

An Interview with F.F. Bruce

Ward & Laurel Gasque

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The figure of Frederick Fyvie Bruce (born 1910) towers like a giant over the field of contemporary biblical scholarship. His commentary on the Greek text of the Acts of the Apostles (1951) is generally recognized as the first important work in what has since become a contemporary renaissance of evangelical theological research. In recognition of its excellence his *alma mater*, the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, awarded him an honorary doctorate. Generations of college students have been first introduced to Bruce by reading his little book *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable* (IVP and Eerdmans) which has been regularly reprinted and revised for nearly a half century. His *New Testament History* (Doubleday) has been a standard textbook in seminaries and colleges for two decades. Educated lay men and women have appreciated his ability to translate the results of specialized studies into non-technical books that you do not need a theological degree to be able to understand and enjoy—such as *History of the Bible In English* (Oxford University Press) and *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans) while pastors and teachers look forward eagerly to each new commentary or biblical study from his pen. The latest of these, on Paul's Letter to the Galatians for the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans), will doubtless remain a standard work well into the next century.

A simple listing of Bruce's publications runs to fifty-six pages of small print! He is the author of more than forty books and nearly two thousand articles and reviews. In recognition for his work he is one of the few scholars who has been elected president of both the Society for Old Testament Study and the Society for New Testament Studies. From 1959 until his retirement in 1978 he occupied the prestigious John Rylands Chair of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester University in England, where he supervised more PhD students in biblical studies than any other professor in British history.

The following interview was conducted by W. Ward Gasque and Laurel Gasque, who recently visited Professor and Mrs Bruce in their home in England.

GASQUES: Has your church tradition [the Plymouth Brethren] shaped your study and teaching of the Bible?

BRUCE: I suppose in some ways it has. As far as my experience goes, it has been part of the tradition of the 'Open Brethren' to encourage independent Bible study and independent thinking, without following one school of thought rigidly as sometimes happens in other ecclesiastical groups.

When you began your academic career, there were very few people in British universities, especially in England, who were committed to combining an evangelical faith commitment with academic biblical studies. Things are quite different today, I believe.

Oh, completely different now. And I think it is due, in some measure at least, to the influence of the Tyndale Fellowship which is an association of evangelical men and women who wish to engage in serious biblical research without unnecessary strings but linked with a faith commitment.

It has been forty-five years since you defended the essential trustworthiness of the New Testament in your little book The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? Do you still stand by what you wrote then?

I still stand by the general thesis of the book. I may differ in details from some of the critical points I dealt with incidentally, but I still maintain the same outlook that I argued for in that book.

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How do you as a Christian and as a scholar, approach the study of the Bible?

I think I should have to distinguish between academic study and more general study. At one level—and perhaps this is the most important level—I approach the Bible with a readiness, and an expectation, to hear the voice of God there. But there is no conflict between that more devotional use of the Bible and its academic study. Over the years I have played a pretty full part in Bible ministry in churches—preeminently, of course, in the local church that I happened to be associated with at any particular time—and what I have tried to do in this ministry has been to combine the two approaches. I have sought to make available to my hearers, in a form that they can assimilate, the results of my academic study, while at the same time trying to enable them, like myself, to recognize and apply the voice of God in holy scripture.

The term 'biblical criticism' normally has a positive connotation in your writings, in spite of the negative connotation it has in some circles. Why is this?

Because biblical criticism is the study of the biblical text. It involves the establishing of a reliable text on the basis of manuscripts and other early witnesses: this is the work of 'textual criticism.' And when that is done it involves the interpretation of the text, what is technically called 'exegesis.' And this requires the study of such matters as the structure of individual books, a consideration of the dates at which they were written, how they fit into their contemporary setting, and then the question of authorship.

It is in these three areas—structure, date and authorship—that we have the group of studies that used to be summarized in the single term 'higher criticism.' Thus biblical criticism is a very positive study. Its aim is to help people to understand the Bible better. One of my eminent Manchester predecessors in the Rylands Chair, Arthur Samuel Peake, who was no mean practitioner in biblical criticism, has put it on record that 'criticism for its own sake has never interested me. The important thing is to pierce to the core of the meaning.' And any technique that enables us to penetrate to the central meaning of scripture is helpful.

Is there is a uniquely 'evangelical' view of biblical criticism that differs from other types of biblical criticism?

Not so far as I'm concerned. Some evangelical scholars probably do have unique views of biblical criticism which they would distinguish from certain other approaches. But when I was appointed to teach biblical criticism in the University of Manchester. I was appointed to teach the same subject as my predecessors had taught—Peake, whom I have mentioned. C. H. Dodd, and T. W. Manson—and I have been conscious of no difference between the criticism that I have taught and the criticism that they taught. They may, in certain respects, have reached different conclusions from those that I reached. But that is a different matter.

In North American there has been a lot of debate concerning the 'inerrancy' of the Bible, and 'inerrancy' has often been viewed as a touchstone of evangelical orthodoxy. What do you think about this concept?

Happily, from my point of view, that is a North American phenomenon which one does not find very much in Britain. The term that has been traditionally used to describe a high view of the authority of scripture in this country is 'infallibility.'

What is the difference between the two terms?

When one looks at the words themselves, there is no difference! 'Inerrancy' means 'not going wrong' and 'infallibility' means 'incapable of going wrong' or 'incapable of leading astray.' But the infallibility of scripture as traditionally

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defined relates to its function as 'the rule of faith and practice.' Inerrancy seems to imply more than this.

What term would you prefer to use in describing the Bible?

Truth. What's wrong with that word? The truth of scripture is what we're talking about. Or, if one says that the scripture is the Word of God, why bother about terms like 'infallibility' or 'inerrancy'?

Some years ago you objected to being labelled a 'conservative evangelical.' You said you preferred to be known as an 'unhyphenated evangelical.' What did you mean by that?

Conservatism is not of the essence of my position. If many of my critical conclusions, for example, are described as being conservative, they are so not because they are conservative, nor because I am conservative, but because I believe them to be the conclusions to which the evidence points. If they are conservative, then none the worse for that.

And what do you mean by 'evangelical'?

An evangelical is someone who believes in the God who justifies the ungodly [Romans 4:5]. To believe in Him, and nothing more nor less, is to be evangelical. That is evangelicalism in what might be called the Lutheran tradition.

How do you draw the line between those who are evangelical and those who are evangelical and those who are not?

Those who have a defective view of the work of salvation and of the sovereignty of divine grace in the saving process. Anything that begins to allow for an element of merit or human achievement in the work of salvation is, to that extent, non-evangelical.

So 'evangelical' to you signifies more a theological orientation than a movement or a group within the church.

Primarily, it is, I think it's disastrous when evangelicalism becomes the designation of one party within the church.

Still, recognizing that there is a group of people who might be identified as evangelicals sociologically, what are some of the changes you have observed as having taken place among them over the years?

In my experience in Britain almost the only Christian grouping in which there has been a distinctively evangelical party has been the Church of England. Now I cannot speak from first-hand experience of Anglican evangelicals, but I think that they themselves would be the first to admit that there has been a very considerable change of outlook among them over the past generation. They have become a much more outward-looking, instead of inward-looking body. They realize their responsibility is to play an active and positive part within the witness of the Church of England as a whole. But here I speak merely as an observer.

In my own church tradition I think it would be right to say that we're all evangelicals. We (in the Brethren) would have no possible existence apart from the faith of the gospel as I have tried to indicate it.

In terms of the world-wide evangelical community, have you observed any similar trends?

I think there is a much greater sense of responsibility to contribute to the well being of the church as a whole, and, of course, of the human race as a whole. The Lausanne Covenant is one very interesting manifestation of this change in outlook.

What do you think of the so-called charismatic renewal movement?

I have had very little experience of the charismatic renewal. Certainly, no active involvement with it. So I cannot say anything that is very well informed. But from what I know of it, it does seem to be a movement of the Spirit of God which is playing a part in the maintenance and the revival of Christian witness in many parts of the world in these present days.

PAUL AND FREEDOM

Your work over the years might be described as a love affair with the writings of the Apostle Paul, in that you have written commentaries on every one of his epistles as well as on the Acts of the Apostles, which sets them in their historical setting. What do you think are Paul's major legacies to the church?

That's a big question. [Long pause.] My hesitation to answer quickly lies in my unwillingness to say anything that might seem to do Paul less than justice. But, of course, anything I say about him would do him less than justice!

I believe his main legacy is his law-free gospel, his affirmation that the grace of God, which he declares is available on equal terms and manifested in an equal degree among human beings of every kind. When he says that 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free person, neither male nor female' [Galatians 3:28], he is saying that distinctions of those kinds are simply irrelevant where the gospel is concerned, and where Christian witness, life and fellowship are concerned.

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Your major work on Paul was published as Paul: the Apostle of the Free Spirit in England. In America it was entitled Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free. How did these two different titles come about?

The first was my own choice. I had in mind the words of Psalm 51[:12] where the psalmist prays. 'Uphold me with thy free spirit!' When my American publisher undertook to market it in the USA, it was thought that the expression 'free spirit' had associations which might obscure the main thrust of the book from the intended reading public. 'Free spirit' was said to be either a particular brand of gas for automobiles or a class of hippy. I thought at the time that Paul may have been regarded as a sort of hippy in his day! When the book was reviewed very graciously sometime later by Professor Paul Minear of Yale, he pointed out that 'heart' in the title was used in a non-Pauline sense. I could not agree more, but I comforted myself with the contemplation that this expression was not my own choice.

How have you been able to resolve the apparent conflict between Paul's theology of freedom and the social manifestations of people who adhere to Paul but who obviously are not free in either their personal lives or in their manner of relating to people in the world?

If they are obviously not free, they don't adhere to Paul! They may think they do, but they haven't begun to learn what Paul means by 'the liberty with which Christ has set his people free' [Galatians 5:1].

Why do you suppose there is this fearfulness among Christians who profess to follow Paul?

Many people, including many Christians, are afraid of liberty. They are afraid of having too much liberty themselves: and they're certainly afraid of letting other people, especially younger people, have too much liberty. Think of the dangers that liberty might lead them into! It seems much better to move in predestinate grooves.

What is your source of confidence? Does it come directly from your theology?

Yes. Certainly. From Christ as mediated through Paul, who had an exceptional insight into the mind of Christ and realized that in Christ and nowhere else is true freedom to be found. Among all the followers of Christ. I suppose there has never been a more emancipated soul than the soul of Paul.

What has been Paul's influence on Western thought?

Paul's influence on western thought has been very profound, indeed. Perhaps it has been chiefly as mediated through Augustine. For Augustine has probably had greater influence on western thought over the centuries than any other single thinker.

Has Paul's thought been mediated accurately by Augustine?

Not altogether. Augustine did not have quite the same appreciation of Christian liberty that Paul had. Even though Augustine was one of the greatest interpreters of Paul—as [the theologian Adolf] Harnack said of Marcion [whom he considered the greatest interpreter of Paul]—even he misunderstood him'!

Who do you think have been the most accurate interpreters of Paul?

Certainly the great reformers, Luther, for example. Or John and Charles Wesley in the eighteenth century. Paul played such a dominant part in their conversion experience that they could not help assimilating the very heart of Pauline teaching and communicating it to others.

Do you think the current theologies of liberation—for example, Latin American and feminist theologies—are correct to applying Paul's theology of freedom to social and political issues?

Basically, yes. The liberation that is at the very heart of the Pauline gospel can't be restricted in any way. It must have its social implications and applications. I do not know too much about liberation theology, but it does sometimes seem to be linked to a Marxist interpretation of history, and of human life, which is quite different from the Pauline approach.

You seem to interpret Paul as a liberator, if not a revolutionary. But many others see him as a conservative—one who wanted to keep people in their places, who tells slaves to be satisfied with their position in society and women to be silent and forbids them from having positions of leadership in the church. Their interpretation of Paul is of one who is anything but a liberator of people!

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Paul's attitude to slavery must be seen in the context of the social condition of the time. There was no point in telling slaves to rebel against their condition of bondage. They were in no position to do anything about it. What he did was to show, as the Stoics of his day also did, in a way, that a slave can be a free person, just as truly, as a sociologically free person is very often a slave. Slavery and freedom are matters of the inner life, primarily, and a person's economic or societal position is not of the first importance.

How would you apply this to the role of women?

Paul's teaching is that so far as religious status and function are concerned, there is no difference between men and women.

What about in practice? Does he not limit women's role in leadership and in teaching in the church, and in leadership in society?

No. If we have regard to the place that women have in Paul's circle, he seems to make no distinction at all between men and women among his fellow workers. Men receive praise, and

women receive praise for their collaboration with him in the gospel ministry, without any suggestion that there is a subtle distinction between the one and the other in respect of status or function. Anything in Paul's writings that might seem to run contrary to this must be viewed in the light of the main thrust of his teaching and should be looked at with quite critical scrutiny.

Your church tradition does not have formal ordination for men or women. However, if you were in a church that did make a distinction between clergy and laity, would you support the idea that women, as well as men, should be ordained as pastors, even bishops?

The point is that I could not countenance a position which makes a distinction of principle in church service between men and women. My own understanding of Christian priesthood is quite different from the understanding that dominates so much of the current discussion of the subject. If, as evangelical Christians generally believe, Christian priesthood is a privilege in which all believers share, there can be no reason that a Christian woman should not exercise her priesthood on the same terms as a Christian man.

How do you interpret 1 Timothy 2:9-15, which suggests that women are not to teach?

I'm not quite sure about whether 1 Timothy 2 was written by Paul. But even if it is taken as a statement by Paul himself, it is merely a statement of practice at a particular time.

So you would not regard it as a canon law for the Christian church for all time.

No. I think when you look at Christian history, you observe a tendency to pick and choose the church regulations from the Pastoral Epistles between those precepts which have been taken over as permanent canon law and those which have been set aside as being only for that particular age.

How do you answer people who say that you are doing the same thing, picking and choosing among the various doctrines of the New Testament, using one strand of Paul's teaching to set aside another strand of the Pauline tradition?

If there is any substance in that criticism, then the strand that I am choosing is the strand that contains the foundation principles of Paul's teaching in the light of which those other passages must be understood.

What about 1 Corinthians where Paul suggests that women should be quiet in church?

In the same chapter, he indicates certain occasions when men should be quiet or silent in church also! My own view about 1 Corinthians 14 is very similar to the view expressed by Gordon Fee in his recent commentary [in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1987)], namely, that the textual evidence throws doubt on the authenticity of the word 'let your women keep silence in the churches.' But even if they are part of the original text of Paul's letter, they have relevance only to the uttering of prophecies in church, where women are advised not to question publicly and vocally the interpretation of prophetic utterances.

In most of our churches today, we don't have prophetic utterances of the kind envisaged in 1 Corinthians 14. Therefore, the application of that negative injunction does not apply.

In general, where there are divided opinions about the interpretation of a Pauline passage, that interpretation which runs along the line of liberty is much more likely to be true to Paul's intention than one which smacks of bondage or legalism.

What about Paul's use of the term kephale (head) in 1 Corinthians 11:3. where man is said to be the head of the woman. and in Ephesians 5:23. where the husband is described as the head of his wife? Does not this imply women's subordination to men?

No. It implies that the head is the source of the being of the other party in question. Paul is referring to the Genesis story of Eve's being formed out of Adam's side. In that sense, the

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husband was the source of the wife's being. This suggests priority in terms of existence but not otherwise.

You have described yourself as a 'lawman.' And yet you are looked to as one of the leading biblical scholars of our day. Is there not an inherent contradiction in this?

I do not think so. One uses the term layman in two senses. When I apply the term to myself. I use the term in an ecclesiastical sense: I am not an ordained minister. This is a negative status that I rather insist on! One talks of laymen in another sense, as between doctors or other professionals on the one hand and non-specialists on the other hand. This is a different matter. However, as a lay interpreter of scripture. I am in quite a respectable tradition. Even our Lord was a layman, as the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes.

Does your status as a layman give your work a special slant as a biblical scholar?

Sometimes it gives me a special privilege in that it cannot be said that I hold the things I hold or say the things I say because my church directs me to do so.

What books have influenced you most in your life, other than the Bible?

Some of the great Christian biographies have influenced my life, especially among them the memoir of Anthony Norris Groves, the early Brethren missionary: the life of William Robertson Smith J. S. Chrystal; and John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.

Have you changed your mind in any fundamental way in regard to our basic understanding of the Christian faith over the years?

As far as the main outlines of my position are concerned, there have been no appreciable changes. But there have been lots of changes in appreciable matters. For example, in matters of biblical criticism: I may have a vague idea about the purpose, date, authorship, and structure of a particular book of the Bible but if I have to teach a course on that book, or write a commentary on it, and get down to the detailed work necessary. I may find myself changing my views on a number of points related to its study. But that is because I was relatively uninformed previously, whereas closer study has shown me that this rather than that is the way to understand a matter.

A rather technical example would be this: for many years I was disposed to believe that the last the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians belonged to the letter that Paul wrote between 1 and 2 Corinthians, sometimes called the 'tearful letter' [2 Cor 2:3-11]. But when I got down to studying 2 Corinthians with a view to writing a commentary on it. I found myself compelled to change my mind and regard the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians as part of a later letter by Paul written subsequently to that contained in the first nine chapters.

What do you think are some of the greatest problems facing Christians today?

The problem is what it has always been. I think: conformity to the world, to the current climate of opinion. The climate of opinion of today may be very different from what it was fifty years ago, but that is the essence of What the New Testament calls worldliness. Getting one's mind into the mind-set of the age, and thinking in those terms instead of in distinctively Christian terms.

How do we avoid worldliness?

We are all influenced by the current climate of opinion, inevitably so. We can't watch television, or listen to radio, or that sort of thing, without being influenced in this way. But so long as we are aware of the fact that we are being influenced, we may be on our guard against it, instead of simply imbibing it without thinking about it.

What do you think is the greatest opportunity for a Christian young person living today?

There is one great opportunity in the fact that Christian presuppositions, even in a diluted sense, are becoming less and less the presuppositions of our contemporaries. So a Christian who bears witness to the principles of Christian faith and life is not so liable nowadays to hear the response. 'Yes that is what I've always believed!'

Do you have a strategy to suggest to the church today?

No.

Do you think we are living in the last days?

I have no idea.

How can we convince people today of the necessity for sacrificial love?

The best way to convince people is not to talk about it but to practice it. There is no sense in telling people about sacrificial love if one does not show something of it!

What do you think Christians can do to further the cause of peace in the world!

They could start by living peaceably one with another, showing themselves to be, in reality, as they are in the divine purpose, a fellowship of reconciliation, a community of those who, having experienced the reconciling power of God in their own lives, proclaim his message of reconciliation to others, in the widest conceivable sense.

Do you think Christians should be actively involved in opposing nuclear weapons?

I do not see a difference in principle between nuclear weapons and other weapons. We have seen quite a lot of indiscriminate destruction wrought by non-nuclear weapons of a kind that Christians could not contemplate with anything like approval. And the use of nuclear weapons simply multiplies this to the nth power.

Do you think that the Christian perspective demands a pacifist stance!

I should find this a difficult position to maintain. I realize that the pacifist probably has the better of the logical argument, but there are other considerations that may lead to a different conclusion. For example, many people in Britain who were pacifists on principle in World War I were not pacifists in principle when World War II broke out, because they believed that the evil to be opposed in World War was a really positive evil that could not be opposed in any other way. Of course, if it had not been allowed to get to the point to which it had reached in 1939, this evil could have been checked at an earlier stage. From our point of view, however, the moral conclusions that persuaded people in 1939 have been replaced by a quite different series of issues in our day.

I have only observed you to be nervous on only one occasion in all the years I have known you. My impression is that you have a great sense of confidence and certainly an independence of spirit. Is this a valid observation! And, if so, why do you think this is so?

Independence of spirit may largely be the result of my having always been in a position where my personal comfort, income, and the like were not affected by what I affirmed. A person who always has to be looking over his shoulder lest someone who is in a position to harm him may be breathing down his neck has to mind his step in the way such as a university teacher, which I've always been, is quite a stranger to.

I've known a lot of insecure and nervous university teachers!

That may be so, but that is probably largely a matter of personal temperament.

Has your father's influence on your life been an influence in this?

In teaching me to think for myself, not to believe a thing just because some preacher says it is so, unless I see it clearly for myself—that was excellent advice. There are some people who will swallow what the most eloquent preacher says.