

HEARING GOD'S VOICE (A Review)

In this book Bro. Thomas Olbricht records us the story of his life and career as an educator and preacher among our churches. After undergraduate studies at Harding (Christian) College, the author pursued his graduate work in various state universities and eventually in Harvard's Divinity School which he describes as "a Unitarian school." "It was particularly in the courses of G. Ernest Wright and John Wild that certain new insights and changes in my thinking occurred....In the end, these insights impinged upon an understanding of the Scripture, which, in turn resulted in an emended hermeneutics" (p. 267-268). The system of interpretation learned from Professor Wright Bro. O brought with him when he was invited to teach in Abilene Christian and Pepperdine University. There he developed and advocated his "New Hermeneutic" that has been used by promoters of change as they have sought ways to justify their revisions of the faith, worship and practice of the church. He acknowledges, that under Wright's tutelage, "In various ways I was leaving the parameters of my grandfather, father..." (p. 278). At Harvard, "for the first time, a series of perceptions fell in place for me. There was a paradigm shift in my perception of reality...This shift has had far-reaching ramifications, as we can see in the emergence of the charismatic movement and the openness of many in our heritage to perceive the actions of God in today's world" (p. 286). At Harvard he also discovered that Soren Kierkegaard, the father of modern existentialism, "...was as orthodox and evangelical as may be found, in respect to basic Christian doctrines..." (p. 279). After telling us while at Harvard he came to believe that the Old Testament revolves "about the mighty acts of God...he says of the opening of the Red Sea, "The raw event may have been a freak accident of nature; no more, no less..." (p.276). To him the fact that Scripture says "Jehovah caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind..." is not decisive (Ex. 14:21). It leaves open the natural cause theory of the liberal school.

He says, "I grew through reading the theologians in the Harvard classes. I explored in great depth the significant theological topics which were largely ignored in our fellowship's circles..." (p. 291). Our brethren have rightly ignored them because they are irrelevant to the understanding and practice of simple New Testament Christianity. He tells us his views on Christian apologetics were "deeply influenced by work in theology and biblical theology at Harvard" (p. 322) "This meant first that there is no universal Christian apologetic" (p. 322).

Looking back on his teaching years at Penn State,(1962) he states, "I am surprised to find that I was already exhibiting some of the characteristics of Postmodernism..." "I rejected a major thesis of the Enlightenment, which held that in the world of nature as well as the world of men, principles and conclusions are universally applicable" (p. 312-313). "But even the truth of God appears in many contexts, times, and cultures (p. 313).

As scholars are wont to do he tells us, "I came up with a perspective which I concluded was Christian, and which was philosophically interesting:...And so none of us is born a 'person.' We arrive at personhood when we make decisions--when we have commitments" (p. 318-319). The ramifications of this view are horrendous. Since a newborn baby cannot make decisions or commitments, he is not a person, thus to destroy a new born would be no different than killing a chimp or a dog. If this were widely accepted, infanticide would become an option in society.

He tells us that while teaching at State College in Pennsylvania, "Already a new hermeneutic was at the embryo stage..." (p. 304). To understand his new hermeneutics, he says, "A journey as long as this book (447 pages) may be necessary, if only to undo the effects of centuries of misfocused hermeneutics" (p. 378). Perhaps he can explain how we have achieved our successes over the years? It certainly was not with his Harvard born hermeneutics and scholarship! He states, "I had not forgotten my longtime commitment to train preachers, and Abilene offered me the chance" (p. 325). We cannot help but ask, If ones assessment of the church is so poor, why would he want to help train her future leaders, unless to change the faith and convictions of young preachers and thus the change the church into an image he has learned to admire. "...it was in the classroom (of ACU jhw) that I gave formulation and systemization to my understanding of hermeneutics" (p. 336). "About fifteen years ago I gave a name to this 'new' hermeneutic. I labeled it the 'Christ' or 'Christological' hermeneutic" (p. 352). Now we know both where it originated, Harvard Divinity School, who brought it to us, Dr. Thomas Olbricht, where it was matured and who named it. He concedes, "Admittedly, with this hermeneutic, which I believe to be profoundly biblical, I have still never been able to settle beyond dispute all the concerns of either my students, my critics or myself" (p. 353). He asks us to give up a method of interpretation which has served us well for hundreds of years for one he discovered at Harvard which he admits leaves even him unable to settle many points.

Concerning the use of necessary inferences in interpreting Scripture he asks, "But what can these inferences be but doctrines of men, since they are the creations of adroit workmen... who conceived the generalizations to synthesize and bring to a conclusion the large body of data they compiled?" (p. 346) This is most interesting, for what is his scheme and plan for understanding Scripture but the "creation of an adroit workman who has conceived and synthesized his plan from his studies in the world of liberal scholarship? Later he concedes that "Inference is, in fact, necessary..." (p. 353).

As a result of his advanced studies he tells us that he discovered that the "New Testament...had a story line. In the New, the focus is on what God has done through Jesus...Jesus is the apex, the culmination of God's mighty acts..." (p. 347). After all those years swimming with the skeptical scholars he finally discovered what "common folk" preachers have always known! He also discovered that the "New Testament code of conduct grows out of a replication of the actions of Christ. 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'" (p. 348) Wow! He assures us that "God never requires anything of humans which he himself has not modeled beforehand" (p. 349). This sounds impressive but has God repented, or confessed sins? He tells us, "By drinking the fruit of the vine, one reproduces the blood of the Lord which flowed from the cross" (p. 350). Lutherans call this consubstantiation and Catholics transubstantiation.

Bro. O tells of his involvement in the birthing of **Mission** magazine while at ACU. He states, "Our objectives were to: (1) create a new editorial voice within Churches of Christ; and (2) to provide a forum in which writers with different perspectives could express themselves freely, even if their views were unpopular" (p. 332). **Mission** was the first organ among us dedicated to promoting a liberal agenda. Bro. O says, "It's not that my colleagues and I disagreed with what was being pushed, we would just have gone about it differently" (p.334). When opposition to the paper grew threatened the well being of his employer, ACU, Bro. O and others resigned from the project. With a sense of pride, Dr. O correctly observes, "looking back now, thirty years later, it appears that the sentiments published in **Mission** are commonplace among the influential preachers and leaders of churches across the brotherhood." He writes, "Those threatened in the nineties by new changes find themselves without a publication to rally around which is respected by the leading preachers. That is the difference between 1967 and 1997. In 1967 leading preachers paid deference to views expressed in the **Firm Foundation** and the **Gospel Advocate**. Now they read first **Wineskins**, then **Image**..." (p. 335).

Dr. O was also associated with the **Restoration Quarterly** magazine. He acknowledges, "The Quarterly was sometimes positioned as left of center, but since the material was scholarly, not promotional or agitational, the brotherhood watchdogs seldom stirred when it appeared" (p. 359). Note that they admitted their stance was liberal, they objected that anyone spoke out against it...calling them brotherhood watchdogs.

In describing his courses at ACU he tells us he fed his students on Paul Tillich, Karl Barth Donald Baillie and Rudolph Bultman...all doctrinaires of the liberal camp. (371-374). He says, "Insights of this sort may not be needed for most persons who are seeking what God wants them to do, but they may be imperative for those who seek to lead believers and criticize their brothers for getting it all wrong" (p. 376). Wow! True on both counts. He acknowledges that "Abilene Christian had become something of a question mark with church members and preachers" (p. 360)...and rightly so.

He relates his experience at the Minter Lane church in Abilene and how in the early 1980s they sought to accommodate early change agents who preferred a charismatic approach to worship. It is not surprising to learn that it ended up with division and the establishment of the Abilene Community Church (p. 379-381). Today this shameful situation is being replayed in dozens of congregations. When change agents have pushed their program and created conflict within a congregation Bro. O offers a six step plan to help persuade those whose congregation has been invaded to be tolerant of the interlopers (p. 382-391). The goal of change agents is to keep the congregation together, just allow them to set the agenda and control the program. Without the financial support of dissenters, they could not achieve their objectives.

"We therefore concluded, in the two churches under consideration (Minter Lane and Malibu), ... our hermeneutics enabled us to proceed as best we knew how, according to the light which God gave us. It was appropriate that we approve new songs and approaches in the second worship assemblies" (p. 390). This demonstrates his pragmatic approach....first he wants something new and different in worship...he utilizes his new hermeneutic to find a way to rationalize the practice and thus proceeds to do so with a clear conscience...! When it came to placing women in

leadership roles in the churches where he served, he writes, "It was not uncommon in some of the classes for women to take a turn teaching mixed adults when multiple teachers were use..." (p. 392). Women pray aloud in 'sharing groups' and in Sunday night services (p. 393). This did not bother him. Both at Minter Lane church and at the Malibu church they dispensed with traditional deacons and replaced them with 'official servants' of the church which included women. The author compares the women's liberation movement with the abolition of slavery, quoting the theologian Stendahl, "the walls of distinction between males and females will finally be overcome, both in the world and in the church." Then Bro. O adds, "If so, then the grounds for increased roles for women is not simply a matter of what culture dictates, but rests upon the foundation of what has already been announced in the advent of the Lord of Scripture" (p. 404). Of course he cites no specific scripture that announces that women will fill leadership roles in the church equally with men and with his new hermeneutic, he explains always those verses that forbid them doing so. It is a very useful tool for those troubled by passage that forbid what they desire.

"In the New Testament, the church, in conjunction with its leadership, is assigned the task of interpreting the Scripture" (p. 412). Just where in Scripture does he find this assignment? "The church must therefore corporately be involved in interpreting the Scriptures" (p. 413). "Congregations must not be derelict in duty by ceding the interpretation of Scriptures to brotherhood leaders who are eager to pre-empt the local mandate, nor to a preacher or even the elders of the congregation" (p. 416). A promoter of change would find it difficult to sell his unscriptural package to the elders of a congregation, but if he could appeal to the entire flock: young, old, novices, and marginal members, he could easily out maneuver the elders and secure his own will. This is a man-made recipe for anarchy. He describes those following his formulae for the whole church deciding what they will believe, as "a body living under the Word of God" (p. 416). Are churches who do not follow his practice "not living under the Word of God?"

While in Pennsylvania he says, "We had a monthly meeting attended by preachers and others from all these groups (liberal Disciples, conservative Christian Churches). We carried on discussions in which we disagreed, but still treated each other as brothers...we also visited each others gospel meetings..." (p. 307). Now he and his tribe have come to agree with them on many matters.

He tells us, "I was not always perceived as a suitable proclaimer in our regions of strength, but I was regularly invited to be with ... mission groups" (p. 419). This is typical of most false teachers who no longer hold to the foundational principles of the gospel. Where churches are strong and grounded, they are unwelcomed because they are recognized as unsound and dangerous. In mission fields they can easily pass themselves off as reliable, dependable teachers and the weak brethren cannot spot the difference. Satan uses them to poison the thinking of young converts in mission fields and thus undermine and ruin work that other faithful teachers have done. When liberals train prospective preachers and missionaries we should not be surprised that their graduates and their endeavors are thus tainted. The liberal is always a missionary for his cause, but not for preaching the simple gospel to the lost.

He relates his invitation to assume the chair of the religion at Pepperdine. "For some years now I have given thought to the persons I would appoint to create a premier graduate program for training ministers" (p. 428). "...my desire to move to Pepperdine was my perception that I was really an 'apostle to the gentiles.' The premier work of my life had not been in the 'Holy Land'--the southern and southwestern 'Bible Belt' but in mission regions" (p. 428). He expresses his long term vision: "if a solid foundation were laid, the prospects for the future might be unlimited. I have always seen myself as a planter, a visionary, a missionary..." (p. 429). In the eyes of many, his premier graduate program represents a reservoir of liberalism that is doing much harm to the church.

We see how change agents view their brethren who went before them and their contemporaries who do not embrace their vision of change. To them:

—We have "not probed in depth any biblical doctrine of atonement or of Christ's word and work as formative for our life style."

—“We have focused, rather on a plan of salvation which culminates in baptism...”

—“We have made many of the right biblical observations but we have sometimes stressed more the mechanics of obedience than the new life to which baptism points.”

—“We have reflected little upon (God's) steadfast involvement with humankind.”

—“We have cut ourselves adrift from the Old Testament.”

—“We have sidestepped (God's) love and continuing struggle with his world.”

- “We have limited the work of the Spirit to the inspiration of the Scriptures...”
- In worship, we have “not always (been) so interested in its results—glorifying God and edifying one another...”
- In communion, “we have sometimes missed the deeper implications of banqueting with our Lord...”
- “Traditionalists among us had little communicative insight or imagination” (p. 362). Elitists assume that only those with their credentials can be truly insightful.
- He asserts that “traditionalists among us have been true children of the Enlightenment...” (p. 362), seeing the world through the mistaken eyes of the philosopher, John Locke. This is a favorite “put down” used by change agents to discredit brethren not inclined to follow their leadership.
- He labors hard to classify many of our practices as “traditions” without Bible authority. This is essential for the change agents, for at a later date they dismiss them as “only our traditions” and replaced with new traditions of their choosing! –He says, “It is not wrong to prefer tradition, **nor is it wrong to agitate for change.**” (p. 410).
- Bluntly he says, “The question to my way of thinking, is not whether our theology is viable from the perspective of classical theology, but whether it is viable biblical” (p. 437-438)
- “I was surprised that we, who profess to settle all matters by the Bible, had not seriously questioned whether the topics or issues to which we assigned such importance were that important in the Scripture itself” (p. 291-292).

This book relates the pilgrimage of a young Christian from the Missouri farm belt to the corrupting influences of secularist higher education, and his experience at Harvard School of Divinity. In the end he arrived at Postmodernism and a leading position among the promoters of change within the church. As a professor in our Christian schools he influenced a generation of aspiring young preachers away from the simple faith of New Testament Christianity into that of Evangelical denominationalism. The author reflects a lack of gratitude and appreciation for those benefactors in the faith that went before him...who taught him his first lessons in Truth and helped lead him to Christ. From his superior seat in the university he looks down on them with arrogant pride and dismisses their efforts as unworthy. His mistake is in faulting those humble servants who labored without benefit of higher education, many without books and with little or no financial support. He compares them unfavorably with himself and his ‘superior’ class of academics who together, with all their advantages, have not accomplished a tenth of what those poor laborers did. Had they not done their effective work, he would have no place to preach or teach today! One can only wonder how the church flourished in the first three Christian centuries without the benefit of such scholarly types...and how our fathers here in America were able to start from scratch and build the brotherhood of Churches of Christ to their present strength and numbers without ivy league theologians? Such scholars as Dr. O were virtually unknown to our brethren until the 1960s. We did have men who had their terminal degrees but virtually all of them were faithful to the Restoration Plea, they were loyal members of the church of Christ, happy to be a part of her, zealous to defend her and expand her borders. One value of this book is the blue print it provides for how change agents work to transform a church from its traditional faith and practice into an Evangelical denominational church (Chapt. 10, subsection on Worship) JHW