

## Exegesis as a Theological Discipline

At the beginning of our year's work, it is good to focus attention on that part of the theological enterprise which traditionally has been the foundation of the whole—exegesis. Not a few would hold that if the Christian faith is built on the apostles and prophets, the explication of it is built on the exegesis of the apostolic literature. But even if this were admitted, our task would only be stated, for generally speaking, we lack an adequate understanding of what exegesis involves and of how it is related to theology as a whole.

How, then, should we understand exegesis? The dictionary definition—that it is the critical interpretation of a text—is not adequate, because our problem is precisely that we are no longer confident that we know what interpretation involves. Likewise, the old adage that exegesis reads the text's meaning in but eisegesis reads it out is too simple because every exegetical effort combines ex- and eisegesis. No one approaches a text with complete neutrality.

Complete neutrality, however, was the ideal of an earlier time. Thus Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer set himself such a goal in 1829, when he wrote the first volume of the now famous German commentary series that still bears his name. His Preface included the following remarks:

The interpreter of Paul, having thoroughly deprived himself of his own self, should have put on the whole individuality of the Apostle. . . . He should not think with his own head, nor feel with his heart. . . . Because of the meaning which the New Testament has for the Christian church . . . the exegesis of the New Testament as such has no system at all and may not have one . . .

insofar as he is an exegete he is neither orthodox nor heterodox, neither supernaturalist nor rationalist . . . he is neither pious nor godless, neither moral nor immoral . . . for he has only the obligation to search out what the author says so that he might give this over as a pure result to the . . . dogmatician. . . . The relation of the explicated meaning to the teaching of philosophy, how it agrees with the dogmas of the church . . . —this is of no concern to the exegete as such.

Before we smile at an attitude so naively confident, let us remember that in a sense Meyer was asserting a vital Reformation principle—the independence of Scripture vis-à-vis the church and its ordinary theology. Nor should we forget that orthodoxy usually claims that the Bible contains nothing that does not support it, and that the task of the exegete is to exhibit this agreement. We need only recall the recent call for a “Conservative Translation of the Bible” and the controversy over how Isa 7:14 should have been translated by the RSV in order to realize that the independence of historical-critical exegesis has not yet been granted by many parts of the Christian church. What Meyer required, and what every exegete expects, is honest listening to what the Bible actually says, and understanding why it says it that way. This is nothing less than what that often castigated exegete, Karl Barth, has also said: that we should take the Bible at least as seriously as we take ourselves.

In other words, scientific exegesis has the right, even the duty, to pursue the text’s own meaning as carefully as possible, and to “let the chips fall where they may.” Thus far, Meyer was right. In addition, today we remind ourselves that if biblical study is not carried forward with a rigorous quest for the intended meaning of the text, we shall have compromised the canonical criterion by which the church can gauge her faithfulness. The independence of the exegete is not to be confused with academic irresponsibility. In fact, it has been precisely through relentless, independent biblical study that the church has been summoned once again to come to grips with what the Bible has to say.

What Meyer did not see, however, was that one cannot recover the meaning of the text by an exegesis that is disinterested, that precisely the identification with Paul that he demanded is precluded when the exegete himself is excluded. How am I to think Paul’s thoughts after him if I may not use my own head? If my self is not engaged? How is the interpreter to take the meaning from the text if he is forbidden to bring anything to it? Meyer did not see that two presuppositions controlled his demand:

one, that ultimate questions could be so thoroughly dismissed from the mind of the exegete that he is free to recapture an objective past; two, that such a past would itself be an adequate source for subsequent meaning. But just as there is no presuppositionless thinking, so there is no presuppositionless exegesis. It is precisely this disturbing fact which makes our problem acute: what IS exegesis and how is it related to theology as such? If we can no longer think that an exegesis wholly free of presuppositions is either possible or desirable, are there any alternatives?

## II

Looking briefly at several possibilities can help us move forward. The first was developed by the left wing of biblical criticism, on the assumption that scientific exegesis must carry on a continual war with the church and its interpretation. This can be seen clearly in what Albert Schweitzer taught us to call the Quest for the Historical Jesus. As the critical study of the Gospels advanced, not only did traditionalists defend these texts as completely reliable records of the life of Jesus, but some radicals completely rewrote the story of Jesus' life, and a few claimed that he had never existed at all. What began as a creative reinterpretation of the Gospels by David Friedrich Strauss ended in a hodge-podge of data and innuendo published in the early years of this century by Arthur Drews in Germany and by William B. Smith, a mathematician at Tulane University. In all such works, there is the constant theme that scientific historical exegesis is inevitably pitted against the church's theological tradition.

A second alternative was offered by what is known as historicism and it is associated with Adolf Harnack, the eminent church historian at Berlin. Though he too was critical of traditional dogma, he tried to serve the church by recalling it to what he believed was the original gospel of Jesus. In his epoch-making lectures, translated as *What is Christianity?* Harnack said, "The Christian religion is something simple and sublime—it means one thing and one thing only: eternal life in the midst of time, by the strength and under the eyes of God." Harnack believed that the eternally valid gospel addressed the essentially unchanging man in changing circumstances. As a historian, he knew very well that the gospel too had become many things. How, then, did he determine which part of the gospel's many changing expressions is eternally valid, and which part can be dismissed as expressing the historical circumstance in which

it had been expressed, or as he put it, How does one separate the kernel from the husk? Harnack found the answer in history itself, as disclosed by historical research. "What was kernel here and what was husk, history has itself showed with unmistakable plainness, and by the shortest possible process. Husk was the whole of the Jewish limitations attaching to Jesus' message. . . ." Thus Harnack peeled away the historical context of Jesus' teaching to lay bare an eternally valid core which Paul's mission to Gentiles transformed into a universal religion, which was again and again transformed. For Harnack, the exegetical task was to recapture the gospel's original expression so that it could be the norm for later expressions. Thus historical research could disclose the true and living center of the Christian religion. Within this everchanging, culturally conditioned Christianity there exists a constant element to which we can respond in faith—the kernel disclosed by history.

After the Great War showed what history could be, it is little wonder that the third alternative was a violent reaction to Harnack's view. Thus in Barth's 1919 commentary on Romans, the meaning-giving center of the Bible was not found through historical research, and thus dependent on man, but was the wholly free, unexpected Word of God in the Bible's words. Not the kernel in the husk, but the direct, inbreaking Word of God which comes to man not as a datum to be analyzed but as a summons to be obeyed, precisely because it is a Word, which dissolves all notions about the search for a kernel because it is a Word from God. This, for Barth, is what the Bible attests and makes possible. The task of the exegete, then, is to press through the words of the text to the Word of God. All historical-critical work is at best only preliminary to listening for the Word in the words. Consequently, exegesis is theology and theology is exegesis. The dogmatician is nothing less than a systematic interpreter of Scripture.

How different from Meyer, who insisted that theology not contaminate exegesis! Yet, there is also a striking similarity between them. Meyer set out to exclude himself so he could think Paul's thoughts. Barth, in his Preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary, claims access to Paul by just the opposite means. It is not by excluding his own interests but by a relentless pressing of the issues that he claims at last to have come to grips with the issues with which Paul grappled, and thus also to have eliminated the assumed difference that twenty centuries create between Paul and modern man. Not by disinterested analysis does one understand and interpret Paul, but by becoming existentially involved

in the crisis of man before God. Only then does one lay hold of the Word in the words, and so become able to write a commentary with Paul and not merely on him. The identification with Paul that Meyer demanded is achieved by Barth because he rejected Meyer's method. So also what Harnack sought—the confrontation of man as man with the eternal gospel—is unexpectedly reached by Barth who rejected Harnack's method with equal vigor.

Some of those who looked for a fourth alternative found Rudolf Bultmann to be the New Moses who could lead us to the Promised Land. Bultmann has the distinct advantage of being both a master of the historical-critical method and of working consciously with a theological perspective. For Bultmann, there is only one exegetical method—the historical-critical one. More radically than most of his peers, he applies it rigorously to the New Testament. But instead of excluding his own theology, as Meyer required, he pursues historical criticism until he lays hold of the understanding of human existence implied in the text. Like Barth, Bultmann assumes at the outset that the New Testament is the unique bearer of God's Word, and thus he refuses to treat it simply as a repository of early Christian ideas. But unlike Barth, Bultmann is not impatient to get the critical research done so that the real issues can be dealt with.

Interestingly, however, it is because Bultmann wants to take seriously both the historical-critical method and its results that he is under attack from theologians and exegetes alike. For as a result of his critical work, Bultmann has become aware that the New Testament presupposes an understanding of the world, of man, and of God that is so alien to ours that a real perception of the New Testament's message is impossible. At the same time, because he sees the New Testament as the bearer of the Word and not simply as the husk around a kernel of truth, he must take it seriously. But how can one take seriously the Word in the words if the words are rooted in essentially alien presuppositions? His solution is to recast the New Testament's understanding into terms that enable modern man to really hear and hearken to the Word of God and not merely listen to the strange words of the text. Thus without looking for timeless truths, Bultmann seeks to restate the New Testament in language that modern man may truly hear what it actually has to say.

Let me summarize what I have outlined as four alternative positions: first, attacking the church and its theology requires moderns to choose between exegesis and (true) theology; second, using the Scripture as source in the historical-critical quest for the permanently valid kernel

in religion's ever-changing husk; third, identifying the brunt of the Bible with the Word of God which does not come as the result of historical work; and fourth, pursuing historical questions until the historicity of man is disclosed and restated in existential terms. Each of these has an element of truth which dare not be ignored. Yet each is vulnerable as well.

### III

Let me suggest a different relationship between exegesis and theology. What I have in mind is rather simple: exegesis and theology are related in a continual dialogue. That is, the exegesis of Scripture is achieved when fundamental questions are raised and dealt with theologically. Where this lively conversation occurs, exegesis will provoke serious dialogue between the ancient text and the modern believer, essential for both exegesis and creative Christian faith. For exegesis places a question mark behind our theology, and our theological understanding assumes the validity of what exegesis discloses.

An example will take us to the heart of the matter. One basic datum for understanding Jesus' conception of his work is recorded in Lk 11:20: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God is come upon you." Critical exegesis not only attests the reliability of this logion but also connects the exorcising work to the preaching work of Jesus. Both the word and the deed are forms of announcing the kingdom. Exegesis can pursue the matter farther by relating the various relevant Gospel materials concerning the kingdom of God and Jesus' relation to it. To some extent it can also assist an historical reconstruction of the main features of Jesus' ministry with varying degrees of probability. The exegete can also discern the ways the Evangelists understood his mission. But here the exegete approaches the frontier of the discipline. That is, demonstrating that Jesus believed he was the herald and bearer of the kingdom raises the real question, Was he? Was Jesus what historical research indicates he believed himself to be? Did his career have the religious significance he apparently saw in it? And if not, if the kingdom did not come as he expected, was his own eschatology crucified with him? If so, did his resurrection transform it as it transformed him?

Such questions—the real religious questions—cannot be answered by doing more exegesis of more passages, because this process would either refine the questions or merely give us the answers of the early

Christians. The bankruptcy of such an approach is painfully manifest when we hear fellow believers try to answer theological questions by quoting texts that also need exegesis. Our substantive questions, raised by exegesis, are to be answered instead by decision, by obedient response to the Word heard in the words. When this begins to occur, the answer to our question will be found beyond exegesis, for it will have moved from the critical explanation of the text to wrestling with its claim to religious truth. In short, exegesis fulfills its function by raising the questions so that the Word might occur to us.

It will perhaps be objected that since the Bible contains the answers to man's questions; how can one say that the goal of exegesis is discovering the questions? This objection would be cogent if the Bible were a compendium of true ideas. Indeed, a popular notion about the Bible is not far from such a view. But even if that were the proper way of viewing the Bible, the real issue would be exactly the same: Can I believe that this humble and humiliated Jesus is the Christ whom God raised from the dead without responding to this claim as a Word about God from God?

Driven by the consequences of our exegesis to the frontier not only of our discipline but also by the nature of faith itself, we can become receptive to the Word. It is precisely when we become aware of the limits of our understanding that we face the deeper questions of faith. It is then that God can communicate that Word that can save us and make us free. There is no guarantee, of course, that this will occur because exegesis is not a procedure for producing the Word. If, however, we have been led to this possible event by following the narrow path of exegetical work, we can come to know in what sense the Bible becomes God's Word to us and for us. In addition, because the exegetes are members of the same community that produced and preserved the texts in the first place, they are willing to listen for the Word lest in our time they miss hearing what their forebears heard in theirs. Moreover, it is this same event of hearing the Word that draws us back to the text where we may now find that also its answers become ours, enabling us to share its witness. So our exegesis casts a double light: on the one hand, it illumines the text before us; on the other, it throws light on the interpreter as well.

One more question must be asked: How does this differ from Harnack's dialogue between exegesis and Christian history? He also wanted to determine the truth by a continual dialogue between the results of historical-critical exegesis and the subsequent manifestations of the Christian religion. The difference lies in this: whereas Harnack carried

on his dialogue in the quest for the eternally valid core of religion, we enter it in the quest of that Word that can free us for our particular time and place, believing that the Word comes to us not in disembodied purity but in the warp and woof of our humanity and historicity, for thus did the Word once become flesh and blood among us.

If what has been said has any validity at all, our studies will summon us to a significant dialogue not only among the various disciplines in the curriculum but also within each of us. We may secretly try to emulate Jonah, to whom the Word of the Lord came as he sat in the shade of the cucumber vine, but our more likely model is the legendary Jacob who heard God's Word after he wrestled.

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