

*Te totum applica ad textum; rem totum applica ad te.*

Thyself apply wholly to the text; the thing apply wholly to thyself.

Johann Albrecht Bengel

Among the many things this pithy formulation may be taken to mean, two concerning the nature and point of interpretation—not only of scripture, but of any text—stand out.

1. If one asks, why should the interpreter apply her- or himself wholly to the text, the answer, presumably, is that the text alone is the criterion of any interpretation strictly and properly so-called. In other words, the only criticism appropriate to interpretation as such is strictly *immanent* criticism—the sole criterion for which is what the text itself says and means. By implication, then, acting on the imperative stated in the first clause of Bengel's epigram entails following the methods (and only the methods) of historical- and literary-critical study without which what the text itself says and means cannot be determined.

2. Significantly, what the imperative expressed in the second clause calls the interpreter to apply wholly to her- or himself is not the text, but "the thing" (= *res* = *die Sache*). This means, I take it, that, although the nature of interpretation is such that the interpreter must attend to nothing other than the text, the point of interpretation is such that the thing the text is about—though only it!—must be wholly brought home to the interpreter her- or himself. The interpreter is reminded, in other words, *tua res agitur*—this thing has to do with thee!

I have two further reflections.

I ask, first of all, whether the *res* or thing of the text isn't to be thought of more exactly as its *formal* object than simply as its *material* object. By the "formal object" of the text I mean its "material object," or the thing it is about, but *only as it is about it*—only as it is viewed in terms of the question to which the text is addressed. Thus, although the *res* of the text is to be distinguished not only from what the text says, but even from what the text means—namely, as the thing

about which the text means whatever it means in saying whatever it says—still, it is this thing only under the horizon of the text's own question about it.

My second reflection is that the imperative expressed by the second clause can be complied with even though one rejects, rather than accepts, what the text means about its formal object. There's not the least question, of course, that, just as what Bengel means by "the text" is scripture, so what he means by "the thing" is Jesus Christ, or, more exactly, no doubt, the *beneficia Christi*, which he calls the interpreter to apply wholly to her- or himself. But Bultmann rightly insists that, even where one's response to the text's gift/demand is No instead of Yes, one's interpretation can still be legitimate, because, or insofar as, it involves an existential encounter with "the thing" of the text (cf. *NTM*: 152).

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