"What Job receives is not vindication, but a vision of God that forces his concern with self-justification to recede to the background..."

In Memoriam:
Dr. Gerald Wilson

The late Gerald H. Wilson, Ph.D., Professor of Old Testament and biblical Hebrew, strongly believed in empowering his students and others who take the Bible seriously by teaching them a hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures that can give them confidence that their interpretations are well founded and worthy guides to their theological and ethical choices in life. Dr. Wilson’s methodology is clearly and succinctly presented in his “Hermeneutics: Why Do We Have to Interpret Scripture Anyway?” (Christian College, Christian Calling: Higher Education in the Service of the Church, ed. Steve Wilkins, Paul Shrier, and Ralph P. Martin, New York: AltaMira Press, 2005, 39-53); his hermeneutical approach to the book of Job is demonstrated in his forthcoming article in the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: “Preknowledge, Anticipation, and the Poetics of Job.”

Hermeneutics

Dr. Wilson organized his first essay around ten “factors” which must be considered when interpreting a passage of Scripture: linguistic, literary, translational, historical, cultural, contextual, unity, parameter, incarnational, and canonical. A reader sensitive to language understands that the Bible’s “language... is inherently ambiguous and requires more than superficial attention” (40). This affirmation from a compassionate professor of biblical Hebrew reveals his respect for both the text and his students who might prefer simple, shallow approaches to the Bible.

Dr. Wilson also wants readers of the Bible to know about “the specific forms of symbolic language, literary structures, and written genres of the biblical literature” (42). Further, he reminds them that “[t]ranslations are always interpretations of the original” (43); he recommends comparing many translations of the text. In order to grasp the full significance of the text, its historical context must also be researched — “the historical context described in the narratives of the book, and the historical setting to which the narrative speaks” (44). Along with historical context, serious readers must also study the culture out of which the biblical texts emerge, for “without such cultural understanding, we are constantly in danger of importing our own ideas where they do not apply” (45).

Dr. Wilson then introduces a kind of hermeneutic circle whereby a part of scripture must be viewed in terms of the canonical biblical whole: “each sentence must be considered within the larger literary unit or pericope of which it is a part; each pericope must be read against the whole chapter in which it occurs; and chapters have meaning within the book in which they are found” (46). He remains convinced, despite inherent tensions, that “together all the individual pieces of scripture provide us with a unified understanding of the nature and purposes of God; we can construct a theology of the whole Bible” (47).

On the other hand, some interpretive tensions within the Bible may require ongoing study. “How do we hold Proverbs’ assumptions that God gives blessing and prosperity to the righteous together with Job’s clear testimony that the righteous often suffer inexplicably?” (48). Dr. Wilson confesses, “often our natural tendency is to resolve the tension either by explaining it away or by rejecting one of the offending opposites. This, however, makes us the master of scripture rather than allowing it to master us. I would much rather have a word of God that is my authority than assert my own authority over the word of God!” (48). His “Preknowledge, Anticipation, and the Poetics of Job” is one step further into exploring this particular tension.

The Book of Job

In this sophisticated article, Dr. Wilson shows the hermeneutical effects of first reading the book of Job and then rereading it: these can be different experiences. Unlike Job’s friends, the reader has “preknowledge” (along with God, Satan, and the narrator) that Job is sinless, and his “faithful endurance” preserves this holiness to the end of the book. Hence, the accusations of Job’s “friends” reveal to the reader “mistaken conclusions based on an inadequate worldview associated with a tit-for-tat form of retribution.” Dr. Wilson emphasizes that the “book in its present form cannot be concerned to explore the reasons for innocent suffering.” Its focus is on Job’s “enduring faithfulness.”

In addition to “preknowledge,” the reader experiences “anticipation” which “sensitize[s] the reader to particular issues and... prepare[s] the reader to recognize significant themes or developments when they arrive.” Some of these key issues are “Job’s restoration to family and possessions,” his power to pray for his friends, his renewed health, his confrontation with God, including God’s grilling questions, and his friends’ future. Dr. Wilson shows the irony the reader may experience when rereading this book: the friends’ pleas to Job to submit to God as a repentant
sinner in order to have all that he has lost be restored end up with their realizing that God does indeed turn around Job's losses while affirming his righteousness and the friends' sinfulness. Thus their theory of retribution for the repentant sinner evolves into restoration of losses to the man of integrity.

Dr. Wilson shows Job's integrity to be far superior to his peers, for he values it more than his life, family, or possessions: "The issue for Job increasingly becomes whether he will be recognized in death to be a person of righteousness or integrity [someone whose 'thought, word, and deed are congruent']." Dr. Wilson continues, "What is at stake here is whether humans will remain righteous—continuing to 'fear God'—when their very motivations for doing so are misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misrepresented."

Dr. Wilson concludes his article by noting that Job never receives the full vindication from God that he desires until after he "has laid down his ghost and submitted to the freedom and power of God [sic]. What Job receives is not vindication, but a vision of God that forces Job's concern with self-justification to recede to the background of oblivion.... Seeing God is enough!"

-- Carole Lambert

**Research Colloquia**

"Overcome evil with good"

- Romans 12:21b

Wednesday, Jan. 18, 2006, in the LAPC

At our first 2006 Colloquium, Dr. Paul Shrier and Dr. Kevin Reimer will explore how "goodness" can be cultivated theologically and psychologically. This topic is important to all Christians but especially to parents. Dr. Shrier will speak about "practical theology"—how the ideas of Christianity can be translated into practice—while Dr. Reimer will demonstrate that specific patterns of altruism can be encouraged in adolescents and can make a difference in their families and communities.


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