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Growth in Exegesis

In continuing the series of discussions having to do with a pastor's professional development we come to exegesis, the exposition of the Bible. That Lutheran theologians, while not hostile to any legitimate field of theology, lay particular stress on exegesis has as solid and venerable a historical basis as one may wish for. It will be recalled that the fathers of the Lutheran Church, Luther and Melancthon, in giving theological courses at the University of Wittenberg, devoted themselves chiefly to the expounding of Biblical books. This was the origin of Luther's well-known *Commentary on Genesis*, a mighty work, which it took him ten years to deliver in the classroom and which has reached us through the notes of students, published, however, in part by Luther himself. The famous commentaries of Luther on Galatians, belonging to the most effective instruments God employed for the spreading of evangelical truth, likewise originated in exegetical courses. Similarly, the first Lutheran book on dogmatics, Melancthon's renowned *Loci*, developed out of lectures on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. The question has often been asked why Luther, this great giant of the Reformation, did not write a large work on Christian doctrine which in magnitude and comprehensiveness could be called the equal of Calvin's *Institutions*. If the question had been addressed to Luther himself, he would have replied perhaps that, in his catechisms and in numerous other treatises of his in which particular doctrines were set forth and defended, he had fully satisfied the demand for doctrinal discussions. In addition, however, I fancy he would have said that the chief work of theologians is the proclamation of what God has revealed in the Holy Scriptures and that hence a study and exposition of the divine writings must constitute the chief occupation of all who wish to become and remain theologians. Besides, it should be mentioned that, as all who have studied

Luther's exegetical works have noticed, the great Reformer, in discussing a certain book of the Holy Scriptures, did not confine himself to the setting forth of the grammatical and historical sense of the sacred words but dwelt at length on the truths contained therein and showed their relation to other truths of God's Word. In this manner his hearers were made acquainted with far more divine teachings than those embodied in the passages under immediate consideration.

It does not require a long demonstration to convince the readers of this journal that there should be progress in exegesis for a minister as his career lengthens and one year of professional service succeeds the other. Having been called as a herald of the message set forth in the Holy Scriptures and as a teacher of the great doctrines which our Holy Book lays before us, a minister would be guilty of gross indifference toward the duties of his sacred office if he ever considered the interpretation of the divine Word as a matter of little or no moment for himself. But the members of our churches are justified in demanding not only that we be deeply interested in exegesis but that we advance in our ability as interpreters of the Scriptures. One expects a lawyer to become more proficient in his knowledge and understanding of the law as his legal practise goes on. Likewise we think that a physician should constantly increase in his acquaintance with the many facts relating to medicine and the well-being of the human body. With respect to members of Congress the nation holds that they should unceasingly busy themselves with the study of the history and development and the many social and financial problems of our country. Certainly in treating of what is most important in our existence, the well-being of our soul, we have to say that the men who have volunteered to make a special study of the Sacred Writings furnishing us the only infallible light available on this great subject cannot afford to be indifferent toward progress in their understanding and expounding of the Scriptures.

One thing we may say by way of consolation to all ministers who realize their great responsibilities in this regard and would like to measure up to them is this, that the conscientious pastor through the preparation of his sermons and the instruction he dispenses will inevitably progress in exegesis. It is simply inconceivable that texts from the Bible can be preached on and that they can be analyzed in the instruction of catechumens without some advance in understanding for the pastor himself. It is here as with a doorkeeper and guide in an art gallery. Think of a man who, originally entirely innocent touching acquaintance with works of art, takes visitors day after day to certain paintings which they have come to see and looks at the paintings himself as he

attends to his humble service. It would be very strange if he himself through such constant external contact with the masterpieces did not become at least superficially acquainted with them.

But no devoted pastor ought to be satisfied with the progress which thus falls to his lot with the same inevitableness as recurring birthday anniversaries. There ought to be found in him the striving to advance apart from what of necessity comes to him as he goes about his regular work. The material, he must realize, is so immense that he can never be acquainted with all of it. If he reads the Bible in the original tongues from Genesis to Revelation and meditates and makes his comments, he will become aware that, after he has traversed the Scriptures, he will have to make the journey again, because there are many valleys and brooks which he failed to explore on the first trip. In studying the Scriptures, we are dealing with an inexhaustible gold-mine. It is a delusion to think that there have been geniuses who have succeeded in appropriating all the riches it contains. Manna from heaven, new every morning, comes upon us in our Bible, bringing truths which in their myriad aspects and applications may be likened to the infinite varieties of snowflakes dancing about us on some winter morning.

Growth in exegesis will involve becoming acquainted with the opinions of the most spirit-filled and pious exegetes, such men as Augustine, Luther, Balduin, Philippi, Stoeckhardt. What these men of God amid prayer and with hard work, using their special talents for such service, elaborated in setting forth the content of the various Bible-passages must be of intense interest to us epigones, who are not worthy to serve as the famuli of the fathers. It will be seen, too, when the works of the fathers are studied, that few worth-while ideas are being uttered today which have not been previously expressed. It is one of the tasks of the exegete to acquaint himself to such a degree as is possible for him with what learned, God-fearing men have written on the texts he is expounding. The gain which will come to a minister when he studiously searches in the commentaries of Luther and others is simply incalculable.

But no one should think that if he makes excerpts from the writings of great exegetes and peruses numerous commentaries, his task as an exegete is nobly fulfilled. He has merely begun. In the Middle Ages, it will be recalled, exegetical writers thought it sufficient to gather the opinions of great theologians on the texts of the Bible and to submit them to their readers. For a number of centuries, from the seventh to the eleventh, little else was considered commendable exegesis. This was the period when the so-called *catenae* flourished, the collections of excerpts from

the writings of the fathers, strung together like the pearls of a necklace. When the writings of the Venerable Bede (d. 735), of Alcuin (d. 804), and of Rabanus Maurus (d. 856) are scrutinized, the investigators tell us one finds merely or chiefly anthologies, that is, compilations of what the venerable fathers of the Church have said on this or that verse. (Cf. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 248 ff.) That this method of merely gathering and considering what others have said is not engaging in exegesis in the full sense of the term ought to be evident to everybody. Valuable as it is for every clergyman to ponder the results of the labors of former Bible students, he must not be satisfied with simply repeating their dicta. Whoever takes such a course may elicit our admiration for modesty and humility, but we cannot approve of his refusal to employ the gifts of independent thought with which God has blessed him. No one can make other people the keepers of his conscience. We ministers are responsible for the teaching we present, and that Dr. Walther or Dr. Krauth had the conviction that a certain Bible-passage contained a particular doctrine, though of high importance to us, cannot be decisive for our understanding of the passage. The exegetical anthologies, while stimulating and, if properly employed, of great value, must not be given the position of the *ultima ratio* in our exegetical work. "To his own master he standeth or falleth" (Rom. 14, 4) applies here, and no one of us can simply hide himself behind the authority of some great theologian.

The study of the exegetical works of godly, consecrated commentators will not only make us conversant with their views, but will help us to learn something about exegetical procedure. Reading their treatises, we shall gradually see how they arrived at their conclusions, what principles guided them, what points in the sacred text they habitually stressed, what methods they employed in separating truth from error in the opinions of other exegetes, how they elaborated on the doctrines enshrined in the Sacred Word. The great exegetes, while they were men of deep spirituality and fervent prayer, will be found to have been human. Though their genius was ever so great, it will be seen that there are certain paths which they regularly traveled; and probing into their works again and again, one will finally discover some of the secrets of their fascination and success, and what we admire as achievements of transcendent excellence will appear to rest on some well-known, frequently praised, though less often cultivated attitudes and virtues, the chief of them being industry. Observing their method of expounding texts, we shall finally arrive at some aptitude of our own in treating Bible-passages, far inferior in all probability to that of the masters, but nevertheless sufficient to

make us take some independent steps. Let us, then, regard good commentaries not merely as source books of information but as guides concerning the proper methods to be employed in interpreting the Scriptures.

To make progress in exegesis means, besides the points just mentioned and besides a growth in proficiency in reading the Hebrew and the Greek,—a matter which has been sufficiently dwelt on in former articles,—an ever firmer hold on the correct application of sound hermeneutical rules. It is next to impossible for any one to carry about with him in his memory the proper interpretation of every verse in the Bible; but what is within the reach of practically everybody is to have the right principles of Scripture interpretation at his finger's ends, ready to be used at a moment's notice. The old legend of an event that is said to have happened when the queen of Sheba visited King Solomon contains a deep truth. The queen, so the story relates, in order to test the king's much-heralded wisdom, brought two bouquets, one consisting of natural, the other of artificial flowers, which latter, however, by most careful imitation had been made to resemble the former to an astonishing degree, and she asked the king to tell her which bouquet came from the garden and which from the workshop of human artists. The king at first was puzzled, but suddenly his face was lit up with a smile. He saw a bee flitting around in the room, and taking the bouquets to the little creature, which of course at once paid homage to the true flowers, he was enabled to answer the question. The story illustrates that, though the king was not omniscient, he possessed true wisdom, which does not consist in encyclopedic knowledge but in acquaintance with, and the ability and good judgment to make use of, such avenues of obtaining information as are open to us. Similarly, to advance in exegesis does not merely signify that we amass a large fund of interesting and pertinent material on every passage of the Scriptures but that we become increasingly familiar with, and alert in, the use of the great principles which underlie correct exegetical procedure.

How important the use of such principles is can be seen, as has often been pointed out, in the case of Luther. In his early exegetical endeavors he was still under the domination of mediæval views concerning exegesis, holding that in Scripture there was to be looked for not only the obvious historical sense but a hidden sense and that it was the task of the exegete to bring the latter before his students, hearers, and readers. In this period the idea of the theologians in the Middle Ages that there is a fourfold sense of Scripture, a historical, an allegorical, a moral, and an anagogical (referring to hope) sense, still had had some fascina-

tion for him. Accordingly, the first works of Luther in this field are marred by discussions of the hidden meaning of plain narrative sections of the Scriptures. As he advanced in understanding the Word of God, he cast aside these medieval fetters and simply sought to apprehend and set forth the one, the intended, sense of the Scriptures, and it was then that he produced the great exegetical works which belong to the immortal treasures of our Church.

In speaking of hermeneutical rules, the mature theologian will emphasize what to beginners, who with awe have looked at the vast shelves filled with Biblical commentaries, sounds very strange, that these rules are really quite simple and few in number. If one inquires why, if this is true, there are so many different interpretations of almost every section of the Scriptures, we have to reply that the reason is not to be sought in a multiplicity of vague, perplexing hermeneutical formulae, but rather in bias and lack of understanding, which in many an instance hinder honest interpreters from applying properly the correct principles which they themselves acknowledge.

That the Bible, although composed of sixty-six books, is a self-consistent unit, coming from one divine Source; that, hence, whenever the same subject is touched on in various passages, there is not contradiction but either reiteration or supplementing; that one of the most important principles of interpretation is, Let the Bible interpret itself (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*); that, therefore, when we deal with the Scriptures, our reason is not to be the dictator and judge deciding what is meant but is merely the servant helping us to apprehend what is placed before us; that such obscurities as exist through the occurrence of prophecies, foreshadowings, symbols, visions, and figurative language have their authoritative explanation in the Scriptures themselves and that, if the veil is not lifted there, we must not dogmatically prescribe to the Church any veil-lifting devised by ourselves; that, as in other writings, the intended sense of a passage is not multiple but one (*sensus literalis unus est*) and that the allegorical methods of interpretation employed in the Middle Ages are useless trappings belonging in the ash-can; that in the center of the Scriptures stands the cross of Christ and that the interpreter who has not found this center is studying and explaining the Scriptures without knowledge of their unifying principle, — these truths beside the purely grammatical, literary, historical, and archeological considerations constitute the chief principles of Biblical exegesis. Simple as they are, they are violated every day, ignorance and prejudice making many an honest, well-meaning Christian interpreter heedless of them and carrying him into more or

less serious misapprehensions. In the deepening of his conviction that these principles represent great vital truths and in his becoming constantly more adept in applying them the Lutheran pastor must seek one of the elements of his growth in exegesis.

In exegesis, as in other theological departments, there is to be observed a constant shifting of emphasis as the decades roll by. About the beginning of the nineteenth century the rule of Ernesti (professor in Leipzig, d. 1781) that exegesis must be grammatico-historical triumphed, being almost universally followed, often to the exclusion of efforts to provide food for the hungry soul crying for something more substantial and strengthening than aorists and the date and circumstances of the death of Herod the Great. With Schleiermacher, who, rationalist though he was, abhorred the dry husks of the matter-of-fact scholarship which his rationalistic brethren looked upon as the most delectable fruits of exegetical labors, there came the demand for a more psychological approach to the meaning of the sacred writers, for an effort to penetrate into their thought processes and emotions in order to set forth more adequately what they intended to convey on their pages. In our day there has arisen the call for a spiritual ("pneumatic") exegesis, which term signifies not a mystical or allegorical method but an interpretation which lays hold of the spiritual content, the eternal, soul-sustaining truths of the Scripture-passages, and points out their significance for us today. If the astonished reader asks whether such an interpretation has not constantly been aimed at by Christian interpreters, one may reply that such is indeed the case, but that often even godly men permitted themselves to become interested chiefly in external matters when speaking of the meaning of Scripture-passages and failed to do justice to, and apply properly, the spiritual truths contained in them. Let us beware of becoming one-sided, and as we grow in exegetical stature, let it be our conscious effort to have this growth include all the elements just mentioned. At our pastoral conferences, where, needless to say, exegetical papers should prominently figure on the program, through concerted efforts such an advance can be greatly aided.

In concluding these remarks, which, if they do not serve any other purpose, can at least remind us ministers of some of our great responsibilities, I should like to emphasize that it must always be our aim neither to add to, nor to subtract from, the truths of the Scriptures as we in our own words reproduce them for our hearers and apply them to their needs. A sincere reverence for the Word of God will help to make us avoid falling into either ditch. The well-known gibe of Goethe *Im Auslegen seid frisch und munter; legt ihr's nicht aus, so legt was unter* unfortunately is

not entirely a caricature of what is happening in exegetical works and discourses. If growth in exegesis means in our case that we constantly become more careful and desirous of humbly reiterating the saving truths contained in the Book of Life, then one essential factor in making us Lutheran exegetes will have been developed, and God's blessings will not be tardy in coming. W. ARNDT

Brief Paragraphs on the Question When does the New Testament Economy Begin?

Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 3:5, 6; 8:6-13; 12:24), set aside the Old Covenant by means of His work of redemption during the thirty-three years of His humiliation (Gal. 4:4, 5). In this period He fulfilled the Moral Law by keeping it (Rom. 5:19; 10:4), and by His suffering He freed us from its curse (Gal. 3:13). In this time He also substituted the reality of His atonement for the shadow of the Ceremonial Law and thus made the observance of its ordinances unnecessary (Col. 2:16, 17).

The work of redemption was the foundation on which the change from the Old to the New Testament was based. The death of Christ marked the completion of this foundation (John 17:4; 19:30; Heb. 10:4). His death by crucifixion was also the summit of His atoning work (Phil. 2:8). Therefore His death is most closely related to the establishment of the New Testament. "This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you," Jesus says at the institution of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20). Heb. 9:16, 17: "For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead; otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth." (Cf. entire chapter.)

The displacement of the old economy by the new nevertheless was not an instantaneous happening. The divine revelations of the abrogation of the whole Covenant and of the individual elements which make up the complex aggregate of the Covenant came at various times. Furthermore, the Covenant was to be eternal. It was difficult, therefore, for a people in whom this Covenant had been inbred to understand that part of it could be set aside, that an act which once was a sin of disobedience punishable by death might by divine direction become a good work. It was also difficult to find the clear line of demarcation between the ceremonial and the moral laws and then to maintain liberty, in the face of great opposition, in regard to the Ceremonial Law. Doubt in regard to the will of God and fear of sinning (e. g., Acts