Introduction

TEACHING THE BIBLE IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

STEPHEN L. COOK*

The 1990s saw a complete turnover in the biblical faculty at Virginia Theological Seminary. Through retirements and resignations, five faculty members in the fields of Old Testament and New Testament left the seminary. Some of these figures had taught at VTS for thirty or even forty years. New appointments over the last dozen years brought in five very different professors. The departure of honored colleagues and the arrival of a new generation of biblical scholars have marked the end of a grand era at VTS and the start of an exciting new one.

Despite their individual specializations and vastly different teaching styles, the members of the preceding cohort of Bible faculty shared many assumptions and approaches in teaching the biblical texts. Most had received their training at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. They shared the twentieth-century *zeitgeist*, which prioritized an historical, critical, and archeological approach to studying the Bible. Moreover, they first developed their pedagogies at a time when mainline Protestant denominations enjoyed much greater strength and influence in America. Biblical illiteracy, blandness about religious values, and the widespread embrace of religious pluralism have all grown steadily in our culture since that time.

The five members of the biblical faculty to join VTS most recently share a different training and set of assumptions. They all did their doctoral studies at Yale University, as did some earlier members of the faculty in non-biblical departments. They trained in the historical-critical method, and they are actively appreciative of its contributions. At the same time, they share an interest in newer literary, canonical, and hermeneutical approaches to recovering the theological witness of the biblical texts.

* Stephen L. Cook is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary and, with Robert W. Prichard, a guest editor of this issue of the *Anglican Theological Review*.

Further, they are aware that their teaching must meet the needs of a new generation of seminarians. Many new students at VTS come to the seminary underexposed to the Bible's content, theological witness, authority, artistry, drama, and humor. These students come with increasing financial indebtedness, greater family responsibilities, and greater impatience with many traditional pedagogies in theological education.

Recognizing the turnover in the biblical departments, the VTS faculty decided to devote their winter 1997 faculty retreat to the topic of teaching the Bible. The retreat included Bible studies led by new faculty members in Old and New Testament, reports from faculty members in other disciplines about the place of the Bible in their current teaching, and sessions for general discussion and reflection. As the retreat took place, participants noticed that several faculty members in various fields were already working with late modern, postliberal approaches similar to those of the new Bible faculty. Other faculty members began to envision ways of collaborating with the new biblical department in innovative cross-disciplinary initiatives.

At the conclusion of the retreat, participants agreed that their discussions had uncovered new energy and direction in the teaching of the Bible at VTS. The group wanted to build on this energy and share it with those outside of our seminary community. Several participants suggested publishing a selection of the presentations given at the retreat. Such a publication project would alert the Episcopal Church, and perhaps an even larger audience, to the current excitement at VTS. More significantly, it could encourage broader discussion and reflection on the problematic of teaching the Bible in theological seminaries at the start of a new millennium.

The collection of essays in this issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* brings together revised and reworked presentations from the 1997 VTS faculty retreat and related essays that other VTS professors have written in subsequent months. Two of the contributors to this collection have now left the seminary: one has retired, and the other has accepted a call to a new post. Nonetheless, the collection expresses well the continuing sense of hermeneutical redirection and interdisciplinary cooperation currently taking place around the teaching of the Bible at VTS.

We have chosen articles for publication here that have a relevance extending beyond the curriculum of one particular seminary. The articles raise broader issues concerning the teaching of the Bible of inter-

est to the general readership of the *ATR*. Since this collection of essays comes from scholars of history, theology, and homiletics, as well as from biblical scholars, it will surely engage the attention of a wide body of those committed to theological education. With retirements and new hiring at many theological seminaries, the time is ripe for Episcopal faculties to compare notes about the place of the Bible in their curricula. We hope publication of this collection will encourage similar writing projects from other seminaries. One purpose of the *ATR* is to encourage such conversation.

David Scott taught theology and ethics at Virginia Seminary from 1970 to 2001. His essay explores some of the difficulties involved in setting forth the Christian faith in the early twenty-first century. He orients us to current challenges in the use of the Bible in theological education, especially to challenges in teaching the Bible's authority.

Scott argues that modern people are largely convinced that their own minds and hearts are a surer guide to truth than authoritative biblical texts are. Scientific and technological communities of research, which prioritize autonomous reason, constitute the most authoritative institutions in modern society. Even in searching for spiritual truth, people do not turn first to biblical texts. Nowadays they tend to turn sooner to their own inner depths and inner potential as the source and criteria of truth. Alternatively, they turn to embrace the circumscribed truths of particular subgroups or minority parties in society to which they may belong.

Among further challenges mentioned by Scott is the observation that modern people and modern seminarians no longer hold in common a unified store of values and convictions. The current growth of "value pluralism" in our culture has robbed seminarians of knowledge and passion about distinctive Christian truths and biblical understandings.

Since advocates of many causes find support in biblical texts, how can the Bible authoritatively convey God's consistent will? If many current students come to seminary without fixed notions of biblical authority, how can a prime teaching goal continue to be disabusing students of rigidity?

The remaining four essays of this collection suggest approaches for meeting some of the challenges outlined by Scott (as well as other challenges). None of the contributors claims to have worked out a definitive, universal solution to our current challenge of teaching the Bible. The four essays do cohere with constructive promise, however,

around some basic shared presuppositions, stances, and hermeneutics. Further, the essays all benefit from classroom feedback about what approaches students embrace as potentially helpful for their future ministries.

The way that these essays cohere in forging a new direction in teaching the Bible becomes clear upon a close reading. The new direction that they take contrasts with many current neo-liberal approaches, especially approaches that are historically and anthropologically focused. This new direction is *not* consciously intended to contrast with the approach of the previous generation of VTS faculty, however. We do not mean to brand the approach of our emeriti faculty as "anthropocentric."

It might be fair to say that the previous generation of VTS faculty generally accepted a neo-orthodox approach to Scripture that was advocated by Reinhold Niebuhr and other mid-twentieth-century faculty members at Union Theological Seminary. For them the Bible provided a commentary on the human condition that was needed to take a realistic view of the world. They retained the liberal theological assumption that the primary objects of investigation of modern biblical study are the original authors and the ancient set of events that first gave rise to the biblical texts. Nevertheless, the focus of these faculty members was clearly on the word of God. They were not merely interested in pieces of ancient tradition that fit current needs. A hallmark of both the current VTS faculty and of the preceding generation is the central place given to Scripture and Word in the seminary curriculum. The centrality of Scripture to the theological enterprise is a continuing distinctive at VTS.

What does it mean to say that our contributors prioritize a *theological* approach to the Bible over an *anthropological* one? An anthropological approach begins from the perspective of our human experience. It brings human experience to the Bible, searching for points of contact, affirmation, and solace. In this approach, one values the Bible primarily as a "sourcebook" for discovering the ethical advances and religious breakthroughs of the human figures of biblical history. As Judith McDaniel notes in her essay, the problem with such a privileging of experience is that human experience is not only limited but also flawed. Drawing on Anselm, she writes that any given individual may certainly be in relation with God, but no one individual can contain God's fullness.

A theological approach to using the Bible is completely different

from an anthropocentric one. It comes to the Bible not for religious insights that reflect a reader's inner identity and cause but in order to hear the Word of God. It assumes that the Bible bears witness to theological reality, to the person of God and to God's plan and work in the world. It is determined to find an orientation to the biblical texts that allows the Bible to interpret our experience, to tell us who we are, and to make demands on us and assure us of God's promises.

The essays in this collection agree that theological interpretation of the Bible is often most successful when it focuses on the final, scriptural form of the text rather than on its reconstructed building blocks. True, an "archeological" approach to the Bible clarifies many of the puzzling, ancient features of the biblical texts. It is the holistic, canonical form of the Bible, nevertheless, that most directly constitutes the Scripture of the Church that has nourished its life throughout church history. Too often, historical criticism has neglected theological exegesis of Scripture, content to settle for a pious appropriation of prescriptural levels of the biblical texts.

Our contributors further agree that one helpful avenue for relearning to read the Bible theologically is rethinking the nature and the function of the Bible's language. Modern people often assume that language is a tool for verbalizing experience and for sharing one's inner depths with other people. The essays in this collection make arguments that language can also be a tool for creating and shaping experience.

Stephen Cook comments on how the possession of a language is sometimes a prerequisite for having various experiences. To give a mundane example, having language allows people central human experiences, such as the experience of hope, which the family pet will always lack. McDaniel notes how the acquisition of a language gave Helen Keller access to a completely new world of experience. The language of Scripture is no less powerful. Robert Prichard argues that the sounding of clear scriptural voices at critical junctures has driven the experience of the Church; scriptural language has provided the "gas" in the engine of church history.

Even more dramatically than sign language for Keller, the language of the Bible opens up a new world of life with God for the faithful reader. The language of the text is a transformative vehicle that enables the reader to revision the world from a theological perspective. Robert Prichard notes some historical examples. The gospel story of the rich young man inverted the world of Antony of Egypt. The exo-

dus story allowed the African-American slaves a completely new theological way to experience the horrors of slavery.

The contributions to this collection stress that the language of Scripture gives us a redescription of reality, allowing us to see the world from God's perspective and to frame our personal stories in the biblical story. Ellen Davis reminds us of Karl Barth's observation that the Bible presents us with a "strange new world." McDaniel reflects on how preaching might best enable listeners to incorporate themselves within that world. To preach kerygmatically is to frame the mundane world in God's perspective, not vice versa.

Modern people find it natural to employ the categories and frameworks of the modern world in reading and interpreting biblical texts. The essays in this collection suggest, however, that the Bible's own linguistic world is a preferable context for reading the Bible "biblically." The interpretive grid that the Bible itself provides guides readers in how best to relish the nourishment of God's Word in the new millennium.

Our contributors remind us that the compilers and editors of the Bible set our biblical traditions and texts in conscious interrelationship with each other within a canonical context. As a result, the present canonical shape of the Bible forms a sort of echo chamber. Within that chamber, the language of many biblical passages reverberates with memories of God's mysterious ways with the world.

McDaniel cites memories from the Old Testament of God as a searching shepherd that clarify and deepen Jesus' symbolic language. Davis points out how the Gospel symbol of God the Father resonates with memories of the variety of portrayals of highly compelling "father" characters in the Old Testament. Without cognizance of such echoes and memories, biblical language and symbolism may seem incomprehensible or offensive.

Because the strange new world of Scripture is so foreign to our fallen world of experience, we must prepare theological students to exercise patience and diligence in navigating its rich complexity. McDaniel exhorts us to a deep listening to the biblical text. Davis calls us to grow in our literary competence, to revel in the text's suggestive ambiguities. Prichard notes the whole chorus of voices within the Bible, giving Scripture tremendous resources to speak anew in every age. Cook calls attention to the aids to interpretation and application that the canonical shaping of Scripture over time has left embedded in the text. We must be attentive to how the Bible wrestles with its own

source material, and shapes and interprets it for our correction, instruction, and growth in the faith.

Each of our essays in its own way asserts and demonstrates the ongoing authority, relevance, and world-inverting power of the Bible. Each contributor calls for a renewal of respect and love for the biblical texts and for God's word, which speaks through them. By living more closely with the texts, and by giving them more exacting attention, the contributors pray that a new generation of theological students will experience the Bible as a feast for their own souls and for the souls of those to whom God is sending them in ministry.