

## PAPER 4

### *The Hermeneutics of Charles Strong* *Norman Habel – July 2006*

The hermeneutics of Charles Strong are not formulated in the same way as those of modern exegetical scholars. Strong is, after all, more of a philosopher than a philologist, a contemporary thinker rather than a typical exegete. Yet, Strong's reading of text and tradition is governed, I would argue, by a set of principles that many a modern interpreter would find both challenging and inviting.

The governing principles of Strong's approach, I would argue, are spiritual/incarnational, evolutionary/developmental and moral/social.

The hermeneutical task, according to Strong, is to

Reinterpret Christianity in the light of modern knowledge, the principles of development, and the spirit of religion as distinguished from the letter; to reinterpret Christianity just as Copernicus and Galileo re-interpreted astronomy (1894, 9)

#### **Spiritual/incarnational**

Strong begins with an understanding of Spirit, not in a narrow Trinitarian sense, but as the 'universal all-animating Spirit', an eternal and deep dimension of all reality. Spirit is not one of the doctrines of the church, but the deep inner essence of all things. According to Strong, that deep inner force, rather than doctrinal or religious beliefs about God, needs to govern our thinking and exploring as we re-interpret text and tradition.

The task of the thinker/interpreter is to read the text in search of the deep spiritual dimensions of the text, not the popular features that reflect historical customs and laws. The goal is to discern pathways in the New Testament to

a vision of God as the universal Father, whose best name is 'light', 'love' and 'Spirit'. They are all one in so far as the new Spirit of Jesus breathes through them, and as they introduce us to the religion of the sons and daughters of God, the all-embracing Absolute Religion for all time and all races, of trust, hope, love toward God as seen in the face of Jesus, a religion which is its own evidence. (1894, 34)

Reading the text according to a Strong hermeneutic is to take a position outside the vagaries of doctrine, history or traditional religion and search with a clear mind, a mind which is itself part of the eternal Mind and led by the universal Spirit or Word, the gospel of implicit trust in God as Light and Love. This, according to Strong, is the meaning of Jesus' words about the narrow way. This way is not the religion of the church, but the underlying deep

morality of trusting in a living God and expressing that trust in a spiritual selfless love that transforms society.

Strong's search for the Spirit/spiritual is a search for what is deep within, the eternal spiritual reality that lies below the surface of obvious or traditional popular readings. According to Strong,

Most people live on the surface of life. We float over the ocean but seldom reflect upon its hidden depths, and what a tale of wonder is written in every shell that lies far down in the ocean bed. ...In the tiniest shell picked up by a child on the sea shore lies written, if only we had eyes to read it, the history of the universe. (1894, 99)

For Strong, what is true of the way people live life is also true of the way interpreters have read the text. The task is to explore the depths and discover that Spirit/spiritual connection with Christ that means a profound connection with the Centre, with the Divine, with Life itself. Christ is the 'way' to that Life. The Gospel for Strong is therefore essentially Life with all its deep divine dimensions! Or in the words of Strong,

...the gospel that God is Spirit, that God is Love, and that 'God so loved the world' as to send his Son to draw us into sonship and make us partakers in a divine life; glimpses of a world at length inspired with a 'spirit of life in Christ Jesus.' (1894, 17)

It is understandable, then, that the Gospel of John, with its focus on the themes of life and light is a primary source of the spiritual, the God that is Life and connects us with Life and the Spirit. Interpreting the text means reading it in the light of the Spirit of Christ, not the letter of beliefs about Christ. For Strong, I suggest, the hermeneutical canon within the canon is the Gospel of John.

When Strong reads the story of the woman who seeks healing, he points out that Jesus does not first ask her whether she believes this or that particular teaching or will agree to perform this or that ritual. He declares that she is saved, not because she accepts Christ's atoning death but because she trusted in him to bring her a new life and become part of the Life stream which is God. Accordingly, even basic teachings that Christians have found in this text are not central for Strong.

Salvation, for example, is no longer accepting an offer of deliverance from hell, but being saved from ourselves, and lifted into Christ's life and God's life. Popular Christianity puts this second. Christianity reinterpreted puts it first. Be saved, says the former, and love. Love, says the latter, and be saved. (p.14)

According to Strong we read the text to find ways to be lifted into God's life, to be taken into the Spirit/spiritual that lies deep within, to find God directly through the experience of love rather than by first agreeing to a set of teachings.

An extraordinary feature of Strong's spirituality is its distinctive incarnational base. This base is read in line with the approach of Clement of Alexandria. So 'the Word of God became man, so that thou mayest become God' (1894, 116). In other words, the incarnation is not an *ephhapaz* (once and for all) event, but an expression of an eternal present reality. The word or spirit becomes/is incarnate in every human. Every human is an expression of the incarnation of God's presence. As Strong writes:

The essential idea of Christianity in such writers as Justin, Clement and Athenagoras, is the revelation of God in man, that man may be drawn into God through the Logos or Word. God in man and man in God, is indeed the very keynote of spiritual Christianity in the early church, the Middle Ages and modern times (1894, 116).

Spiritual Christianity is clearly distinguished from a Christianity governed by doctrines, partisan views, ecclesiastical powers or an inerrant text. A spiritual Christianity is a spiritual movement that links up with the spirit deep in all things and the spirit deep in each human.

The Spirit/spiritual is not some dimension added to humans, but is an essential part of being human, expressing its power especially through the mind. The mind/soul of humans reflects the drive of the divine, the spiritual dimension of humanity, the deep eternal within.

The Spirit of Christ in the text is a means of connecting with the Spirit/spiritual, the divine that is innate in all humans. Reading the text is a way to facilitate that spiritual process, not to extract doctrines for debate.

### **Evolutionary/Developmental**

One of the clearest and most controversial aspects of Strong's hermeneutics is his principle of evolutionary or development revelation. Evolution in this context does not refer to the scientific theory of evolution, but to the basic assumption that there has been an evolution of knowledge, insights and consciousness throughout human history. The various parts of the Bible reflect stages of that evolutionary development in its understanding of God, humankind and the world. It is necessary to take this evolutionary development into account as we read the biblical text.

For Strong, human history is a crucial factor in understanding the way human beings have evolved as well as how humans have written and read parts of the Bible throughout time. Theology too is part of that evolutionary process. As Strong says,

It means fully and freely accepting the results of the modern study of History—history of the earth, the heavens and man—fully and freely accepting the results also of the critical study of the Bible and the Story of the church. (1894, 9)

Theology, after all, is a human science, and we no more destroy God and Jesus, and the religion of Jesus, by pulling an old theological house to pieces than we destroy the stars by exploding old-world theories about the earth being a plane, and stars rising above it and setting below it (1894, 10)

In this context Strong extends the concept of evolutionary development also to Christianity, and therefore, to how we interpret the historical texts which are part of that development. The Bible is not a book of direct revelations, but of historically conditioned records and beliefs.

The re-interpretation of Christianity means, secondly, the acceptance of the idea of Development. The old theology is built on the hypothesis of a direct revelation from heaven to which nothing can be added, from which nothing can be taken.(1894, 10). The ancient religion of Israel developed, and the theology of the church developed—all these dogmas have a history! (1894, 11)

If we accept this preface, then, according to Strong, the very nature of revelation in and through the Scriptures has to be re-interpreted. Here it is no longer a question of reading the revelation of the text with new eyes, but of discovering that revelation is itself part of the evolutionary process.

The Bible and the church are a revelation of God, but a revelation not given once for all from outside, but slowly growing up from within, in the minds and hearts of men—a revelation which is still going on. God spake, God still speaks, and each age must translate his word into its own language. (1894, 11)

For Strong, the orientation of popular Christianity is constricted by doctrinal perspectives that prevent the inner spirit and life of the text from shining through. Doctrines such as the historical inaccuracy of the New Testament and each text as a final once and for all revelation lead to an outdated, negative and legal concept of salvation. Strong illustrates his position by interpreting the textual expression ‘in Christ’.

Take the phrase, for example, ‘in Christ’. That popularly interpreted, means sheltered by him from the wrath of God, as one is sheltered from a storm by entering a house. The idea is legal. We escape hell by getting as it were into Christ, so that the Law sees not us but the Holy One. The re-interpretation is: so wedded to the Spirit of Jesus’ life and teaching and death, that His spirit becomes ours, and not legally at all, but really, Christ is we, and we are Christ. (1894, 14)

The full force of this aspect of Strong’s hermeneutic becomes apparent when we read his approach to the Gospels. Strong begins by accepting the reality that historical criticism, already in the 19th century, has demonstrated that the Bible consists of many and different strata, writers, perspectives and cultural contexts. The Bible did not fall from heaven, but is ‘the story of man’s ascent, from earth to heaven—of the gradual revelation of the true God in the hearts and minds of a particular people’. (1894, 23)

Strong also recognises radical differences within the Gospels and between the Gospels and the epistles of Paul. His task in reading these texts, then, is to find an underlying unity that is deeper than all the differences. Through all these narrative, claims Strong, there shines 'the Light of the world,' the religion of love, the Light of God 'in the face of Jesus.' (1894, 30)

For Strong the terms 'Light' and 'love' seem to be interchangeable concepts that guide his hermeneutics. Texts which highlight 'love' in Paul or 'Light' in John are reflections of a true connection with the Divine, the Centre, the Spirit at the source of all things. That love which is the greatest of all virtues in 1 Corinthians 13 and behind the injunction to 'love your enemies' in the Gospels is the means of connecting with the underlying love of God, epitomised in the text of Ephesians 3.17-18 which Strong quotes as the ultimate expression of the Gospel as 'universal religion':

That ye being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend what is the height and depth, and length and breadth, and to know the love of God which passeth knowledge'. (1894, 32)

Strong argues that the Gospel of John is coloured by Alexandrian philosophy, but that through the text shines the same 'Spirit of Love' found in the other Gospels. The Logos in John is the revelation of the very Heart and Soul of the Universe. John too proclaims a religion of the 'spirit' against the 'letter'. The Gospels, John and Paul all agree that love is the key. Love is the underlying unity, the hermeneutical key for a deep rather than a surface reading of the New Testament.

'God is love' says John. 'The greatest of these is love' says Paul. 'Thou shalt love' says the Jesus of the synoptists. (1894, 34)

An evolutionary reading of the text demands that we uncover this deep eternal logos/love and let it shining through all the various historical, cultural and theological stages reflected in the surface of the text

### **Moral/Social**

Strong's new theological hermeneutic is not only concerned with discerning the connections with the spiritual, the divine energy at the Centre of all things, including all humans, but also with the moral, the natural expression of that energising Love in human lives and societies.

That means that theology must integrate with sociology. Or as Strong writes,

God is not the God of the individual only or of the physical universe, but the God also of the Social Order and that God's nature cannot be interpreted apart from the laws of that Order as manifested in our social nature. (1971, 285)

The task is to see the Love of God at work in humanity and to express a life of love and justice as an expression of God within the social order. This requires a re-reading of the very laws of the Bible, recognising them as conditioned by the social mores and culture of their times. Strong draws a parallel between the laws of the Old Testament and narrow understanding of love found among churches.

Like the Hebrew law of which Jesus speaks, the old churches have taught love, but not love reaching beyond the walls of creed, denomination, ecclesiastical organisation, theological beliefs and sacraments. ((1971, 280)

The task is to read the biblical text in the light of the higher law of love that God is seeking to make manifest in human lives and societies. In Strong's opposition to the Boer War, and later World War II, we capture something of his ideal about rising to a higher morality of selfless love. He writes,

I cannot reconcile war and democracy, war and the Christianity of Christ....Nor can we as Christians love selfishly. We are Christians first, Britons, Boers, Germans, Frenchmen second. Our religion knows one law—Love, respect, serve, bless your fellow-men'. (1971, 278)

How then does Strong interpret the central Gospel theme of the kingdom of God? First, the kingdom of God is not some future celestial realm, a domain of eternal bliss in another world. Nor is the kingdom confined to the select, those who might call themselves true believers because they have preserved the faith in the favoured way. Rather, the kingdom of God is an evolutionary process within the orders of this world that lead to a richer expression of love and justice in society. Or as Strong writes,

The Kingdom of God is essentially ethical and spiritual. Its citizens are knit to God ethically as to a Father; they are knit to each other ethically as brothers and sisters. The foundation of the Kingdom is laid in faith in the goodwill (=Love) of the Eternal, in a gracious meaning and purpose running through all things which it is man's high calling to spell out in his life and struggle; for it is man's meaning as well as God's. (1971, 288)

The Kingdom of God, then, is linked to three factors,

- first, the rational ethical divine meaning that permeates the universe,
- second, the evolutionary unfolding of that divine purpose in human experience,
- third, the righteousness or justice of God expressed in goodwill, love and brotherhood to all,
- and finally, a willingness to suffer until this great 'law of our being' is realised in society.

Strong compares this law of love operating as a moral force in the universe with the law of gravity operating in the physical world. God's love, of which justice is an integral part, is a unifying energy that permeates the universe and ought to lead humanity to a rich expression of justice in society.

A moral interpretation of the text means reading the laws, ethics and narratives of the Bible as exemplars of past models of morality and discerning those dimensions which reach to a higher level of love and justice that will transform society as God ultimately intends.

### Conclusion

Strong rarely functions as a modern preacher, taking a particular text and doing a detailed exegesis as the basis for his sermons. Rather he functions with a hermeneutical theology which I have summarised as spiritual, evolutionary and moral. Yet, these three are all expressions of a divine unity. There is an underlying interconnectedness of the physical, the spiritual and the ethical. And that unity is not in some distant realm, but within each of us. Nor is it a distant concept; rather it is an energising force—that divine Love with moves all things to live, to love and to realise the Kingdom of God in creation. Our task is to discern that Love in the text and be agents of that Love in society.

### References

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