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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Critical Exegesis in the Life of the Indian Churches

Some Professional Perplexities

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Perhaps it is not entirely inappropriate at a meeting of the Society for Biblical Studies to raise the question of the place of critical exegesis in the life of the Church.

All of us here are exegetes. I use the word 'all' knowingly and deliberately. For whether we are teachers of the Bible in a theological seminary, or parish pastors on the front lines of the Church's mission, or even students in preparation for ministry, together we have a common stake in serious Biblical exegesis. My immediate intention, however, in what follows is to address myself primarily to the teacher of Biblical exegesis.

Our work lays upon us a particular, paradoxical responsibility. On the one hand, we are—precisely—exegetes. Exegesis, as most of us understand the methodology of Biblical scholarship, means that we listen to the text critically and dispassionately, using all tools of modern research methods to encounter what is given. Our vocation as scholars is to explore the frontiers of Biblical scholarship without regard to practicability or dogma, fulfilling what Heinz Zahrnt has called the 'representative function' of the scholar on behalf of the Church. On the other hand, if we teach in a seminary as most of us do, it is also our job to train men for the ministry. For this we must not only be able to say for ourselves what the text means for the present life of the Church; we must also accept the burden of helping our students discover how to say it. Exegesis therefore, if it is to come to grips with the text in a genuine way, must also deal with exposition.

The demand of our vocation requires us to be both historical exegete and contemporary expositor, both a Biblical specialist and a translator of the text in modern language; in short, both scholar and pastor.¹ Therefore the questions I put before us are

¹ The 'Statement of Aim' of the United Theological College in Bangalore, for example, recognizes this inherent duality of purpose. It states a twofold task for the college: to train men for ministry and to develop an objective and scientific theological scholarship. The statement

these: How can we hold in creative tension the requirements of the critical and the pastoral in the conduct of Biblical theology? And how can we for our students more clearly mark out the path from exegesis to exposition?

I

Let me begin by describing our dilemma in terms of a concrete situation.

Recently a group of Indian Lutheran ministers, all graduates of the B.D. programme at Gurukul, were asked to comment on any difficulties they felt in relating their academic training to their work as ministers. Here are some of the replies:²

'There is a gulf—unbridgeable.'

'Academic training, as far as I have seen, has very little to do with practical ministry. In academic courses we study about JEDP documents, Babylonian accounts of creation, . . . the scientific approach to Jesus' miracles—all which has no place in our sermons. In ministry we meet very often problems of soul and body and have to cater for it.'

'I have never tried to think too much of the academic side of the training.'

'Studies are not so much useful, only for the sake of the degree itself, not for service in the parish.'

What do we make of these statements? To what extent they are typical we cannot say with precision; certainly others of our former students do not find the gap between the academic and pastoral so stark and unbridgeable. I hope that you would also agree that Gurukul should not be singled out as the only theological college in India which may have had difficulty in training its students to relate critical theology to the practical. Nevertheless, are not these statements indicators of a common and

properly qualifies this distinction in function with the sentence: 'It should, however, be affirmed that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive.'

The NCC report on theological education, recently released, quotes the UTC statement with approval and calls for the recognition of two types of theological education, one 'primarily for the traditional forms of full-time Christian ministry' and a second 'with greater emphasis on imparting in a Christian context a scientific study of religion of a high academic standard'. *Theological Education in India: Report of Study Programme and Consultation, 1967-68* (Board of Theological Education of the National Christian Council of India and Senate of Serampore College, 1968), p. 9. While some sort of a distinction of this kind may be necessary for situational reasons, it is precisely my contention that the traditional ministry itself, on all levels, if it is to develop needed new structures and vitality, needs to be sustained and given direction by critical theology at its best.

² For a more complete discussion of these statements within the total context of training for the ministry, see James A. Bergquist, *Education for Ministry at Gurukul Theological College: A Follow-up Study of the Student Population, 1953-68* (Madras, 1968), pp. 36-37.

widespread confusion over the place of critical exegesis in the life of the Church? To that extent they are not isolated and unrepresentative, but typical. Indeed, did not the European theologian, in deploring the gap between theological knowledge and the popular proclamation of the Gospel in the Church, describe our Indian situation too when he writes: 'The results of modern Biblical scholarship, now generally accepted by our theological faculties and seminaries, are not influencing the pulpit.'

II

Why not?

Is it because professors tend to be hopelessly academic and impractical or, worse, unappreciative of their responsibility toward the Church? Is it because churchmen and pastors are disinterested in 'good theology'? Is it because there is in fact a genuine conflict between exegesis and exposition? In all cases, I think not. We must resist these simplistic analyses and try, rather, to uncover deeper reasons for the persistence of the gap.

Several factors seem to be at work:

(1) *Biblical exegesis today has become increasingly specialized and complex.* In this respect it does not differ from any other field of study. How can the parish pastor, whose job is essentially non-academic, deal adequately with the tools and fruits of Biblical research when the scholar himself can do so only with difficulty?

Take the Biblical scholar. Assume he teaches in a seminary, as most of us. He is a man of above average abilities, with six to ten years or more of specialized study behind him. If he has stuck to his books and taught in a disciplined setting for a number of years, probably only then will he have begun to master the outline of his field of study. With continued effort he will keep abreast of the new literature and perhaps eventually—if he has a mind like a computer and the imagination of an astrologist—make what is known in our circles as a 'creative contribution'. Meanwhile, he cannot be deeply informed about any field other than his own, including the pastoral ministry.

Now stand beside him the pastor. He knows that solid exegetical effort is foundational to his every task. Without it his ministry becomes shallow, drained of all substance. Observe him: social critic, clinical ear of the congregation, defender of God in the post-Christian age, fall-guy for everything wrong with the Church, and sometimes dismissed as poor relative by his more scholarly brothers. But he wants and needs to be nourished by Biblical scholarship. Yet somehow the specialist appears to be performing so many incantations around the text that even in his most studious moments the preacher finds current Biblical exegesis curiously remote from his daily work. Is it any wonder he doesn't know whether to trot off to still another programme of 'continuing education' designed by experts to rehabilitate his fossilized theology, or to tell the scholars to go hide in the library?

Two observations on this situation might be in order: One is that good intentions alone are not enough to bridge the technical gap between the academic and the pastoral. It will take programmed effort. The other is that in India, on the Protestant side at least, the division between L.Th. and B.D. levels of training may only serve to accentuate the problem. If we find structural difficulties in dealing with the critical in relationship to the pastoral in ministerial training itself, how much more difficult must be the pastor's task of translating critical results on the level of the local congregation.

(2) But it is not simply the fact of specialization which separates critical studies from the life of the Church. *A more important difficulty lies in the radical difference between the respective working approaches of the scholar and the pastor with regard to the methodology of Biblical exegesis.* The pastor normally deals with the Scripture from a homiletical and devotional point of view. He cares about the Message as he finds it in the final, fixed form of the text, and not about literary sources and redactions of divergent layers of oral tradition. While he may indeed recognize the rich diversities of theological expression within the Old and New Testaments, he must deal with the Bible as a unity within the context of worship and proclamation.³ The Biblical specialist, on the other hand, has learned the methods of traditio-historical criticism. His context is the classroom and his basic assumptions predicate growth in the tradition. As an historical scholar, it is his job to expose differing layers of tradition which may lurk within a single pericope. But what has become for the critic a perfectly accepted exegetical method, remains confusing, alien and somewhat beside the point for the pastor who must use the Bible daily as a straightforward document of faith.⁴

³ The 'Biblical theology' of the past three decades, especially as characterized in the work of the *Heilsgeschichte* theologians, but which is now being called into question, had an immediate relevance to the preacher primarily because it reinforced his working approach to the Scriptures. Of course it was carried out in a critical framework, but that only made it all the more valid as an option to either Fundamentalism or Liberalism. The work of C. H. Dodd, Oscar Cullmann, the writers of Kittel's *Wortebuch*, and others formed a Biblical basis for church renewal with fresh, *kerygmatic* treatments of the great Biblical themes: the people of God, vocation, the Church, the Kingdom, covenant, and others. All of this had great impact on the Church, if indirectly, by describing the preaching task in *kerygmatic* terms and laying the basis of today's revitalization of social concern. These methods stressing the unity of the Biblical message have today, however, given way to the methods of traditio-analysis. The result is a fragmentation and uncertainty of direction which makes it all the more difficult to the parish pastor to relate these 'results' to his daily work.

⁴ I find this problem posed in an indirect but particularly acute form by R. H. Fuller at the close of his book, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 250-51. There he raises the question of how the results of traditio-historical research can be applied to the life of the Church today. Fuller's own study, of course, is a massive and thorough application of the traditio-historical methods to the problem of Christology. But out of the

(3) *Still another factor may be located in the over-all failure of the present theological curriculum to adequately chart the way from critical exegesis to pastoral exposition.* Dissatisfaction with the way in which the academic and the practical are presently handled is widespread.⁵ Everywhere, East and West, the churches are pressing for new patterns of effective ministerial training, but nowhere are theological educators or churchmen quite sure what shape a fully integrated syllabus ought to take. A healthy process of experimentation is now evident. But again, if the problem of how to relate the critical and the practical has not been solved on the level of the theological college, it should not be surprising that many parish pastors as individuals, who largely have been thrown upon their own resources in the matter, have difficulty integrating the two in the context of their daily work.

(4) *A fourth factor lies in the kinds of theological literature at the pastor's disposal*—or, strictly speaking, not at his disposal. Even today, with the explosion in the paperback press, there are too few books which give direct assistance in bridging the critical and the pastoral. Too often the required textbooks, which serve the purposes of a course in Biblical exegesis admirably, are inappropriate tools for the pastoral task. At the other extreme, much of the meditative and homiletical aids which line the pastor's bookshelves may be faulted for their lack of theological perception. The problem is even more complicated in India by the limited book budgets available to most pastors as well as by the shortage of vernacular theological literature.

(5) *Again, there is a human factor.* It is difficult to hold the tension between the critical and the pastoral. For both personal and professional reasons it is much easier to let go—for the pastor and churchman to lose himself in ecclesiastical activism to the detriment of theological reflection, and for the professor to do his work with scarcely a side glance at the goal of his exegesis.⁶ Further, there is risk involved. We do not know where the results

emergent detail, all of which expose a growing, divergent Christological confession, what kind of modern Christology arises? What is striking is that Fuller insists that the New Testament scholar cannot say. 'That is the task of the proclaiming church', he writes. Who then is left with the responsibility? The preacher! And therein lies the difficulty posed by the difference in working approaches between the pastor and Biblical scholar. My own feeling is that the Biblical specialist cannot so easily escape his responsibility of translation.'

⁵ Cf. the judgement of the NCC report, *Theological Education in India*, p. 20. 'Though there is a general approval of the curriculum of Serampore College, dissatisfaction has been expressed by almost all the colleges on the grounds that the pastoralia section in the present Serampore curriculum is weak, and that it does not satisfy all the needs of the Church in India.'

⁶ Perhaps we should not overstate the Biblical specialist's dedication to scientific, objective exegesis. A few years ago, in the context of the Barthian movement, Oscar Cullmann found it necessary to protest against the neglect of critical studies. His point was well made: all theological interpretation of the text is dependent upon an accompanying literary-historical criticism. See Oscar Cullmann, 'The Necessity and Function

of higher critical study will lead, and for some this is at best an annoyance, and at worst a threat to the structures of the Church. Gerhard Ebeling makes this point:

'The critical historical method is certainly recognized in principle, except by a few outsiders. But in practice it is widely felt in ecclesiastical and theological circles to be really a tedious nuisance. Its results may perhaps be noted, but then they are left aside after all instead of being worked through. And where the critical historical method is seriously applied today, it remains a matter for the individual historical disciplines, and does not have an effect on theology as a whole, still less on the church—or when there is any visible sign of consequences of such kind, it is pronounced to be rationalism and liberalism, or even rouses the cry of heresy.'⁷

It is, of course, still common to hear expressed the fear that a critical approach to the Bible undermines faith. Some months ago I was visiting with a graduate of one of our Indian Protestant theological colleges who is now completing his doctorate in Islamics. I asked him whether in his Islamic studies he was employing the critical historical method. His reply was negative. Then I asked, 'Do you find this a disadvantage?' 'No', he said, 'to the contrary. I find it saves a lot of awkward questions!' And he added: 'In fact, I find it a disadvantage as a Christian to have to deal with the Bible critically because it weakens the authority of my (Christian) Scripture over against the authority of the Koran.'

In exegesis, as in ethics however, there are no simple answers; only by accepting the tension of the responsibility of decision can we fashion a faith which meets the demands of the modern world—and be true to the Word itself!

(6) *A final factor, particularly in India, lies in the suspicion that critical problems are Western problems.* The development of modern critical exegesis indeed can only be understood in relationship to Western intellectual history, and many of the ways in which the Biblical problems are formulated are distinctly Western. Existential exegesis, for example, reflects the cultural *Angst* of post-war Europe; this is one reason why it has not been fully at home in either India or America (or even the U.K. for that matter). Still, the historical method *as such* is not inherently Western any more than technology *as such* is Western; both belong to the present-day nature of things. Critical exegesis in India, however, must develop its own formulation of the questions. This, I think, is what we mean when we speak of the need for an indigenous theology. We cannot go back on the historical

of Higher Criticism'. *The Early Church* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1956), pp. 3-16.

⁷ Gerhard Ebeling, 'The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for the Church and Theology in Protestantism'. *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 60-61.

method. But we should make sure that the problems which agitate theology are the actual problems of our own cultural situation.

III

So far I have described some difficulties. Let me now attempt to state from a more positive angle why it is necessary for the health of the Church to maintain the balance between academic-centred critical exegesis and world-centred exposition and, if possible, along the way offer some possibilities for bridging the gap between the two. I shall do so in terms of two theses.

Thesis I: The on-going life of the congregation needs to be sustained and informed by theology at its best if its fellowship is to be genuine and its mission effective; for this process the work of the Biblical specialist is essential.

Several points would seem to support this thesis:

(1) *The very nature of the Biblical Revelation itself demands it.* The Bible does not preserve a set of timeless truths, but above all is, in Ebeling's phrase, 'primarily and properly a definite event'.⁸ The Old Testament describes the God who acted in Israel's history. In the New Testament the central event is the Word who entered history. In both testaments the books of the Bible are inescapably historically-conditioned reports of God's act and varieties of human responses to that act in history. Furthermore, both the transmission of the Biblical message and its eventual deposit in literary form, as well as the process of the transmission of the text, are a part of the historically-mediated Revelation. We cannot understand the text unless we first listen to it in its original setting, grasp in so far as we are able what it meant to the original hearers and readers, and from this encounter—laid bare by a thoroughgoing historical exegesis—let it speak to the Church today. The methods of historical criticism are hermeneutical tools in the service of the Word, nothing more, nothing less. No doubt the critical method, like any tool, can be used destructively; but its primary function is to unlock the richness of the text. It is helpful to recall in this respect that the work of the Biblical specialist has laid the foundation for Church renewal from Augustine to Luther and from Wesley to Barth and Pope John.

(2) *Another function of critical exegesis is to express again and again for each generation the authentic Biblical kerygma.* Much that passes for Christian theology, both in the Church and in the popular understanding of non-Christians, is a far cry from the centre of the Gospel. Critical exegesis therefore has a double purifying function. On the one side, it must constantly recall

⁸ Ebeling, p. 29.

the Church to recognize its true identity and mission, calling into question all distortions of the *kerygma* in the life of the Church. The results of modern Biblical exegesis have in fact been powerful tools in the hands of the sociological critics who, following Bonhoeffer, have today properly refocused mission in terms of the secular. On the other side, exegesis must expose the *kerygma* in such a way that the non-Christian is confronted with the real goods, and not adulterated substitutes. As Paul Tillich has emphasized, there is no way to communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it; for this there is no method. But to communicate the Gospel means to present the authentic 'stumbling-block'. Too often people are put off from Christ for the wrong reasons, often by distortions of the *kerygma* as presented by the empirical life of the Church (and its implicit theology). It would therefore seem that the following sentences of Tillich apply with special force to our own missionary setting:

'But there are two kinds of "stumbling-blocks". One is genuine . . . There is always a genuine decision against the Gospel for those for whom it is a stumbling-block. But this decision should not be dependent upon the wrong stumbling-block, namely, the wrong way of our communication of the Gospel . . . What we have to do is to overcome the wrong stumbling-block in order to bring people face to face with the right stumbling-block and enable them to make a genuine decision. Will the Christian churches be able to remove the wrong stumbling-blocks in their attempts to communicate the Gospel?''⁹

That last question defines with precision the purifying function of critical exegesis. For Indian exegetes, in particular, that function certainly implies rethinking the Gospel in non-Western categories.

Just one more thing on this point. It is important that the Gospel we addressed to the actual cultural situation, seeking out 'points of contact' which engage the hearer of the Gospel in genuine dialogue. Still the purifying function of the *kerygma* about which I am speaking should make it clear that it is precisely the *kerygma*, the centre of the faith, which we bring to dialogue. Dialogue is meaningful only when both partners speak from the respective generating centres of their faiths. In this context I like what Manfred Mezger has written: 'Never let your theme be given you by your opponent. If your opponent dictates the theme to you, he is steering the preaching, the attitudes, the conduct from the start—and he will never let go of the reins.'¹⁰

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 213.

¹⁰ Manfred Mezger, 'Preparation for Preaching', *Translating Theology into the Modern Age*. Ed. by Robert Funk (New York: Harper Torch-books, 1965), p. 178.

Dialogue—for both parties—treads a thin path between cultural openness and *kerygmatic* concern.

(3) *A third way in which critical exegesis can sustain and inform the life of the Church is by giving historical perspective to its theology.* The Gospel has come to us as a *paradosis*, a tradition handed down. That tradition is not confined, of course, to the Biblical record, although we locate the centre of the tradition in the apostolic witness reported in the canonical Christian Bible. While we must read the tradition critically and, if necessary, restate it in our own cultural categories, it is the function of exegesis to describe the varieties of *kerygmatic* formulations in the tradition, learn from them, and correct our own theology in their light. Eduard Schweizer states the point precisely:

‘It is the advantage of tradition that we, while better aware of its limits and errors than of those of our contemporary thinking, may see in its light the deficiencies of our own theology.’¹¹

(4) There remains perhaps the most important thing to be said about the place of critical exegesis. *Critical historical study is an indispensable prerequisite for creativity in theology.* Research builds on the past. The space technologist cannot explore the frontiers of our universe without a detailed knowledge of the previous results of scientific research, just as a historian cannot reinterpret the past for the present apart from a fresh reading of the sources. Nor can the Church chart its new frontiers without understanding the ‘rock from which it is hewn’. Herein lies the ultimate justification for a well-trained ministry, as well as for academic training of high standard on all levels of the curriculum. This does not mean, of course, that the Indian scholar is bound to Western forms. To the contrary, he must transcend them.¹² But it may indeed mean that Biblical studies on an advanced level may have a special place in the process of creating new theological formulations for India. Truly creative, indigenous theology, as the history of Christian doctrine may indicate, develops vitality in direct proportion to the degree to which it is a genuine, fresh response to the *kerygma*.

IV

The preceding thesis attempted to answer *why* critical exegesis is necessary for the life of the Church. My second thesis addresses itself to the question of *how* critical exegesis can be focused on the essential pastoral mission of the Church.

¹¹ Eduard Schweizer, ‘The Relation of Scripture, Church Tradition and Modern Interpretation’. *New Theology No. 1*. Ed. by Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. 56.

¹² Cf. the balanced statement in the report, *Theological Education in India, op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

Thesis II: *Academic theology needs to be done within the practical context of the worshipping, ministering Church if it is to be true to itself; for this process the goal of exegesis must be to expose the world-centred intention of the text.*

As long as the research of the specialist is carried out in the service of the *kerygma* and is effectively translated into terms meaningful for the life and worship of the Church, both theology and the parish are well served. What can be done to expose the pastoral intention of the Biblical text? How can we as professors chart the way for our students? I make four suggestions:

(1) *It should be recognized that the Biblical text itself has a pastoral bent and that it is our task to discover it.* Following the results of form criticism, at least as it applies to much of the prophetic literature as well as to the Gospel tradition of the New Testament—which would also include a large share of the Pauline material—we should remember that the texts originated as sermonic materials. ‘They once *were* preaching, they *are* preaching; essentially, therefore, they can again “*become*” preaching today.’¹³ We must not, however, limit the world-centred intention of the texts to preaching. The other materials as well—confessional, liturgical, ethical, apologetic—all speak God’s Word to a concrete situation. It is the function of exegesis to rediscover and restate for today the form of God’s address to men. That is why, in my view, it is precisely the traditional core subjects of the traditional theological curriculum that may in the end have the most ‘practical’ relevance if, of course, they are thought out in the context of contemporary ministry.

(2) *Consideration must be given to further structural changes in the theological curriculum which will bring ministry more pointedly into focus.* This should be done not by scrapping the traditional core subjects, but by placing them solidly within the context of the Indian Church situation. Hardly anything more needs to be said on this point because curriculum revision is at least everywhere being talked about. In our planning for new structures we would do well to take Manfred Mezger’s words as our text: ‘Practical theology is much less the crown of all disciplines than it is the rallying point for all the partial problems.’¹⁴ I would take this to mean that not only must the theological syllabi of the future integrate the subject-matter much more thoroughly, but that all theology—and that of course includes Biblical theology—must be a theology of participation. In this regard, it is important for theological professors to know at first hand the work of the Church on the parish level. Perhaps in India we err too much on the side of professional involvement

¹³ Mezger, p. 164.

¹⁴ Mezger, p. 162.

in Church functions. Still there is something to be said for the practice of Dr. George Knight, the Old Testament scholar and now president of a new seminary in the Fiji Islands. 'I myself', he once commented, 'have been teaching for 20 years but I only failed in two summers in that period to go back into a parish.' Of equal importance are the friendships a theological professor develops with men and women outside the academic and ecclesiastical community, and especially outside the Christian fold. No syllabus yet devised tests the validity of a theology more rigorously than the encounters which grow out of friendships with 'secular' man in the flesh.

(3) The world-centred intent of the Biblical text is also revealed in the Biblical language itself. *The translation task of Biblical exegesis requires that we be disciplined in our use of language.* Philological criticism can teach us the precise meaning of a Biblical term in its original setting. But only knowledge of our contemporary situation, its needs, hopes and fears, will enable us to speak the Biblical Word with understanding. As Eduard Schweizer puts it, 'A sermon without burning love toward modern man, a sermon in an outlived language, no longer understandable in a modern world, is probably no sermon of the Holy Spirit.'¹⁵ One of our former Gurukul students has developed the practice of inviting the young people of his parish to criticize his sermons, an event which he describes as both humbling and instructive. As one result he has modernized his speech, attempting to eliminate obsolete clichés and unexplained theological concepts, and he is the better pastor for it because he is sensitive to the nuances of life among his people.

(4) One last thing needs to be said. In the end, *the Biblical text can become transparent through us only if it has become transparent to us.* Bishop Hans Lilje of Germany once told a group of American churchmen: 'If you cannot state the Gospel in its classical simplicity it is because you either do not understand it or you do not believe it.' Toward the goal of classical simplicity, with all that that phrase implies about the depth and directness of the *kerygma*, all the labours of the Biblical specialist are directed. Perhaps the answer to our professional perplexity is relatively simple: Critical Biblical exegesis is never an end in itself, but is always the servant of the Gospel and the ministering Church.

¹⁵ Schweizer, p. 49.