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Author(s): George M. Landes

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George M. Landes

Dr. Landes is Davenport Professor of Hebrew and Cognate Languages, Union Theological Seminary, NY.

The Confession of 1967 and the Issues of Biblical Authority and Interpretation

THIS PRESENTATION, THE INVITATION SUGGESTED, should serve a dual role: "1) to explore a usable confessional tradition as a theologian of the Church, and 2) to venture into new directions as a creative theologian." More specifically, it should be the key task of my paper "to move the discussion of biblical authority and interpretation toward a livelier appreciation of biblical studies and of a liberating hermeneutic."

All of this adds up to a pretty tall order for a treatment required to be limited to thirty minutes, and I must confess at the outset that I am not at all sure that I have been able to meet these challenging expectations. After much reading and reflection across the past five months, I have found a great deal said on the matters of biblical authority and interpretation with which I readily agree, thus raising the question whether it is possible, or even necessary, for me to come up with a fresh word or a creative new perspective on this heavily worked over subject.

However, whether or not anything strikingly new comes out of it, my reassessment of the meaning and implications of what the *Confession of 1967* (C'67) has said, both directly and indirectly, on the authority of the Bible and its interpretation has helped me to focus some considerations which I trust may be of value in thinking about a present understanding of the nature and use of the Bible in the Church's perennial task of proclaiming the Gospel and discerning what God's will is in resolving contemporary problems. I shall do this, of course, drawing upon some helpful contributions from within the current ferment going on in biblical studies. Some of what I will say will be controversial, though possibly not enough for some of you.

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I would like to begin by raising the question of why from time to time the Church has deemed it important or even essential to make some formal affirmation or declaration about the Bible's authority. After all, the Bible itself is not often very self-conscious about the authority of all its content, even though implicitly there may be, and indeed is, such an understanding underlying many individual biblical sayings and traditions. Obviously, what has been recorded and preserved within the Bible is there because of the conviction of many in the historical communities of Israel and the early Church that precisely these stories, laws, oracles, wise sayings, hymns, laments, and apocalyptic visions were authoritative for their faith and life. They acknowledged this, not so much because any one of these things asserted openly and directly its own authority, but because this literature as a whole testified accurately to the nature and identity of their God, to who they were and to what they should become in relation to this God, and to what they must do if their lives were to be blessed and fulfilled by God. They perceived that what the Bible had to say about the consequences of their obedience and disobedience was repeatedly borne out in their glorious and wretched experience, and thus any additional testimony as to the authority of the biblical traditions was superfluous. Why, then, do we in the Church continue to feel the need for such?

I would imagine there have been a number of historical theologians and other thinkers within the Church who have reflected and commented on this, though so far in my own reading I have not encountered any of them. I therefore offer my own opinion, which may or may not reflect reality very well. It is my impression, however, that we're dealing here with a relatively modern phenomenon.

Like the early Church, the pre-Reformation Church largely assumed the Bible's authority, making no special mention of it in any of the early creeds and confessions. In the time of the Reformation, however, a prominent issue was the relative weight to be accorded the authority of the Church and its tradition over against biblical authority, with the Reformers taking the position that the Bible must be assigned the primacy. Even though in the debate neither side either rejected or devalued the authority of the Bible, it was the Reformers who for the first time raised it to a central issue of theological discussion and creedal confession (especially the *Second Helvetic* and *Scots Confessions*, which we have incorporated in our *Book of Confessions*). This discussion was subsequently heightened, though for different reasons, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, which fostered the historical and

literary critical disciplines that, when applied to the study of the Bible, seemed to some to mount an effective challenge to the veracity of many biblical statements and perspectives, and hence to the whole authority of the Bible itself. Doubtless it was this factor more than any other which kept alive the concern for a forthright articulation of the authority of the Bible as an article of faith whenever that faith was confessed. And this has continued right into the present.

However, most recently the feeling within certain sectors of Protestantism, including groups within our own Church, that there should be a strong affirmation of biblical authority in every new confessional formulation of our faith has also been reinforced by challenges stemming from some of the liberation theologies, as well as from the pervasive secularism of our age with its scientific world view. From these perspectives it is seen that the Bible does not always support what are deemed to be important features in one's liberation or outlook; indeed it may be perceived even to undergird and encourage the continuation of certain cultural practices and theological beliefs which serve to increase oppression and injustice rather than confront and destroy them. For those under such influences, the authority of the Bible is very problematic and no longer easily assertable. In many situations it is ascertained to be unadaptable to life as it must be lived in the face of the problems we must deal with in these last decades of the 20th century, and hence irrelevant, safely to be ignored or rejected, or perhaps even replaced by sources thought to be more effective and helpful in giving moral and religious guidance and support.

The thrust, then, to make the authority of the Bible a definite article of faith within contemporary creedal formulations can be interpreted as a defensive posture put forth by the Church in reaction to those forces which have challenged the whole idea of biblical authority, whether by pointing out its problematics, paying no attention to it at all, or bypassing it for other authorities held to be more relevant. Such a posture obviously does not counter very effectively the challenges that have been posed against adhering to biblical authority. At most it serves to remind the Church of an assumption that was held to be crucial for Christian faith and action by believing communities within the Church from the time of the New Testament until at least the beginning of the modern era. But in so doing it helps keep alive before the Church the need continuously to wrestle with the biblical witness, in the process of which the contemporary listener and interpreter may be led to discern how what the Bible is and does can still have authoritative meaning for present belief and conduct. As a stimulus for getting us to rethink what we mean about

biblical authority, I find helpful the statement about the Bible in the C'67, and to that I now turn.

In view of the influences just cited which I think account, in part at least, for the move of the Church to a more explicit confessional affirmation regarding biblical authority—influences, moreover, which were clearly being felt during the 1960s when the C'67 was being drawn up—it is striking that this *Confession* has no discreet statement in which the authority of the Bible is specifically and directly mentioned, though clearly the opening paragraph in the section on the Bible has some bearing on this. Here we note first of all that “the one sufficient revelation of God” is not the Bible, but Jesus Christ, who is defined, following the Johannine lead, as the Word of God incarnate (‘Word’ here with a capital ‘W’). The preeminent revelation of God—the communication which most adequately tells us who God is, what the divine nature is like, and what the divine will desires—is focused in the divine-human person of the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth, who as the enfleshed Word of God expresses the divine purpose for and the meaning of life, not simply verbally but also in action. Though this revelation is not first and foremost centered in the Bible, it is nonetheless crucially through the Bible that the Holy Spirit bears “unique and authoritative witness” to Jesus as the incarnate divine Word: unique because it is found only here in its earliest expression, and authoritative because this constitutes its original and most formative articulation.

Authority, then, resides not so much in the Scriptures as such, but in the Spirit’s witness through the Scriptures. Authority is grounded in God, though it is discerned and acknowledged in the interpretation of the Scriptures, interpretation that must be open to and hence willing to be guided and informed by the Spirit’s witness. What is authoritative, then, is what the Spirit brings us to perceive through our interpretive work.¹ By shifting the locus of authority away from the scriptural words *per se* to the witness of the Spirit through the scriptural words in our interpretations, the C'67 frees the Scriptures from any deadening literalism, and by the same token, allows them to function as Israel and the early Church always understood them to function, viz. as ‘adaptable for life,’² in every new situation and context. This places the emphasis where I think it rightly belongs, not on any ontological characterization of the Scriptures as the *ipsissima verba* of the Deity, fully inspired and without any error whatsoever, but on the functional role of the Scriptures as the vehicle of the Spirit’s authoritative witness which works through the interpretive process.

To be sure, the C'67 goes on to say that the Scriptures are to be received and obeyed “as the word of God written,” an expres-

sion which can be interpreted as indicating a move in the direction of conferring a divine ontological status on the Scriptures, and some have seen this as a compromising condescension to those who wanted in the *Confession* a very explicit statement on the Scriptures as the inspired word of God.³ However, it seems to me that the writers of the *Confession* have appropriately guarded themselves here by setting up a clear contrast between Jesus Christ, "the Word of God incarnate," and the Scriptures as "the word of God written," in which 'Word' in the first expression is capitalized, in the second it is not. This indicates that the Scriptures are not God's word in the same sense Jesus Christ is, i.e., they do not incarnate the Deity, but because they convey in human words at the divine initiative what God has decisively done for us in redemptive action, and because these human words are the Spirit's instrument for interpreting the Christ event to humanity, these words can rightly be called "the word of God written."

Thus, in the Scriptures God communicates the divine nature, will, and activity to such an extent that one can say that there is something 'of God' in the words. They are not simply *about* God, but also *of* God,⁴ though not in the sense of any mechanical theory of dictation. The Spirit's witness is *through* the Scriptures, not *to* them, as the *Westminster Confession* would have it.⁵ As already pointed out, this is a very important understanding of the Scriptures, for it means we are not bound to only one level of scriptural meaning, say the literal sense, but under the Spirit's guidance, we are able to interpret the same scriptural words in fresh and differing ways, depending upon our new historical situation and concerns. I shall return to this point later in connection with further remarks about scriptural interpretation.

But before turning to that theme, I would like to make a few additional observations on the matter of biblical authority. If, as the C'67 suggests, biblical authority resides more in the witness of the Spirit through the Scriptures guiding our interpretations than in the scriptural words themselves, then the question has to be faced: how can we be assured that our interpretations are indeed in conformity with the Spirit's witness, and thereby authoritative? How can we be certain that a particular interpretation, while claiming the Spirit's revelation, is not actually the result of a very personal and human bias, or due simply to an erroneous perception? Clearly this is a risk we must be willing to accept when we claim that it is the Spirit's witness that is authoritative. But three things can be said here.

First, the gift of the Spirit in interpretation is not only to individuals, but also to the ecumenical Church, so that where new, unique, or unusual interpretations do not eventually receive communal acceptance within the Church, one might rightfully be

suspicious that they are not under the guidance of the Spirit's witness.

Secondly, any interpretation which radically violates, distorts, or negates those generally consistent features in the biblical perspective on God, humanity, and the world, those which represent the pervasive biblical view of reality, either explicitly or implicitly, would have to be discounted as stemming from the Spirit's influence.

Finally, interpretations which do not check out, prove true, or make good sense in light of humanity's past or ongoing experience cannot be assigned to the Spirit's authoritative testimony.

None of these tests of the Bible's authority through the Spirit's working may be deemed absolute or infallible, whether individually or all together, for in the final analysis, our apprehension of the scriptural word as authoritative is a matter of faith which cannot be proven. The warrants for that faith lie in our diligent, prayerful study and analysis of the biblical text conjoined with a perceptive awareness of our present context, including all of its needs and problems. The C'67 thus lends support to what has been called a 'soft' rather than 'hard' conception of biblical authority,⁶ refraining from linking this authority to the complete veracity of every biblical statement. For if the Bible's authority is contingent upon the Spirit's working through the scriptural witness, and the Spirit does guide us into all truth, as John 16:3 promises, it is not necessary to assert our unlimited confidence in the total reliability of everything the Bible says, whether to bolster our security by positing a fixed absolute, or to protect God from errors and limitations that the Deity nowhere expresses the least concern about.⁷ If God can be that relaxed about the truth question in relation to the authority of Scripture, surely we can too.

II

With regard to the interpretation of the Bible, the C'67 suggests two strictures in relation to the interpretive task, the first theological, the second methodological. In keeping with the *Confession's* overarching theme, the Bible—including both the Old and New Testaments—is in the first place “to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ.” And then, because the biblical writings are fundamentally historical documents, tools most pertinent to their historical analysis must be employed in their illumination and explication. I would now like to review briefly the significance and implications of each of these interpretive guidelines, and look at any critical problems they seem to raise.

The first principle is based on at least three assumptions: 1) that a major, if not *the* major biblical theme is the divine initiative

to heal the brokenness caused by humanity's sinfulness, initially described in Genesis 3-11; 2) that a decisively effective solution to humanity's problem is never completely accomplished through the Old Testament witness to God's reconciling work in Israel through the covenant relationship, sacrificial worship, and divinely mediated forgiveness in the cult; and 3) that the Old Testament, in addition to being indispensable to understanding the New, is itself not fully understood without the New (as the *Confession* makes clear at the end of its second paragraph on the Bible).

All of these presuppositions derive, of course, from a theological overview of the whole canon of Scripture in its final form, and though admittedly not every biblical writer or tradition makes specific mention of God's reconciling activity, whether in the covenant or the cult in the Old Testament, or in Jesus Christ in the New, it would seem to be a valid inference that few biblical authors would deny, if asked, that it is the divine intention to bring humanity back into a right relationship with the Deity in which life can be blessed and fulfilled. But it is the New Testament that proclaims what the Old Testament only looks forward to: that the Messiah has come in Jesus, and that only the divine reconciliation that did and continues to happen in Christ determines humanity's ultimate salvation or judgment.

It would be improper to conclude from this, however, that what the Old Testament says about God's reconciling action toward Israel can be either safely ignored or dispensed with, since it is only in light of this action that the New Testament's witness to Christ can be fully comprehended. Moreover, the Old Testament not only describes the critical need for a harmonious and fruitful relationship with God's will and purpose, and the fearful and disastrous consequences when this is not established, but also records the mechanisms and arrangements preparing for and pointing to its accomplishment in Christ.

Yet there are many, including most devout Jews, who while quite willing to acknowledge that the New Testament cannot properly be understood without the Old, would not grant the reverse: the Old Testament needs the New for its full comprehension. And not simply from a Jewish perspective there is a sense in which it is valid to say that the Old Testament has a meaning and integrity of its own that does not require the New Testament for its complete understanding. Indeed, there are a number of places in the Old Testament upon which the New Testament sheds no interpretive illumination whatsoever, while there are also texts that contribute a dimension to our faith that is not supplied by the New Testament. Christians need to acknowledge this if for no other reason than to promote better Jewish-

Christian relations, but also to make clear that the Old Testament has its own genuine theological witness to contribute that is *not* always dependent upon the New Testament for its legitimation or fulfillment.

Nevertheless, for the Christian the Old Testament can never stand alone. To the Christian the Bible means both the Old and New Testaments, and its interpretation involves moves in both directions, the Old Testament to the New, the New to the Old. To the extent it is a legitimate Christian perception that the Old Testament points beyond itself to that which the New Testament functions to provide, viz. the messianic revelation, Old Testament interpretation is not complete until at least the question is examined whether what is being interpreted does not need to be brought into connection with what the New Testament reports, since the New Testament self-consciously understands itself as fulfilling the divine salvation which the Old Testament only anticipates. So without the New Testament's messianic revelation, the Old Testament can indeed be understood; in fact, in many places, quite fully, but as a whole it cannot be understood as fulfilled.

Having said this, it is important to go on and point out the value of the divine reconciliation theme as an interpretive principle, as well as some cautions about its application. Let me deal with the latter first. The chief danger, of course, is that it may be employed to make Christological impositions on the Old Testament where they do not rightly belong, either because they obfuscate, pervert or cause the important message of the plain meaning of the text to be discounted, or because they are simply irrelevant to understanding the particular text in question. Not many Old Testament passages can or need to be interpreted in light of their witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ, and I would imagine some New Testament texts should not be forced under this rubric either. Of course, where the literal meaning of a text is not amenable to this interpretive principle, the fuller meaning or *sensus plenior* understanding may be applicable, and thus permissible, with appropriate caution. But further circumspectness is needed to guard against letting the reconciliation theme be the *only* interpretive guideline for reading the biblical text, thereby promoting the creation of a 'canon-within-the-canon' of texts that most exemplify the theme, at the risk of overlooking or even rejecting other themes, particularly in the Old Testament, which are of distinctive importance.

But if we are aware of these cautions, it seems to me there is a great value in setting forth the divine reconciliation theme as an overriding principle for biblical interpretation. Aside from the fact it is a crucial theme for the way the Bible conceives of the solution

to humanity's most besetting problem, human sinfulness, it also serves to remind us of its importance for constructive theologies based in some form or other on the biblical witness.

From the perspective of liberation theology, for example, what would a liberating hermeneutic look like that took this theme of reconciliation with utmost seriousness? Following the biblical paradigm, it first of all would stress as much what we are liberated *to* (i.e., the worship and service of God) as what we are liberated *from* (i.e., sin and oppression). Liberation, biblically viewed, is not primarily to doing your own thing, to becoming the rulers instead of the ruled, or to replacing poverty with a decent living standard (as important as this is), unless such things promote the service of God, manifesting the divine reconciliation. In the second place, a liberating hermeneutic would also acknowledge that God's reconciling activity does not prevent conflict, alienation, suffering and sacrifice, but may even engender these things,⁸ until such time as the divine love has had a chance to work. The people of God, moreover, are called to be instruments of that love, and thus if the conflict has been generated between themselves and their enemies, it is their task to devise strategies to see through it and beyond it, to overcome it rather than to exacerbate and perpetuate it. Thirdly, a liberating hermeneutic in a reconciling mode confesses that it is God alone who initiates and completes the work of reconciliation, and that human participation in the work of liberation as a necessary response to the divine initiatives must never delude itself into thinking that the outcome is the sole result of human action, since the latter by itself is too much mixed with sinful motives—selfishness, arrogance, idolatry—to accomplish on its own the reconciliation that God desires. Finally, I believe a liberating hermeneutic arising from the divine reconciling work in Christ must also be a monotheizing hermeneutic, to use a term of my former colleague at Union Seminary, J. A. Sanders.⁹ The reconciling God is the only God there is, who has created all things, and willed the deliverance of all people. Despite a divine bias to the poor and oppressed, there is no person, no particular sex or race, no ethnic group, no political party, no country or nation which does not stand in need of a liberating reconciliation, and which therefore also is not the object of the divine will to deliver. God is ever urging us to widen the boundaries of those whom we think should belong in the Kingdom with us, to work for the inclusion of all, especially our enemies, for unless we can do that, we are liable to find ourselves excluded, not because God does not want us to be reconciled, but because by refusing to share in the Deity's all-embracing love, we fail to meet the condition that makes the divine reconciliation effective for ourselves.

The second stricture which the C'67 suggests for the task of biblical interpretation is a methodological one. Because the Scriptures are written in human words, "conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and time at which they were written," and because "they reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. . . The Church . . . has an obligation to approach [them] with literary and historical understanding." The *Confession* clearly supports the work of historical-critical analysis in interpreting the biblical text. However, since the historical-critical method has come in for some rather severe criticism in recent years,¹⁰ it is important to begin by saying a few words in defense of its enduring value.

The basic and necessary purpose of historical-critical study of the Bible is to expose the literal or plain sense meaning of the text, what the original author or tradition may have meant and how this was heard or read by the first audience. Fundamentally, 'exegesis' is a 'going-out' to the text in order to listen carefully to what it has to say first, to hear it on its own terms and out of its own setting and context, before we bring it into our situation and ask what it might mean for us. Historical-critical work is therefore indispensable for getting at the *sensus literalis*, the basic meaning of a text and a check against which we bounce off all later meanings. It also identifies the foreignness of the text so that we do not too quickly impose on the translated meanings of its words our present definitions and usages. Again, it is only through the historical-critical analysis that we can probe behind the present final form of the biblical text to distinguish meanings which the canonical editor may have overlooked, deliberately obscured, or at least refused to highlight—meanings which however difficult they are to define in relation to their original historical context, can nonetheless sometimes address us with as much vitality and relevance as those present in the last canonical shaping. Such meanings should not automatically be discounted, even though their exegetical legitimacy is often encumbered by some rather severe problems.

But if historical-critical interpretation is necessary to responsible biblical study, those who have challenged its results are not without some justification. The problem is not so much that the method itself is bankrupt,¹¹ but that the expectations for its results have been both unrealistic and misguided. The method was not designed primarily to wind up giving us what the biblical text *means* for today, but rather for what the text *meant* in its original biblical historical contexts, even though the latter is a necessary foundation for the hermeneutical move to the former. A difficulty was that many historical critics became so fascinated with the archaeology of the text, with dissecting and fragmentizing it into

its alleged traditional layers, often on very tenuous grounds, that the reader of their work found hardly a clue as to what the integrated form of the text in its present biblical contiguity may have meant to either the biblical author or canonical editor who put all the layers together, to say nothing of what it might mean for contemporary believers. Obviously the present-day biblical critic who is also an interpreter for the Church has a responsibility for *not* leaving the text locked into its historical context, whether or not in some more or less irrelevant atomized analysis, but for interpreting the text in such a way that it reflects the hermeneutics at work in the canonical process, and what significance that may have for present hermeneutical observations, as well as for being sharply aware of the current context in which the interpretation is taking place, and how this influences what is seen in the biblical text and helps point the direction of its hermeneutical thrusts for the contemporary scene. Clearly this means that the biblical interpreters who are also hermeneuts for the Church need to have a whole array of tools in their exegetical kits in addition to those related to the historical-critical method—tools which are helpful primarily for analyzing the modern context in which the Bible is read and to which it addresses meaning, thus tools from the social sciences: sociology, politics, psychology, and economics.

This has definite implications for the way the Bible is taught and the way Bible scholars for the Church are prepared in our theological seminaries. Regrettably there is not time here to give the attention to this that it deserves!¹² But briefly I would offer the following observations.

The paradigm for teaching the Bible in our seminaries needs to be modified (to the extent it has not already been so in the directions I am suggesting here) in that, while not neglecting the historical-critical method, room should also be made for the application of the other disciplines I have just mentioned, particularly in the interest of facilitating the interpretation of the text for today.¹³ Yet this is no easy task, as the amount of curricular time available for biblical study has generally been reduced in our seminaries in the face of pressures to include much new subject matter deemed as equally pertinent for preparing today's ministers. Unfortunately, the teaching, demonstration, and practice of the historical-critical disciplines are rather time-consuming, if done responsibly, and when hardly more than their rudiments have been introduced, there is little time left for the presentation of other methodologies. Nevertheless, I think we must continue to find ways to do this. And because not many biblical scholars are trained adequately in this multifaceted mode of biblical interpretation, the format will have to be interdisciplinary, involving

at least the biblical and homiletics professors, but also others as time and schedules permit. Moreover, because of time constrictions, this work should no longer be visualized as taking place primarily at the M.Div. level, but needs to be extended into advanced degree programs at both the master's and doctoral levels, including the D.Min. In addition, it should extend into the subject matter offered in continuing education formats, where it is my impression this concern has been largely neglected. And because the biblical languages are still a constitutional requirement in the UPCUSA—though regrettably not many exegetical language courses in our seminaries are concerned to incorporate an intentional hermeneutical component—I would be so bold as to suggest that at least some of the courses offered which feature this component, at whatever level, presuppose the ability to work with the original language texts. Finally, the focus should be practical, *i.e.*, not devoting most of the time to the study of various hermeneutical theories more or less in the abstract, but centering upon specific biblical texts, and working with them to explore how they address us today.

All of this presupposes some general understanding of just what is involved in hermeneutical interpretation of the Bible, *i.e.*, the factors that help determine the appropriate meanings of a text for today, and the techniques one employs and the elements one must take into consideration in moving to such meanings. I will end this presentation with a few brief comments about these important matters.

First, the *present* meaning of a text is contingent upon a dialectic between those who spoke and wrote out of their historical and theological understanding (whether at the level of the final author or at the canonical level¹⁴) and us who read and listen to them in the contexts of our more or less comprehensive self-understanding within the religious, social, political, economic and other cultural factors that characterize contemporary life. The more knowledgeable we are of *both* sides of this dialectic, the richer and more fully nuanced will be the ways in which the text is understood as addressing us and our situation. Moreover, it is the careful and necessary maintenance of this dialectic that guards against a too facile reading into the text of what we may want to hear it say.

Second, an important technique for bridging the dialectic between the biblical and our own situation is to utilize the principle of analogy.¹⁵ Though the historical, social, and cultural settings from which the biblical writings come are often quite different from our own (and due allowance must be made for this in formulating our contemporary interpretations), there are frequently analogous relationships between the situation depicted

in the Bible and ours. We must discern and then carefully define the dynamic analogies that may exist between the biblical and current situation. In the process it is important to see how the biblical tradition was heard to function in confronting the needs of a particular context. To use again the terminology of J. A. Sanders,¹⁶ did the tradition function in a 'constitutive' mode, *i.e.*, to comfort, encourage, and bolster hope, in a situation of despair and affliction, or did it function in a 'prophetic' mode, *i.e.*, to challenge, judge, and transform, in a situation of rebellion and idolatry? Once the dynamic analogy between the biblical and our situation has been correctly delineated, care must be taken to apply the appropriate hermeneutic, for it would be a wrong hermeneutical move in analogous situations requiring judgment, for example, to hear the biblical traditions as essentially supporting our own self-righteousness.

Third, the biblical witness often gives expression to perceptions and principles whose validity and meaningfulness are not dependent upon the time-bound cultural trappings in which they may be clothed, or the particular historical context in which they occur. The interpreter must be able to identify these non-time-bound features, for it is frequently they which figure substantially in a text's contemporary address. Of course, the difficulty here is offering the criteria by which we distinguish helpfully between what is permanent and what is time-bound within the Bible!¹⁷ The problem is complicated by the fact that the time-bound category must always be viewed as somewhat fluid, for even in a synchronic time frame, what is apprehended as outdated in one culture may not be so understood in a different but still contemporary culture, while diachronically, what was once quite acceptable in a particular historical setting does not remain so in a new and later one. This is not to deny the validity and even necessity of acknowledging time-bound features in the Bible, and though it is the understanding of one's own cultural context conjoined with a careful exegesis of the biblical text that determines whether or not a particular feature is time-bound, no absolute or universal rules can be set up to guide this process.

The hermeneutical crunch comes when two groups in the same cultural setting read the same biblical text in diametrically opposite ways, one as time-bound, the other as not. This issue is complicated when one group derives a rule of conduct from their reading of the text which they subsequently defend as a matter of conscience (as some have done, for example, in connection with the ordination of women issue). Though it is altogether appropriate for biblical teaching to be a formative guide to conscience, the critical question is: What is the character of the exegesis that has interpreted the text in this fashion? Whereas good exegesis may

indeed support a good conscience, bad exegesis can create a bad conscience. It is my observation that in such situations as this the exegesis rarely gets the close scrutiny it deserves, and what is often overlooked are pertinent biblical principles and perceptions from other texts that either discount or seriously undercut a rule of conduct derived from a disputed time-bound text.

Finally, a fourth factor may be mentioned which can play a role in the contemporary interpretation of a biblical text. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter can be led to discover some new inferences coming out of the study of a particular text or group of texts which may not have been perceived by the biblical writers, their audience, or even subsequent interpreters down to the present. If such inferences do not seriously violate or negate any of the normative features characteristic of the total biblical witness, and ongoing experience in which the Spirit works continues to support them, they may become quite valid as warrants for contemporary thought and action.

In conclusion I would say that the *Confession of 1967* gives judicious expression to the matter of biblical authority by placing that authority in the right place, *i.e.*, in the working of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures in the task of interpretation. It correctly emphasizes the functional role of the Bible, wisely refraining from affirming anything about its ontological character that could unhappily restrict the Spirit's witness, and thus render the Scriptures a less adequate vehicle for mediating God's will and purpose to us today. Moreover, by setting forth the strictures which highlight an important theological and methodological guide to interpretation, the *Confession* keeps before us the essential character of the divine action toward us in Christ which our interpretive work should never lose sight of, and reminds us that historical understanding must ever stand at the beginning of our scriptural study, which not only allows but facilitates our ability to continue to hear God's word through the Scriptures "in a changing world and in every form of human culture."

NOTES

¹ This is essentially the position expounded in the Report of the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship on "Biblical Authority and Interpretation," to the 194th General Assembly of the UPCUSA (1982), which appeared in *Blue Book I*, pp. E 7-27, esp. 18. Note also the helpful discussion of D. G. Miller, *The Authority of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), chap. 2, esp. pp. 33-35.

² For this phrase and its full implications for the function of Scripture, see the stimulating study of J. A. Sanders, "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *Magnalia Dei—The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. by F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 531-60.

³ See e.g. the comments of G. S. Hendry, "The Bible in the Confession of 1967," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, LX (October, 1966), 21-4, esp. p. 24.

⁴ I am following here the comments of my New Testament colleague at Union Seminary, Raymond E. Brown, in his recent book, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 21.

⁵ E. A. Dowey, Jr., *Commentary on the Confession of 1967* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), p. 100.

⁶ Cf. M. F. Carson and J. J. H. Price, "The Ordination of Women and the Function of the Bible," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 59.2 (1981), 259.

⁷ Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 17f.

⁸ As the *Confession* itself clearly affirms (§ 9.08), though here the conflict mentioned seems to be more between people and God than between the oppressed and their oppressors. Certainly the latter too should be seen as one reaction in the process of bringing about reconciliation.

⁹ See e.g. his study, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy," in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. by G. W. Coats and B. O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 21-41, esp. pp. 40f.

¹⁰ See e.g. Walter Wink's *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), chap. 1; O. C. Edwards, Jr., "Historical-Critical Method's Failure of Nerve and a Prescription for a Tonic: A Review of Some Recent Literature," *Anglican Theological Review* 59 (1977), 115-34; B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), chap. 1, esp. pp. 39ff.

¹¹ Wink, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹² In a preliminary way I have dealt with the question of the teaching of biblical exegesis in a seminary setting in my inaugural address at Union Seminary: "Biblical Exegesis in Crisis: What is the Exegetical Task in a Theological Context?," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXVI (1971), 273-98.

¹³ Walter Wink's new paradigm (see note 10) is helpful and of value, but in my view, it is still too narrowly focused, methodologically, taking its cue from techniques and insights influenced by Jungian psychology. The archaeology of the self can be as fascinating and absorbing as the archaeology of the biblical text, but the results can also be as elusive, delusive, and irrelevant as some of those produced by historical-critical study of the Bible.

¹⁴ For a most illuminating discussion of the various levels of canonical authority, see J. D. G. Dunn, "Levels of Canonical Authority," *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 4.1 (1982), 13-60.

¹⁵ See esp. the article of J. A. Sanders on "Hermeneutics," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 402-07, esp. p. 406.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

¹⁷ Note the remarks of Carson and Price (note 6 above), pp. 254ff.

