

Concerning Exegesis

Exegesis as a rule is guided by some control if it is undertaken with a view either to bearing Christian witness or to testing the claims of Christian witness to be valid. Typically, this guidance is provided by the church tradition in which the exegete stands, although it is also often provided by the exegete's other religious or philosophical commitments—to feminism, say, or to socialism. Certainly, the ordinary Christian typically reads the Bible under the guidance of the church tradition or of the other commitments that are determinative for her or his existence as a Christian and as a human being.

Thus, for example, in the Protestant churches, the witness of Luke-Acts or of other "early catholic" writings in the New Testament is typically exegeted under the guidance of the Pauline-Reformation tradition. Neither the ordinary Christian nor the professional theologian who so exegetes it is aware that this is what she or he is, in fact, doing, which explains one reason for the tension that often exists between believers and theologians, on the one hand, and professional exegetes, on the other. However much such a procedure may yield results for witness or theology that are sound in themselves—namely, because the Pauline-Reformation tradition guiding the procedure is itself theologically sound—the fact remains that one cannot claim that a Pauline-Reformation interpretation of Luke-Acts is exegetically correct.

But, more seriously, such a typical procedure is deeply un- or anti-Protestant insofar as it simply assumes that the tradition guiding the exegesis is theologically sound. To make such an assumption, or, at least, to proceed without testing it, is to make one's own church tradition or other religious or philosophical commitments the real norm or canon for Christian witness and theology. And although Protestants may not recognize any infallible teaching office as an institution of the church, they in effect institute just such an office by assigning this function to their own church tradition.

In this connection, I wonder whether one couldn't fairly say that the so-called biblical message, or Christian message, to which neoorthodoxy typically appealed as its "canon within the canon" was really only a more or less demythologized version of the Pauline-Reformation tradition of *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*. Thus, although neoorthodoxy in no way formally proposed relocating the canon, it in effect did exactly this by allowing its exegesis to be guided by a certain church tradition whose theological soundness it simply assumed and never tested. (Another and perhaps better way of putting this is simply to say that the typical neoorthodox position is caught in the dilemma I pointed out in "Faith and Freedom": if it doesn't involve presupposing the traditional canon of scripture in deriving its "canon within the canon" of "the biblical message," it is vulnerable to the objection of arbitrarily assuming the theological soundness of the Pauline-Reformation tradition now more or less demythologized and interpreted in existentialist terms.)

In any event, if one is really to ground one's witness and theology as appropriate to Jesus Christ and is to do so in accordance with the principles of the Reformation, one must subject all church tradition, including one's own, to the control of the apostolic tradition that constitutes the church and therefore rightly controls—not exegesis (!), but—the results of any exegesis undertaken with a view toward either bearing Christian witness or testing its claims to validity by reflecting on them theologically.

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