

## *Report of the FEET Conference, 2012*

### *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology and Practice*

#### *Overview*

The biennial conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians took place in Woltersdorf, near Berlin, from 24–28 August, 2012. Over seventy scholars from all over Europe gathered to discuss the important topic of how to move from the exegetical study of the Scriptures towards the formulation of doctrine and Christian praxis. The conference was a great success, with some stimulating presentations and good times of fellowship and mutual encouragement.

#### *Plenary Sessions*

There were six main papers throughout the conference.

Dr Richard Briggs, from Durham University in the UK, presented a paper on the topic of ‘Beyond the Bible – within the Canon’. Briggs provided a helpful hermeneutical overview regarding the task of moving from the Bible to contemporary application. One of his main points was that the Christian should use more than the standard toolbox of hermeneutical skills but that we should apply those practices that are indicated in the Scriptures themselves, for example, well-reasoned and exegetically-grounded typology.

Dr Tchavdar ‘Charlie’ Hadjiev (from Bulgaria but now lecturing at Belfast Bible College in Northern Ireland) presented his thoughts on ‘Reading the Old testament as Christian Scripture’. One of the main foci of this presentation was that Christian interpreters should first thoroughly investigate the Old Testament on its own terms before moving on to interpretation in the light of the Christ-event and the New Testament. Hadjiev’s point was that we will never properly understand the Old Testament as Christian Scripture unless we first understand the text in its original historical context.

Professor Roland Deines (from Germany and working at the University of Nottingham in the UK) then presented a stimulating paper on ‘The Writing of Scripture in First Century Judaism’. Among many fascinating observations, Prof. Deines argued that in all likelihood the writers of the New Testament texts were aware that they were writing ‘Scripture’. Many introductions to the New Testament imply or state that the authors would be surprised that their texts were still being read two thousand years after the event. However, Deines suggested that remarkable revelation was normally followed by a formal written record, therefore, it would not be surprising that the events of the life, death and resurrection of Christ were quite quickly committed to writing and that those texts were treated as authoritative by the community of faith.

The fourth plenary session was presented by Professor Patrick Nullens (Rector of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium) then led the participants in consideration of the theme of ‘The Moral Authority of Scripture and the Hermeneutics of Love: Rereading 2 Tim 3:16-17’. Nullens’ basic premise was that the primary hermeneutic to be applied in the consideration of Scripture is a hermeneutic of love. Jesus pointed highlighted the command to love God and our neighbour as the primary Christian responsibility and this paper suggested that this too must govern our interpretation and application of the Scriptures. Prof. Nullens then sought to apply this basic premise to the text of 2 Timothy 3 and showed how a right attitude towards the Scriptures is marked by love and the rejection of a true Christian ethic is marked by wrong love or love for the wrong thing.

Dr Hannes Wiher (Bern, Switzerland) then presented a plenary paper on ‘The Bible, mission and contextualisation’. Dr Wiher highlighted the vital significance of mission in our Christian identity by showing a variety of motivations towards mission. He also highlighted the significance of the contextualisation of Scripture for the settings in which it is heard. This, of course, does not change or adapt the message of the Gospel but is meant to make that message more understandable to the hearer. Dr Wiher was careful to point out that contextualisation does not just apply to far-flung parts of the world but that the Gospel needs to be contextualised for an increasingly secular Europe.

The final plenary session was presented by Dr Yannick Imbert of the Faculté Jean Calvin (Aix-en-Provence, France). Dr Imbert’s paper entitled, ‘The New Atheism and the Bible: the apologetic challenge’ explored, in particular, the manner in which Scripture and Theology is used by New Atheists and how this might be best addressed apologetically. He suggested that the arguments are emotional, selective, frequently inaccurate, utilitarian and adopt a neo-fundamentalist hermeneutic. Meanwhile, evangelicals must face the challenge that society presents in its willingness to receive such ill-reflected presentations and note that behind the simplistic challenge there is a fundamental naturalistic hermeneutic that denies the validity of all religious language; seeing it a merely self-referential. Imbert suggested that evangelicals need to reaffirm an epistemology of knowledge (including hermeneutics) that addresses these needs and ensure that this must be located within the realm of public theology: otherwise we have already lost the challenge.

#### *The Other Sessions*

Over and above the main plenary sessions, Dr Thomas Schirmacher of Martin Bucer Seminar (Bonn, Germany) led the conference Bible readings each morning around the main conference theme. Also, there were three sessions that revolved around specific subject area groups—Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic and Historical Theology, Ethics and Apologetics and Practical Theology. In these groups, conference participants presented short papers for discussion on a wide variety of themes. This is the first conference with an extensive focus on subject-specific discussion groups and this development proved very popular with the participants.

A final reflection was given by the Chair of FEET, Prof. Pierre Berthoud. He suggested that the diversity within the papers suggested that there was a greater need for metaphysics to engage with hermeneutics, that there was a central need to assert a unified field of knowledge and that the use of methods and tools was to be circumscribed: not all tools are neutral. In the light of these, he suggested, we need to ensure evangelical identity is grounded in the historical apostolic faith. He provided an outline investigation of Calvin’s methodology that might be a fruitful means to explore such ends.

At the business meeting of the Fellowship, Gert Hain was reappointed as treasurer of FEET and Dr Leonardo de Chirico of the *Institutio di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione* in Padova, Italy, was appointed to the Executive Committee of the Fellowship. On the Sunday of the conference, the participants attended the *Evangelisch Freikirchliche Gemeinde, Berlin-Schöneberg, Hauptstrasse*, and enjoyed a fascinating bus tour of the city, guided by Axel Nehlsen

#### *Summary*

In brief, the 2012 conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians was a great encouragement to all those taking part and everyone is looking forward to the next conference in 2014.