

Marxsen on exegesis

Exegesis is the effort to understand what an author in the past wanted to say to those to whom he wrote as he did.

Thus exegesis is repeating—in my language today—what an author in his situation and under his conditions wanted to say to his readers in their situation and under their conditions.

Of course, this step of understanding in my own terms what an author wanted to say to his readers need not be called "exegesis." But it is a distinct and independent step, and therefore ought not to be confused with other steps, however closely related to them it may be.

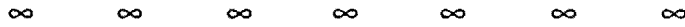
We also need to be clear about what exegesis can and cannot accomplish. Since it always seeks to understand what an author wanted to say to his readers, it is always historical exegesis, and this means that it must refrain from all criticism in doing its job. It may not allow itself to be influenced by whether or not it takes what the author said to be meaningful or illumining and, above all, it may not judge whether or not what is said is (by whatever standards) right or wrong. Any such criticism gets in the way of understanding. Therefore, "historical-critical exegesis" is no longer exegesis. The one and only thing that exegesis has to do is to repeat an old expression in an understandable way.

Thus exegesis in no way decides what is, or is not, to be included as valid in a Christian dogmatics or ethics (unless, perchance, the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture is presupposed).

That a text of the past claimed to be appropriate for ^tis own time may very well be presupposed. But this is at best a claim of the text, which the exegete establishes as such. The exegete, however, has neither the task nor the possibility of testing the correctness of the claim. And this means that as an exegete he or she cannot expect his or her results to be immediately accepted by the dogmatician or ethicist. Exegesis is merely an auxiliary theological discipline. And this modest role is the ground for the freedom of the exegete. True, it is an indispensable

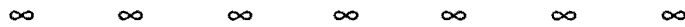
discipline, since any further use that may be made of the writings in question presupposes that they have at least been correctly understood.

After exegesis has been carried out as a first step, the results of exegesis have to be controlled as a second step. Only then does criticism come into play, and not already at the first step of exegesis. But to exercise this control or criticism requires what Luther calls a "touchstone." This is true, at any rate, unless one has recourse to a doctrine of inspiration or to a teaching office of the church.



Historical exegesis is not only the sole possible first step, but also always an independent and self-contained step.

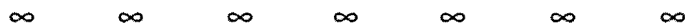
The second step involving criticism of the results of the exegesis that is the first step is properly called "critical interpretation" (Sachkritik). It consists in subjecting the results of exegesis to a systematic theological control. To carry it out requires finding a standard.



When I exegete a text, I must be clear that I am involved in it only as the one who conducts the exegesis, not as the one who is addressed by the text. We may indeed believe that the text has something to say to us. But we must admit that we can mediate what it has to say to us only after we have first established what the author of the text wanted to say to his or her own readers (202).

Exegesis is always a "modern" affair, an attempt to bridge the great temporal distance between a text and the exegete's ~~own~~ present (105).

One does not carry on exegesis for its own sake. Rather, it has a definite place in the context of a complex undertaking (91).



"Exegesis needs a control, but it is not itself in a position to exercise a control"
(ET: 200).

"Exegesis is translation, which need not be thought limited to something purely philological. What is involved is translating the old statement into a linguistic form that can be understood by us today" (202).

"Writer X said this or that to his or her readers in this or that situation" (206).

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The exegete of the New Testament writings, like exegetes in any other discipline, is obligated exclusively to her or his text. She or he repeats what those writers at that time wanted to say to their readers. She or he attempts to understand their assertions. To this end, she or he makes use of all the fullness of helpful means that the various auxiliary disciplines make available: philology, text criticism, literary criticism, and so on, right up to the ever more comprehensive material of religious studies. The exegete is clear that, even with all this, her or his understanding can always be only limited. Her or his way of asking questions also always determines the exegesis and limits its results. This way of asking questions is by no means chosen arbitrarily or left to the free choice of the exegete. It is determined, on the one side, by the history of exegesis, in the tradition ^M~~of~~ which the exegete consciously or unconsciously stands. It is determined, on the other side, by the exegete's being a child of her or his time, who thinks in the categories of that time; and insofar forth the exegesis is always (again, consciously or unconsciously) determined philosophically. Only so is the exegete in a position really to translate, i.e., to bridge over the great temporal gulf between those assertions [*sc.* of the text] and her or his own present. Thus exegesis is always a "modern" affair. If it isn't, if, on the contrary, the way of asking questions is an old way, then the exegete is unable to reach her or his own present. It also becomes clear, then, that exegesis is never at an end, and never can be at an end, because the new time with its new way of asking questions demands a new exegesis. But this all applies, as was said, not only to the New Testament scholar, but also to every exegete in any of the human sciences or disciplines, and beyond them (104 f.).

But even when one manages to focus attention on the individual NT writings, there are still difficulties. They lie in us ourselves. We (and with us also always our tradition) become much too quickly involved in the exegesis. We read the writings as Christians—more exactly, Lutheran Christians, Reformed Christians, etc. And since we understand our own Christian existence to be biblically grounded, we view ourselves as in solidarity with the NT writers. But with this our preunderstanding comes into play and easily turns our exegesis into eisegesis—without our knowing it or even wanting it. We must be clear that exegesis in its ideal form is not to be attained. Not only do we ourselves always stand in the way, but there is also the great temporal

distance that separates us from the NT writers and readers. Still, the difficulty of the task cannot release us from it, even if it should make us sensitive to the fact that one has to do a lot of work in taking this first step (204 f.).

It is not necessary that such an "exegesis" determined by tradition should produce false *theological* results, if the tradition by which it is determined is theologically defensible. But just this presupposition is what we can no longer leave unexamined. For if we were to do so, we would make the church—*our* church—the norm. And even if we knew nothing of an infallible teaching office as an institution, we would have in fact set one up. Our tradition would have assumed this function.

To be sure, non-theologians generally deal with the Bible in just this way. But then they do not hear what the writers wanted to say, but (even if through the texts) only their own tradition. The non-theologian doesn't know this; and the theologian who fails to reflect on her or his method doesn't pay attention to it. This can go well enough for quite a while; and it is a real question whether one ought to demand—and in what case one even can demand—that every Christian down to the very last ought to be equipped methodically to read the Bible.

But we need to be aware of the limits to what such a way of using the Bible is able to accomplish. If we presuppose that our Protestant tradition is correct, and if we have to do only with persons who live within this tradition, then we would hardly have to engage in far-reaching considerations and could proceed as we proceeded before. We could "exegete" on the basis of tradition and control teaching and proclamation with the help of this "exegesis."

Only any one who *really* wants to justify her or his assertions, and especially to defend them in discussion (and not least today, in interconfessional dialogue), cannot get by without thoroughgoing methodological reflection. And she or he will then control the exegeted assertions by asking whether and how they are still theologically usable (212 f.).

(The passages paraphrased and referred to by the page numbers are all from *Der Exeget als Theologe.*)

Exegesis can lift up how the different New Testament authors conceived and spoke of the resurrection of Jesus.

But exegesis cannot enable us to ascertain what actually happened at the resurrection of Jesus. Nor can exegesis determine what should be said about the resurrection of Jesus today (48 f.).

Exegesis never deals simply with texts. Exegesis always deals with texts composed by people, so the proper exegetical question always is, "What did the author want to say with this text?"