

BOOK REVIEWS

Carson, D. A., ed. *Biblical Interpretation & the Church: Text & Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984. 240 pp. Paperback, \$12.95.

Carson, D. A., ed. *The Church in the Bible and the World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987. 368 pp. Paperback, \$19.95.

The purpose of *Biblical Interpretation* is to explore some of the hermeneutical issues that bear on the task of world mission in the late twentieth century (p. 7).

D. A. Carson introduces the essays in this book with a short article entitled "A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts." He reminds us of five important aspects to keep in mind when dealing with hermeneutics in cross-cultural contexts. First, all come to the text with a preunderstanding, which can lead to a lack of adherence to the Scriptures. In Carson's opinion, we can only overcome this if we have a self-conscious dependency upon, and an open humility towards, the Word.

Second, we must be aware of the new hermeneutic. It has the danger of imposing the interpreter's cultural concepts on the biblical writers. Carson points out that the interpreter may attempt to distinguish what he thinks is the culture-bound material of the Bible from that which is supracultural (p. 19). This can lead him to reject the idea that God has revealed truth which is objectively true for all cultures and jettison certain parts of the Bible because they are too culture-bound to be of value to us.

Third, there is the danger of creating a canon within a canon. Certain texts are interpreted in the light of a particular idea one wishes to focus on. This destroys the objectivity of hermeneutics. Carson suggests two ways to avoid this: (a) to listen to each other and hear the things we do not like as well as the things we do like, and (b) to embark both personally and ecclesiastically on systematic studies of Scripture that force us to confront the whole spectrum of truth (p. 23).

Fourth, one must consider the problem of salvation-historical development. This usually takes the form of a *paradigmatic* approach to Scripture, in which one focuses on one narrative part of the Bible and seeks to use it as the *paradigm* for current belief (Carson uses liberation theology's tendency to do so with the Exodus as an example). Again, Carson warns that we must be submissive to the entire canon and its message in order to avoid this.

The final problem Carson points out is that of too little criticism and self-criticism within theology. According to him, the more communication there is between diverse cultures, the greater the need that evenhanded criticism and self-criticism be done to sharpen our expression of theology.

Each of the other seven essays continually points to the problem of cross-cultural hermeneutics and its application to ecclesiology in accordance with the work's stated purpose.

The Church in the Bible and the World is a sequel to *Biblical Interpretation*. Its purpose is to build on the previous volume and "try to formulate some biblically informed and hermeneutically sensitive statements on the doctrine of the church" (p. vii).

In moving towards that goal, Carson's chapter, "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," can be taken as representative of articles in this work. Here he posits three horizons that one needs to keep in mind when attempting to share the gospel cross-culturally. The first horizon is that of the biblical witness itself. The second is that of the established Christian seeking to understand the Scriptures. The third is that of trying to teach the Word to another group of people. Carson points out that the greater the gap between the evangelizing church and the target people, the greater the chance for massive distortion of the message. This must be taken into account when doing cross-cultural evangelization.

Based upon the three horizons, Carson defines the task of the church as the "contextualization" of Christianity. "Contextualization" for him cannot be simply defined as the church's becoming self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. It goes beyond these to include the questions of biblical interpretation and theological expression. He is not suggesting a pluralistic theology. He believes that the truth found in Scripture must be expressed in terms that the receiving culture can understand without distorting its basic message. The aim of evangelization is to "develop an indigenous, contextualized Christianity that is in hearty submission to Scripture, growing in its understanding of and obedience to God's Word" (p. 257). This, then, sums up the task of these two works.

Both works have one major weakness besides the varying quality of the essays typical of this kind of enterprise. The majority of the writers are from first-world countries. It would have been helpful to include a number of prominent third-world scholars to give their viewpoints on the hermeneutical issues that bear on the tasks of world mission. In spite of this weakness, the books can be read profitably by those seeking to understand various ways the problems of hermeneutics are being solved today and how those problems relate to the task of world mission in the late twentieth century.