

Wrong in the *right* way - by the Rev Andrew Judd

I am delighted to post this guest blog by the Rev Andrew Judd, grandson of my first hermeneutical mentor, the New Testament scholar and former Archbishop of Sydney, Donald Robinson. Andrew doesn't agree with my argument for women preaching in church but he wrote to me 'off line' to say he reckoned his grandfather would think I was "going about it in precisely the right way." If I'm wrong, in other words, I'm wrong in the right way. I love it! So I asked him if he would allow me to post his thoughts here. I hope you enjoy them.

John Dickson

Tony Payne contributed a volume to *Women, Sermons and the Bible* which seeks to show that John, along with Michael Bird, has been “blown along” by the malodorous winds of two figures, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Anthony Thiselton (WSB, loc 3588). He takes issue with the “two horizons” approach to hermeneutics, implying that following this approach is the mistake which leads to the kind of theological error which Dickson and Bird have made. He then contrasts this approach with biblical theology, which tells us that we are at “precisely the same point” (WSB, loc 3722) in salvation history as the New Testament Christians, and so can read their writing in an uncomplicated way as the word of God to us.

With great respect to Tony Payne, to whom we owe a great debt for his contribution to Christian publishing, I think he has inadvertently muddied the waters on this issue.

Disclosure

I should lay some cards on the table before I proceed. I count both Claire Smith and John Dickson as dear friends. I am not yet convinced by John’s argument in *Hearing Her Voice* that “teaching” in Pauline usage is so closely tied to the task of transmitting the apostolic deposit. But I am grateful to both authors for their engagement on the issue: both John and Claire are committed to finding out what the text actually says, and *doing* it. They are not afraid to follow the word of God wherever it takes them – even if that means being politically incorrect, or departing from what the church has historically taught. This is as it should be.

The “two horizons” approach has almost nothing to do with why John is wrong

I am no lover of the “two horizons” approach – I am too enamoured of the vision of Biblical Theology developed at Moore College by my grandfather Don Robinson and spread throughout the world by my own hermeneutics lecturer, Graeme Goldsworthy. But the limitations of that particular articulation of an evangelical hermeneutic (there is no other way of describing it) have little to do with the present debate.

Don Robinson describes hermeneutics in this way:

“Hermeneutics is the term used for the science of interpretation. In regard to the Bible this means, first, how one understands the Bible or any part of it in its original context, and secondly, how one transfers this understanding to our own situation. This second stage is more than being able to understand the original text in terms which are intelligible to our

modern culture; it is trying to discover what relevance the original utterance or passage might have for us today.”

(Donald Robinson, “Using the Bible Today”, 1.)

The debate between John and Claire is an argument at this first, most basic level of hermeneutics. It’s an argument about the “plain meaning”. It’s not about how to apply apostolic instructions to our lives. It’s about the semantic range of a Greek word in a Greek sentence in a bunch of Greek documents written by Greek speakers. There is a gap between us and those words, but it is not the same type of gap which the two horizons people are normally talking about.

John and Claire aren’t arguing about the “significance” of an uncontroversial text to our modern situation. John isn’t disputing the “comparable particulars” between Paul’s day and ours in order to dispute whether that text still applies. He is arguing about something more preliminary: what the text *meant in its original context*. According to Don Robinson, John is going about it in precisely the right way – the “critical-historical” method (Robinson, “Using the Bible Today, 2). John is rightly marshalling all the information we have about Paul’s conceptual and linguistic world (especially other parts of scripture) to work out what Paul had in mind. Claire just thinks he’s wrong.

To point out the obvious, we need historical information to understand the plain meaning of the apostolic instruction, before we even get to the task of applying it, because we are not first century Greek speakers immersed in the same linguistic world as Paul. When you pick up a Greek dictionary you are picking up the collated results of the kind of careful historical enquiry that John is attempting.

Of course, Tony Payne doesn’t actually disagree with this approach to reading. He agrees that “exegesis is always an activity of history – of looking at what a word meant in a particular time and place” (WSB, loc 3847).

So why all the fuss then? I can suggest two things.

First, Tony Payne has, I think, been too hasty to lump John together with Michael Bird and Gordon Fee. His mistake (and we simply must assume it is inadvertent, not malign) is to diagnose John’s “assembling exegetical and historical data” (WSB, loc 3811) as symptomatic of a “two horizons” approach, done to work out the significance of a text, rather than its meaning. (By the way, this distinction which Tony Payne introduces between “meaning” and “significance” is probably not helpful in clarifying the debate: it is a distinction borrowed from one particular hermeneutical approach by American writer E.D. Hirsch, and has its own problems.) The main thing these three writers have in common on this issue seems to be the conclusion they reach, not their hermeneutic.

Second, it sounds like the underlying issue is a reluctance to let Bible nerds get between us and God’s Word. If we listen to the results of John’s careful study of what the words mean, then Tony Payne worries that we have to “rely” on historical arguments (WSB, loc 3742), and may end up “in the hands of scholars” (WSB, loc 3742). At one level, I sympathise with the sentiment – let no fine sounding fellow with a doctorate take your Bible out of your hands!

But actually, the church cannot afford to ignore what our Bible scholars tell us about what the Bible means. To do so is not evangelicalism. Don Robinson points out that a return to the plain meaning of the text, and therefore the critical-historical method, was precisely what the reformers fought for. Under God, we are *always* “in the hands of scholars” who faithfully translate the Greek into our native tongue. That’s why evangelicals take Bible scholarship so seriously (and why presumably amongst the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a gift of people with skills in “languages” (1Cor 12:10)).

Conclusion

I mentioned at the start that I’m not yet convinced by John’s argument. But his method – of carefully studying what the words meant in their original setting – is exactly what we should expect from a fellow evangelical, eagerly listening to the Word to hear better what it is saying. One thing I am sure of: if John is wrong about women preaching, he is wrong in the right way.