



Our columnist, Jim Punton, is the Frontier Youth Trust's Training Officer.

## Reading things into the Bible

More and more we're realizing that it's not enough that we share a conviction on the authority of the Bible, or even on all questions of 'inspiration', 'inerrancy in its message', 'entire trustworthiness'. We still have the vexed and complex issue of 'interpretation'. How do we authentically bring out the relevance of the message for our own generation? This is the task of biblical hermeneutics, and it is vital.

'Eisegesis' is a word somebody coined for the reading into the text of the Bible ideas that are not in fact there—for making the Bible seem to support attitudes, values, traditions, teachings, and practices that have previously, and on other grounds, been accepted. The Bible is forced into the mould of these preconceptions, made to conform to them, and then, not surprisingly, is found to substantiate them. The authority of God's word is undermined by this process, and the results are everywhere to be seen, not least in the Christian community:

- (i) There are those who reject *a priori* anything non-rational or beyond the natural. So they set aside the Bible's presentation of itself and see the content simply as a record of peoples with an out-dated and primitive world-view.
- (ii) There are those who see the biblical writings as bound in the culture from which they came, irrelevant today until 'de-mythologized'. So the Bible is made to agree with current understandings of reality.
- (iii) There are those who ignore the cultural context of the original writings, give scant attention to the use of poetry, metaphor and symbol or to the distinctiveness of each writer, and are marked so often by an unlovely dogmatism. A historically conditioned

'orthodoxy', strangely partial in its use of Scripture, is brought to the Bible and interprets the Bible.

- (iv) There are those who delight to speculate on hidden meanings or who reject the obvious meanings in favour of mystical fantasies.

But the primary end of *all* 'eisegesis' is that the Bible is not allowed to stand in judgement on us. And to the extent that we make it say what we want it to say, we attempt to master it rather than be mastered by it. The Holy Spirit is quenched as we bind Scripture in a context of our choosing, and don't allow God to bring us to new awareness, new understanding, new meaning, new repentance, new vision.

As evangelicals we do a great deal of eisegesis, and the most earnest of God's servants can be most guilty. For no one comes to the Bible in a vacuum. All that we are is there—the depth and limitations of our experiences, thoughts, understanding, our presuppositions and prejudices. But we are not bound to impose all these on what the Bible is trying to say to us. The real meaning of any Scripture is the intended meaning of the writer, understandable to his contemporaries. So a grasp of historical, social, political, cultural and religious situations can enormously reduce 'eisegesis'. And it can help us hear from within that context God's continuingly relevant message for now.

Let's ask God to show us where we've been straitjacketing His word. Let's ask for a new openness to his Spirit as we study the Bible, the whole Bible, a freedom from self-assentiveness, an expectancy of new understanding, for the discernment to distinguish the wine of God's message within the culturally and historically determined wineskins, and to find the right wineskins for our time.