bible? – but unhistorical idealization.
- Postmodernist view – no fixed meaning in text; exaggerated.
- Magisterium determines meaning; but does not NT canon have critical function with regard to tradition? – the norm that norms the norm.

Two unavoidable factors in interpretation:

1. *Historical particularity* of text; can we assume that it has universal applicability? Does 'This was the word of God' translate into 'This is the word of God'? E.g. OT laws; promise of Canaan/Palestine to Abraham; Leviticus/Paul and homosexuality; does John's Gospel justify anti-semitism? Is 1 Cor. for all churches/Revelation prophecy for today?
2. *Diversity* in NT. E.g. 4 different Gospels, not Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Jesus alone as foundation, but different superstructures built on foundation; one gospel but diverse elaborations/outworkings of gospel. Issue not inspiration, so much as interpretation; canon as basis of *diversity* as well as *unity*; canonical criticism does not allow us to escape the issue.

Particular problem when NT does not support subsequent tradition, or when tradition runs counter to NT. E.g. gift of Spirit subordinated to rite of baptism; does traditional cult of saints not diminish status of believers as saints in NT?

Two major issues for today:

a) Role of women in ministry. Why did Jesus choose only twelve men? Can we assume he did it for theological rather than social/cultural reasons? Paul (1 Cor. 14.34-5; 1 Tim. 2.12) – women or wives? Importance of women in Paul's mission teams (20%); Phoebe, deacon and patron (Rom. 16.1-2); Junia, outstanding apostle (16.7) – founder of churches in Rome? 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 have to be balanced/read in light of Paul's practice; both strands of Paul need to be recognized. NT canonizes diversity.

b) Order of priests. No such order in NT churches; priestly language used for any service of the gospel (Rom. 12.1; 15.15-16; Phil. 2.25); priestly role invested in the people as whole (1 Pet. 2.5; Rev. 1.6; etc.). Clear teaching of Hebrews: order of priesthood belongs to old covenant, now passé, obsolete (Heb. 8.13); replaced by unique, unrepeatable priesthood of Christ (7.3). Methodist Deed of Union nearer the mark! Irony of contrast between Judaism and Christianity: Judaism having lost Temple lost rationale for priesthood, so transferred focus of ministry to rabbi; Christianity, having initially seen no need for mediatorial priesthood, slowly readapted to focus ministry on role of sacrificing priest.

So, need for interpretation inescapable → inevitably to different interpretations; NT validates more than one understanding of doctrine/praxis → important necessity of recognizing validity of interpretations other than our own.

Christianity of NT larger than our own narrow definitions. NT functions canonically by warning us not to 'make God's love too narrow by false limits of our own', lest 'we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own' (F.W.Faber).