

HERMENEUTICAL FRAGMENTS: WHY WE
DO NOT NEED A NEW HERMENEUTIC

Response of Allan McNicol

All interpretation inevitably must operate within a certain framework and structure. And consideration of this paper presented by Highfield is no exception. It was written against the backdrop of the seminar on hermeneutics that has become an ongoing enterprise in several recent Scholar's Conferences. I appreciate the fact that Ron has taken the work done in the seminar seriously and has attempted both to clarify some points already made and to move us beyond past discussion.

I especially appreciate the statement he made in the paper (p. 14), "I find myself in almost complete agreement with Allan McNicol." After that, perhaps I should say, "I rest my case," and sit down. But I am supposed to do something at this meeting. So, as briefly as possible, I would like to set forth a point that I trust may be deemed worthwhile for further exploration in our discussion period.

The point is this. It seems to me that an important issue has emerged out of our discussions in this seminar and elsewhere. Do the contemporary urban churches of Christ in America have an identifiable theological identity that connects with our heritage?

Leonard Allen, Richard Hughes, and now Ron Highfield all have highlighted the culturally conditioned context which was exemplified in the plea of the nineteenth century restorers. We are not a movement that stands above history. As much as the church at Corinth in the first century was intertwined with everything that went on in that town we have been affected by most of the undercurrents and theological perspectives operative in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That much is clear.

Now I think it is evident that as part of Western Protestant Christianity we set out to be a Reformation movement that attempted to develop a kind of generic Christianity under the rhetoric of restoring the original pure faith of the apostles. In so doing we drew heavily upon and incorporated into a new synthesis theological strands from both the Reformed and Believers church traditions. But how we did this has never been worked out systematically and it does not necessarily imply that we attained a clear theological identity. When you pick up a book on theology written by a Lutheran you can be aware there is an agenda there. He will subsume a lot under the law/grace discrimen; and you

can be sure that he will filter things through the two kingdoms doctrine as well. Among the Anabaptist communities a similar procedure (but with quite different categories) goes on when John Howard Yoder and his Mennonite compatriots do theology. But I think the issue that I attempted to raise in my paper at Pepperdine and earlier writings is still before us. Do we have an identifiable theological tradition around which we can rally with integrity? I would like to think that we do.

If we do not it makes little difference whether we have moved from the old hermeneutics to a new one. Different strokes for different folks! But if there is a theological pole star by which our fathers set their course then we can have a discussion about whether the present state of things in the churches represent fidelity and loyalty to the past insights.

This brings me back to Highfield's paper. There are so many things upon which Ron and I agree. I think that he is correct in his assault on Cartesianism; and I believe he has read our philosophical pilgrimage correctly. We have moved from being naive (I prefer common sense) realists to critical realism. Kant and his legacy, the bane of the mainliners, has not bothered us unduly. I concur with Ron and Tom Olbricht that out in our urban constituency there is a different constellation of beliefs operative today than in previous generations; and I believe Ron's crucial point is correct in that the material content of this new set of beliefs has its own self-generating hermeneutic.

But I would also want to be heard saying that there is something that troubles me about Ron's proposal. When Highfield finally comes to put into confessional status the "new content" of what we believe it sounds very much like an up-to-date version of Anglo-Saxon evangelicism. It has far more the ring of something that would come out of Fuller Seminary than Bethany or Cane Ridge. My major problem with this is the problem I always have with most evangelicals. They are too Reductionistic. In the interest of consensus too many important theological distinctions get lost.

I do not question that many among us here have come to Ron's position on the basis of listening to the word of God. The fact that they stand where they stand is not a point to be taken lightly.

But I wonder if while we are concerned to be properly Trinitarian, in keeping with the ancient confessions, that we couldn't say something about the one baptism for the remission of sins. That also has the highest ecumenical credentials (the Nicene creed); and it also makes a statement about who we are and how our fellowship has made a special contribution to ecumenical Christianity. Furthermore, I think that the statement that it is only by "empty-handed faith and pure grace that we

have been saved" could be said with a slightly different tone bringing out our insight that the salvation event of Jesus Christ is not completed without human cooperation. I realize that some of our brethren have sounded, at times, like born again Pelagianists; but there are clear and present dangers as well in using the language of the ultra-evangelicals.

I guess the point that I am making is that I do believe, despite our eclectic origins, if we fish around enough we may discover that we do have a definite theological identity that is worthy of perpetuation. But I will also admit that it is still an open question. It is one of the virtues of this fine paper that we will be forced to come to grips with this question. May the discussion continue.

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