



# LUTHERAN ORIENTATION

16

## Biblical Hermeneutics

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# **Biblical Hermeneutics**

## **LUTHERAN ORIENTATION 16**

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Published by the Theological Commission of the  
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The Reformation's fundamental perception was that the teaching and the nature of the church are based on statements made by Holy Scripture. The starting point for decisive 16<sup>th</sup> C impulses, therefore, was the hermeneutical (re)discovery of Biblical Studies. With its dual approach - translation into vernacular languages alongside continual recourse to the linguistic form and shades of meaning found in the original languages - this discipline laid the foundation for modern exegetical research. It is understandable therefore that the right understanding of Holy Scripture was the central question in the attempts of independent Lutheran Churches in Germany

to achieve unity after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The findings of the Theological Commission of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, SELK) were presented to the 5<sup>th</sup> Synod of the SELK in 1985<sup>2</sup> in a paper on hermeneutics. Part of this was published in the series *Oberurseler Hefte* no. 25.<sup>3</sup> Until the present revised version was presented this 'Biblical Hermeneutics' remained the foundation for proclamation and the study of theology in the SELK.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Synod of the SELK (2003) requested the leaders of the church to commission a revision and publication of the paper on hermeneutics. Alongside a thorough revision, the commission considered it appropriate to expand the paper to do justice to the exegetical discussion of the last decades. The fruitful approach adopted by 'Biblical Hermeneutics' in 1985 was to be retained and brought into touch with contemporary debate.

The 11<sup>th</sup> General Pastoral Convention of the SELK in 2009 and the 12<sup>th</sup> Synod of the SELK in 2011 adopted the current paper on biblical hermeneutics with a broad majority.

The Theological Commission of the SELK therefore hopes that this paper will now prove itself in practise. Working on Holy Scripture and listening to its voice remains our common goal and our foundation. To this end the Lord of the Church has promised us his blessing.

Köln/Oberursel, September 2011

Pastor Dr. Albrecht Adam

*Chairman of the Theological Commission*



A network of Lutheran churches has been in place globally since the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. In recent years, this development has gained even more pace. For this reason, the Theological Commission of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, SELK) has for some years been concerned to make available in English translation statements and elaborations that are of greater importance to its own church.

Therefore, we hereby also present the paper „Biblical Hermeneutics“ in English, in order to make the clarifications contained therein, which have been helpful in our church, accessible to non-German speaking readers in our sister and partner churches.

Greifswald/Oberursel, June 2021

Pastor Hinrich Brandt

*Chairman of the Theological Commission*

## 1. PREAMBLE

The church is bound to the Old and New Testaments of Holy Scripture as the infallible word of the Triune God, through which he speaks to man in the past and at the present, works salvific faith in Jesus Christ and so builds the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Through our faith in Jesus Christ who died for us and is risen again we, as Evangelical-Lutheran Christians, interpret Holy Scripture. We pray for the counsel of the Holy Spirit, because we cannot “by own understanding or strength ... believe in Jesus Christ ... (our) Lord or come to him.”<sup>5</sup> In this we rely on the promise of Jesus Christ, that his Spirit will lead us in truth and remind his disciples of all that he has said.<sup>6</sup>

Biblical hermeneutics describes a way of understanding and interpreting Holy Scripture appropriate to the Christian faith and to the proclamation of the church. It guides us in particular,

- to interpret the words of Scripture in such a way that Christ is recognized as its Lord and King;
- to interpret Scripture in the certainty that what it says and works is truth and reality and does not deceive;
- to interpret Scripture in the context of living our Christian faith (worship, prayer, teaching and piety);
- to interpret Scripture in such a way that God’s working in law and gospel is seen;
- to interpret Scripture in daily *meditatio*, *oratio* and *tentatio* in such a way that the exegete realizes that he himself is interpreted by Holy Scripture;
- to interpret Scripture within the framework of Scripture relating to confession. Scripture remains the touchstone and foundation, it precedes the church and determines all its teaching (*sola scriptura, norma normans*); the confession



of the church is the norm determined by Scripture (*norma normata*), it summarizes the message of Scripture in an accountable way. The confession also structures the exegesis of the church theologically in focus on Christ.

Such biblical hermeneutics is theologically and methodically appropriate for the exegesis of Scripture, and is accountable on the basis of the outlined premises. The method and result of all exegetical endeavours must be examinable and comprehensible.

## 2. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

### 2.1 Principles

In the exegesis of Scripture the following are insoluble and yet discernable:

- the God who speaks and works through his Word,
- his action through his Word in creation and history,
- the proclamation of these deeds in the words given by the Spirit in Old and New Testament
- and finally the proclamation through which God works faith in the hearers of his Word in all ages, where and when he chooses, thereby bringing his people into being and sustaining them.

The church receives and accepts the biblical canon as the precept for its teaching and living. It acknowledges the binding acceptance of the biblical tradition we have received, which has proved itself to be authoritative. The Word of God in the biblical canon is therefore the first and last authority for the doctrine and the life of the church. It is not the church or its exegesis which legitimises Scripture, rather Scripture authorises the church, and what is recognized by the church as doctrine and as necessity for Christian life. For Holy Scripture contains everything that mankind needs to know for salvation. Therefore it does not require legitimisation by means of human tradition.

As far as the canon of Holy Scripture is concerned, all exegesis aims at the proclamation of Christ. Therefore it must be evident in all exegesis that texts are explained along the lines of their own proclamatory intent. The principle for all legitimate interpretation of Holy Scripture pertains, that it interprets itself (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpret*) and that any superior exegetical authority outside Scripture is precluded.

## 2.2 The Canon

We interpret Holy Scripture as believers in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord who founds his church on Holy Scripture by disclosing the Scripture of the Old Covenant to his disciples, to whom he entrusts the proclamation of his teaching worldwide. The self-commitment of the risen Christ to the biblical Scriptures is binding for the church. For this reason the church of the Lutheran reformation shares the canon of the universally accepted Old and New Testament Scriptures with the catholic church through all times, despite the contentious evaluation of the canonical “margins”.<sup>7</sup>

For an adequate understanding of biblical texts is one which leads the exegete through Scripture to Christ, in the context of Christendom, the confession of faith, prayer and worship. Therefore we pray for the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets and the apostles, when we read and explain Scripture.

This requested and promised knowledge of the truth is received in faith, and not constructed by means of human reasoning.

The Lutheran hermeneutics presented here is based on a canonical exegesis; it opposes the disintegration of biblical understanding into various theologies and understands Christ as the centre of Scripture.

## 2.3 The hermeneutical function of the Confession

The confessions of the Lutheran Church, including the early Christian symbols, teach us to explain Scripture according to the example set by Christ and his apostles, in perception of the context of salvation history and ministry set by God himself in and through his Scripture. This includes:

- the correlation of law and the gospel, of God’s chastising and healing Word, judgement and salvation, wrath and mercy;
- the verification (*verificatio*) of the divine Word and divine promises in the relation of Old to New Testament (promise and fulfilment, type and antitype), and in the relation of the presence of salvation to be received in faith to future salvation which we will behold;

- the twin working of God's Word in belief and disbelief, obedience and disobedience, understanding and hardness of heart, as found throughout Holy Scripture;
- the perception that Scripture aims to proclaim faith and love, justification and salvation.

In this way the confessions follow the understanding that the divine Word is fulfilled by the justification of the sinner through Christ before God.

At the same time the historical wealth of the gospel is differentiated: it is shown in the Triune God's faithful fulfilment of his promises, initially to Israel, but also to the nations; it deepens in Jesus Christ's incarnation, his path on earth, his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension; it is poured out richly worldwide in the sending of the Holy Spirit and proves eschatologically how true God is to his promises from a salvation-historical point of view.

## 2.4 Objectives of canonical exegesis

The Lutheran hermeneutics presented here is compatible with the objectives of the canonical approach. Its goal is to resist a fragmentation of exegetically ascertained theological statements into various theologies (theology of the priestly source, Jeremiah's theology, Paul's theology). The exegesis it pursues instead takes into account the whole of the biblical canon, paying attention to both discontinuity and continuity. A fundamentally Lutheran hermeneutics is interested in the discourse between Scripture and Confession: the differing approaches to Holy Scripture which the Confession of the Lutheran Church itself ascertains in and from Scripture as a whole must stand the test of biblical testimony.

## 3. EPISTEMIC CONSIDERATIONS

### 3.1 Historicity of understanding

Holy Scripture is the revealed Word of God. As a collection of scripts by various human authors, its historical origins are evident and subject to circumstance, as is any book. It undergoes a process of transmission and of exegesis correspondent to observable rules of human communication. Understanding and explaining Holy Scripture takes place under the historical conditions of human life. Differing parameters characterise for any given text the horizon of understanding variously for diverse readers.

It is therefore our task to preserve the identity of any Word of God in its current reception (reception, exegesis and application). The varied historical, ecumenical, contextual and intra-ecclesiastical strands of reception must be identified, differentiated and confronted with the biblical Word of God, as the prescribed gauge.

### 3.2 Preconception

The exegesis of Holy Scripture does not take place without premises. Every exegete has his own preconception about the Bible. Such premises can become bias if an exegete is not prepared to allow his prior concept to be corrected by the text itself, if need be.

As far as the church is concerned there are appropriate but also erroneous preconceptions. For the Lutheran Church 'appropriate' means premises which expect the whole of Scripture to lead to Christ and which see Scripture in the context of Christendom, Confession, prayer and worship. Also appropriate are premises which expect the Bible as the Word of God to surmount doubt and reservation, thus placing themselves under and not over the Word.

Premises which, for example, see the Bible simply as a document in religious history are not appropriate in the view of the church. It is similarly erroneous to stylize aspects lacking any textual relevance or indeed single texts as the determining gauge for understanding the Bible, or to interpret single Bible Words outside their biblical context.

### 3.3 Truth and understanding

Holy Scripture's concept of truth is based on God's revelation of himself and therefore bound to the person of Christ. In this context that which reveals truth to us and endows us with truth, which shows us the true light and takes us into the sphere where God's truth acts, is truth. Truth in Holy Scripture is always about our relationship with the one who himself is truth. This truth is revealed in exegesis and through the sermon; the goal of its eternal proclamation is to generate faith and love. It trusts on the reliability and clarity of Holy Scripture. God leads us to certainty of faith through the proclamation of his Word.

Knowledge of faith is not individualistic, for the power of the Holy Spirit, which works faith, also builds the fellowship of the church. Seen in this way, biblical hermeneutics is a contextual hermeneutics, an exegesis of Holy Scripture found in all times and places in the context of the church. Exegesis of Holy Scripture therefore always intends and aspires to express the faith of the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church" (*una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia*).

The hermeneutic process of understanding can be described as being wrought by the Holy Spirit, commissioning the use of human logics. It is therefore necessary to consider the preconceptions of human logics. Human thought but serves the process of biblical hermeneutics and humbly recognizes that for God nothing is impossible. This excludes hermeneutics which adopt the approach that research must be done "as if there were no God".

The instrumental use of reason serves the plausibility of faith and biblical exegesis. This is the framework for establishing the confines and the effectiveness of all methods of exegesis.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Methodological exegesis

It is therefore legitimate and necessary to employ humanistic, e.g. philological and historical methods to interpret the texts of Holy Scripture, in order to understand their meaning. The appreciation of a canon likewise leads in inner congruity to the reformatory clause, that Scripture interprets itself, that is it excludes superior exegetical authorities. Nor is human reason superior to Scripture.

Methods as a path to understanding a text must be appropriate for each text. In the context of biblical texts appropriateness means that methods are employed according to the goal of the texts' own proclamation and that in the context of the whole canon they can be ascribed to the goal of proclaiming Christ. It must be guaranteed that the method of exegesis remains accountable and generally understandable.

To solve problems of text, content and understanding it is sometimes necessary to use hypotheses. Care must be taken to minimize the proportion of hypothetical assumption as far as possible: this corresponds to the reformatory principle, to start with "certain" and "clear" texts when seeking to understand Holy Scripture and to use the knowledge won thereby to understand "darker" texts.

It is accepted practice to differentiate exegetical methods as synchronic or diachronic. Diachronic methods are used to clarify the prehistory of biblical texts. Possible textual precursors discovered by means of historical methods are not the object nor the goal of our exegesis. Exegesis intends to understand the text we possess and to make it intelligible. Diachronic approaches, therefore, ultimately serve our synchronic understanding of texts. A text is understood therefore as a whole in its current canonical context.

Holy Scripture not only mirrors the working of the living Word of God through all biblical ages, but also unfolds its own rich history of impact as the Word of God. It speaks anew to many people through the ages, in various situations and cultures,

with ever new emphasis. Varying exegeses must, however, also be reviewed critically and their appropriateness questioned.

## 4.2 Variety of methods

In addition to considering basic procedural elements such as the translation, the structure of a text and contextual coherency, many other approaches and methods of investigation are meaningful and possible.

*Textual criticism can for example ascertain the wording to be interpreted, whereby several versions of a text may be equally correct.*

*An investigation of the form of a text may provide insight into speech and/or literary practice, which enables an adequate understanding of the text.*

*Linguistic methods can offer insight into the character of a text and even for example reveal an author's intention.*

*Historical investigation of social and other contemporary contexts may well offer new insight into the significance or even the meaning of some statements, which we cannot easily unravel on the basis of our own experience of life and thought patterns.*

*It is often of importance to ascertain the theological profile of certain passages or textual layers, of whole scripts or groups of scripts and to consider how authors or editors treated the material available to them. In this way we can elicit their particular contribution to the canon as a whole.*

*Studies on reception history can help to us to take a critical look at our own presuppositions.*

*Comparisons and surveys of the changing meaning of words or the use of certain motifs or stereotypes within the bible often enhance our sense of discernment, allowing us to grasp the particular features of the text in question – and so on.*

The approach appropriate for one text may not be suitable for another (e.g. text critical investigation of a text transmitted in only one form will not be fruitful). It is only in conjunction with other methods and against the backdrop of a comprehensive interpretation that the strengths and weaknesses of the methods



applied are revealed. Methods other than the examples described here can also be useful. The goal of all methodological exegesis remains a theologically appropriate explanation of the text.

It is meaningful and necessary, in view of the above considerations on truth, that the exegete also allows the text to speak to himself. The distance inherent to methodology must not necessarily exclude personal impact.

## 5. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

### 5.1 The fringes of the canon

If Scripture itself is to be consulted for the exegesis of Holy Scripture, then it is necessary to determine the scope of the biblical canon. Which texts are to be interpreted and in which version?

Although in the Lutheran Church Holy Scripture is the sole principle and guideline, the Lutheran Reformation did not define the canon of Holy Scripture in detail. To the present day the provisions of the Tridentinum and the various reformed Confessions concerning the canon have no equivalent amongst Lutherans.

We assume that Holy Scripture encompasses the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.<sup>8</sup> We should note, however, that most of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint. The so-called Apocrypha which likewise belong to the Septuagint (deuterocanonical texts), are generally considered in agreement with Luther to be “not equal to holy Scripture, but useful and good to read”.<sup>9</sup>

The wording of the canon cannot even be determined by means of textual criticism. The quality of transmission in biblical texts is generally outstanding. But in many instances text critical questions just cannot be answered unequivocally. Indeed, we must accept that in some cases various forms exist side by side. Therefore a detailed definition of the scope of the canon might well appear to be arbitrary and induce us to draw false conclusions. Quite as if Holy Scripture was a collection of formulas which could be understood and used in complete disregard of the historical conditions in which it originated. Discussion concerning the scope of the text is in continual flux: e.g. Luther’s almost exclusive use of the Masoretic text for his translation of the Old Testament (even where the text is not translatable) does not do justice to the transmitted texts known today.

The essential factor to help solve the dilemma concerning the exact scope of the canon is the determination that Jesus Christ is the focus of Scripture. This does not

mean, however, a “canon within the canon”, but it does enable the integration of the whole biblical text with all its various text forms, its richness and differing emphases. It is not necessary to delineate the confines of the canon sharply, nor must the fringes be eliminated; for everything can contribute to the whole without the difficulties blocking our view of the substance.

## 5.2 Relation to history

The books of the Old and New Testaments bear witness to a God who makes himself available to mankind through ministration and preservation, admonition and punishment. God accompanies individuals and nations on their path through history. With them he “writes” history. Holy Scripture guides the reader to see history in this way. Therefore statements made by Holy Scripture which refer to historical events are always also evidence of God’s guidance.

The Old Testament shows how Israel’s history is embedded in the development and the fate of the various peoples of the Ancient Orient. At the same time we can also recognize in these texts the history of the Old Covenant as a sign of God’s faithfulness. Old Testament texts bear witness to God’s historical power quite as clearly as to the historical responsibility of mankind. The promissory texts in particular point the way to the fulfilment in the New Testament. In the accounts of Jesus’ life and the deeds of the apostles we also see clearly how God works in history. His plan for salvation becomes reality over the passage of time, under certain historical conditions (Luke 2:1, Acts 25:4) and at the times he determined (Gal 4:4), thereby fulfilling his promise.

Biblical exegesis must therefore also take note of extra-biblical documents concerning contemporary events, attempting to shed light with their help on the background and reality of biblical texts. Biblical hermeneutic can benefit from these exegetical insights. For the fact that God’s word came to mankind as the word of man allows this word to partake in the historical conditions of human existence. Language, culture, conceptions of life, contemporary events and so on are all part of it. Therefore exegesis must use historical methods in order to achieve an adequate understanding of the texts. On the other hand, the truth and reliability of God’s words are not called into question when in historical terms a different verdict is concluded. This is for example the case when biblical texts do not allow a detailed historical reconstruction of a particular event. If a historian has to confess that he cannot reconstruct events he has come to the end of his methodological approach. An understanding of history secured methodologically

can neither substantiate nor cast doubt on the truth of biblical proclamation. Biblical hermeneutics is mindful that Holy Scripture does not deliver a description of historical occurrences for their own sake; rather history is explained in view of God's promises to his people and points to their fulfilment. In its description of historical events, Holy Scripture reveals God's law, his promises in the gospels and his salvific guidance for a life pleasing to him.

Historical statements in Holy Scripture demonstrate their Christological and eschatological perspective in their orientation to Christ's salvation for the whole world (John 3:16). History, then, is fulfilled in the Eschaton.

## 5.3 God's Word and Christian Life

### 5.3.1 Systematic-theological classification of biblical guidelines

The biblical-theological issues marked by the Lutheran Reformation with the signal words "law and gospel" are God's way of speaking and acting. They are quite as distinctively different as they are distinctively correlated. This differentiation comes from Holy Scripture itself, as the Apologia of the Augsburg Confession ascertains. "Law" and the "gospel" are not just formal entities simply used in textual analysis. On the contrary, we have to take into account that the pronouncement [of law or the gospel] which the divine Word makes is related to our life and existence.

While God's law on the one hand 'controls' the prevalence of sin by threatening punishment and on the other hand reveals mankind's entanglement in sin, the gospel 'gives', in its many forms – proclamation, baptism, holy communion, the assurance of absolution, mutual consolation amongst Christians – 'guidance and help against sin'.<sup>10</sup> The law judges and takes the sinner's life. The gospel, however, uplifts him, promises him God's unconditional grace, bestows forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, liberating him to new life in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The biblical-reformatory doctrine of justification is, in this sense, both "the teaching concerning Christian freedom"<sup>12</sup> and as such the indispensable "most important topic of Christian teaching".<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind, in this context "the (perfect) law of liberty" (Jas 1:25, 2:12) pertains, "the law of the Spirit of life" that sets "free in Christ Jesus from the law

of sin and death” (Rom 8:2). This is where in Lutheran conventional speech we traditionally speak of the “third use of the law” (also “use for the regenerated”). Under the auspice of the gospel, the divine directions such as the ten commandments, prophetic admonitions, Jesus’ commandments (for example in the Sermon on the Mount) and the advice of the Apostles are helpful instruction manuals for the baptised, believing, justified Christian.

Admittedly, the regenerated Christian’s new spiritual, liberated existence, free of the pressure and the burden of the law, is only a fragmentary beginning. For even after baptism and regeneration the accusing character of God’s law applies to the justified as long as they remain sinners. The good works of the justified are less “works of the law but works and fruits of the Spirit”,<sup>14</sup> which admittedly correspond to the divine instructions in Holy Scripture.<sup>15</sup> “Law” in this context means the “unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life”.<sup>16</sup>

### 5.3.2 Some biblical-theological aspects

We encounter God’s will in the biblical commandments in numerous aspects and varied contexts. The various instructions, commandments and statutes which are founded on Christ’s saving work are intended to touch Christians so that they can draw on them for their fellowship with Christ, in intent and act. The central hermeneutical key to all exegesis of biblical instructions is the relation to Christ.

To demonstrate the diversity of biblical instructions and their relation to Christ, we name a few of these aspects:

- the Decalogue
- the laws of the Pentateuch
- Old Testament instruction, other than the corpora of the law
- the twofold law of love
- the commandment to love each other
- instructions in the Sermon on the Mount
- the call to discipleship
- works of mercy and service
- instructions issued by the apostolic council
- baptismal paraenesis<sup>17</sup>
- Paraclete texts<sup>18</sup>
- tables of duties (Haustafeln)

According to New Testament paraclesis which as “admonitory consolation and consoling admonition” addresses the Christian way of life, Christian exegesis of biblical instruction is always also about encouragement in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 15:30). The aim is that the addressees accept the life-giving paths made accessible to them by Christ, thereby receiving courage, comfort and hope.

### **5.3.3 Relation between temporality and the enduring authority of biblical instruction**

Biblical instructions for the life of God’s people are the binding Word of God for his church, just as much as the historical narratives and doctrinal passages are. They must therefore be interpreted topically and applied according to the theological premisses outlined in this paper on hermeneutics. This concerns in particular the relation between Old and New Testament and the distinction between law and the gospel.

The New Testament often testifies that Old Testament rules for worship in Israel and rules concerning Israel’s political and economic regime are concluded in Christ and therefore no longer automatically binding for the church. However, alongside the Decalogue<sup>19</sup> certain provisions in the “Code of Holiness”<sup>20</sup> and regulations of primeval history<sup>21</sup> are brought to bear for the life of the church of Jesus Christ.

As far as the question of temporality and the enduring authority of biblical particularly New Testament texts is concerned, it is important to pay attention to the immediate context, the terminology and the form of speech used, in addition to the biblical context as a whole.

Many observations can be made here. For example Jesus gave testamentary instructions which are mandatory for the church of Jesus Christ immediately and for all time (the institution of baptism, office of the keys, the office of the ministry and celebration of communion).<sup>22</sup> In Paul’s writing we find instructions which he solemnly hands on as binding words, as doctrine or as the Lord’s commandments,<sup>23</sup> and then those which he expressly characterises as his personal opinion or as ecclesiastical custom.<sup>24</sup> There are instructions relevant to a clearly defined historical location. These can, however, also retain exemplary significance for similar situations in later times.<sup>25</sup> And there are instructions relevant to every age in which a specific concept of reality is expressed, namely the contrast between the old nature of the world and of the flesh which has been

overcome in baptism and the new way of life according to God's Spirit which begins after baptism.<sup>26</sup> And then there are also instructions which can apply in every age to particular situations, especially in persecution.<sup>27</sup> Often these contrast greatly to other instructions, for example those for Christian life as part of creation, in the home, in marriage and in government.<sup>28</sup> This tension between the 'ethos of discipleship'<sup>29</sup> and 'Haustafel ethos' reflects the twofold law of love (first the love of God, then love for your neighbour) and is also present throughout the gospels and the New Testament letters. The 'ethos of discipleship' and the 'Haustafel ethos' complement each other and put each other into perspective. The command to love does not remain abstract, but finds its true fulfilment in, for example, single commandments of the Decalogue.<sup>30</sup>

For all instructions it is vital that we remember that they are not first and foremost concerned with constraining life. Rather they sound out the space which baptism opens up for Christian life with the blessing of God, in salvation through Jesus Christ, and the impact of his Spirit. Biblical instructions are doubly conducive for living in Christ, since they name the diversity consistent with the community of Christ as well as the multiplicity of all that contradicts and endangers it. The polarity of autonomy and heteronomy does not do justice to biblical instruction, for this instruction reflects the contradiction between an initially heteronomous but then also autonomous life according to the Spirit of God on the one hand and the flesh (of the sinner) on the other hand. The interpretation and application of the instructions are then in 'conformity with Christ', when they lead us back to the reality of the baptism we have received and to a life appropriate to it. The relation between law and the gospel is also evident in the use of the instructions, when a Christian as a sinner is brought back to his baptism and to the reception of forgiveness and of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Through him the new life now begins to take shape in such a way that this life is "formed" by the Word.

## 5.4 Aesthetics of reception and polyvalence

### 5.4.1 Aesthetics of reception

The so-called aesthetics of reception (reader-response criticism) concentrate on the recipient in the communication process, instead of concentrating on the author as more usual hermeneutics do. Lutheran theology and the Lutheran Church can find this approach to the hermeneutical discussion helpful, if this emphasis lies within the fundamental correlation of promise and faith (*promissio*

*ac fides sunt correlativa*).<sup>31</sup> The primacy of the divine self-revelation must, of course, be kept in mind. For it is divine self-revelation which creates the faith which it incorporates.<sup>32</sup> Reception is hence denied any constitutive importance in God's self-announcement, as far as revelation theology is concerned.

The aesthetics of reception does, however, take the fact seriously that the revealed Word of God is part of a process of transmission which can be described with empirically observable rules of human communication. Understanding is itself part of impact and reception history – not least for the Word of God. The aesthetics of reception are a good way to acknowledge the role played by the hearer/reader or tradent of God's Word. Continuity of meaning which indeed lies in the self authenticating Word of God is assumed, under the motif of the self-attestation of God's Word. The question of an appropriate or inappropriate reception of the Word of God can only be resolved by bowing to the work of the Spirit of God, who works in the Word itself.

#### 5.4.2 Polyvalence of biblical texts

We can observe that even within the Bible words and texts are interpreted in a way which goes beyond the original historical meaning. Certain implications of a biblical text are understood differently at various times, as we can see in the course of the history of exegesis. This implies that a fundamental, but not arbitrary variety in the interpretation of biblical texts is possible; this corresponds, within limits, to a diversity of potential meanings (polyvalence) in texts. A fundamental excess of meaning is immanent to the Word of God which was spoken, transcribed, transmitted and announced again. It is updated in every age in varied contexts so that the hearer and reader discover new meaning in the words and texts.

Various dimensions in the impact of a biblical word or text can be differentiated methodologically; for one thing its own inherent potency and for another the effect which such a word or text engenders. It is important to state that Holy Scripture itself has been the authorising authority for all recipients since biblical times.

It is therefore necessary to preserve the identity of each Word of God in its reception, interpretation and utilization. The canon, rules of faith and the church are paradigms which guarantee the legitimacy of various possible receptions, protecting thereby against random reception. Together they are the components,



the parameters and the horizons in the process of understanding and interpreting. God's Word alone can create that meaningful clarity which generates certainty of faith.

## 5.5 Figurative exegesis

Perception of the clarity and self-interpretation of Holy Scripture led the Lutheran Reformation to break with medieval exegesis according to the "four fold sense of scripture",<sup>33</sup> distancing itself in particular from allegorical exegesis. The perception of numerous literary genres and manners of speech in Holy Scripture which possess a figurative or allegorical dimension, is not barred but indeed literally sharpened.<sup>34</sup> Indeed we find typological and allegorical exegesis of historical narratives within the biblical canon itself.<sup>35</sup> Inner-canonical exegeses are a further aspect which demonstrate the coherence of the Old and New Testaments; on the other hand the contrast between prototype and the real thing, between model and its "surpassing",<sup>36</sup> brings to light the uniqueness of both Testaments, in analogy to the correlation between promise and fulfilment.

The New Testament itself guides us over and over again towards a view based on the whole of Holy Scripture.<sup>37</sup> In accordance with this guideline, Lutheran theology sees Christology as the appropriate key to understanding the Old Testament. Therefore it can interpret statements made in the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament in terms of the "typoi". As far as the history of impact is concerned, this inner-biblical approach can often be observed for further parts of the canon, and indeed was fruitful in ecclesiastical art, music and literature. Historical narratives or prophetic texts, where the ostensible importance is historic or factual, can have further significance and may be of importance in interpreting other biblical statements.

However, strict criteria must be observed for a figural-pictorial and for an allegorical or typological interpretation. An exegesis according to the *analogia fidei*<sup>38</sup> and in the context of the inner-biblical referential structure of both Testaments is one of these. Figurative texts must be interpreted in the light of explicit statements in Holy Scripture, in particular the message of Christ. Figurative interpretation cannot be the only substantiation for doctrine or the faith of the church, but it can illustrate and thereby foster the reception of biblical statements. The limited fundamental theological relevance of figurative interpretation of Holy Scripture in its various manifestations however enables a wide spectrum of interpretative forms, as the history of impact demonstrates and

should be practised in the implementation of exegetically prepared biblical texts in the faith and life of the church.

## 5.6 Contextual exegesis

Concepts for a contextual exegesis have arisen in the field of so-called contextual theology. This investigates the unfolding of the Christian message in new, above all missionary contexts. Each context influences the content and form of the message; a reciprocal character and impact develops. Contextual exegesis therefore awards the context, with its particular issues and features, great importance and can modify the understanding of a text decisively.

The interaction between a text and the context can make us particularly aware of a text's differing valencies. Observations collected in the history of impact or exegesis can help us to appreciate the rich variety of meaning found in Holy Scripture.

However, we should reserve a certain scepticism when discussing a contextual exegesis which asserts that the context constitutes the text. The danger of syncretism is always present in contextual theology and contextual exegesis can introduce alien or inappropriate statements into a text. There is real danger that a text may be violated and used for goals foreign to the text.

One example is liberation theology, which could be called a form of contextual theology. Its merit is that it draws particular attention to Jesus' support and commitment to the poor. Liberation theology's exegesis, however, is in danger of abusing biblical texts as verification for their ideology. The so-called feminist theology is also a form of contextual exegesis. It investigates biblical texts with particular attention to their patriarchal background and is in danger of introducing current ideological social concepts into the texts.

A critically used contextual interpretation which respects its own limits, corresponds structurally to current, for example homiletic, exegesis. It can throw light on prejudices and make pre-understandings fruitful for understanding biblical texts, while at the same time putting things into perspective. When a text is interpreted in a sermon for a certain group of listeners then we expect the text to have a message for these listeners. But the listener's issues and their situation are also part of the equation and determine the approach taken to the text. Our consideration of contextual exegesis should be able to explain why certain implications of a text are understood in certain ways at certain times. But we must then consider whether biblical texts are indeed open to random

interpretation. This could appear to be the case since there is so much potential meaning in texts, but limits are set by the intended meaning of the words and by the canonical context of the biblical text.

Reflection on our own state of mind, and in particular the demands made by our encounter with the Words of Holy Scripture themselves, cause us to revise our own point of view.

- 1 Einigungssätze, 1947, ch. I.
- 2 31.10.–3.11.1985 in Berlin.
- 3 Hartmut Günther/Volker Stolle: Die Wörter verstehen und das Wort verkündigen. Oberursel 1989 (OUH 25), p. 44–48.
- 4 Cf. the Constitution of the SELK (Grundordnung der SELK) Art. 1,2: the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church “is bound to the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as the unfailing Word of God according to which all teaching and teachers of the church must be judged. Therefore it commits itself to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, because they witness the teaching of Scripture” (“ist gebunden an die Heilige Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments als an das unfehlbare Wort Gottes, nach dem alle Lehren und Lehrer der Kirche beurteilt werden sollen. Sie bindet sich daher an die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, weil in ihnen die schriftgemäße Lehre bezeugt ist”).
- 5 Small Catechism, The Creed, 3rd Article (BC 355,6/“nicht aus eigener Vernunft noch Kraft an Jesum Christ ... (unsern) Herrn gläuben oder zu ihm kommen“, BSLK 511,46–512,1).
- 6 John 14:26; 16:12–15.
- 7 See below, 5.1
- 8 Both the early Christian controversy concerning the “antilegomena” and Luther’s disposition of the New Testament books, point to varied assessments of the individual books of the bible. Christian teaching must as a matter of principle be developed from the “homologoumena”.
- 9 „Apocrypha: Das sind Bücher, so der heiligen Schrift nicht gleich gehalten vnd doch nützlich vnd gut zu lesen sind ...” – Vorrede zu den Apokryphen in der Bibel von 1545 (WA.DB 12, S. 3). The adoption of the order of biblical books from the Septuagint for the Hebrew canon has retained its great impact to the present day.
- 10 AS III,4. In: BC, 319/“Rat und Hulf wider die Sunde“, BSLK 449,7.
- 11 Apol IV,5.22.38.43–47. In: BC,121, 124, 126, 127/BSLK 159, 164, 167, 168–169.
- 12 CA XXVIII,51. In: BC 99,51/“die Lehre von der christlichen Freiheit“, BSLK 128,34.
- 13 Apol IV,2. In: BC 120/“höchsten fürnehmsten Artikel der ganzen christlichen Lehre“, BSLK 159,3–4.
- 14 FC SD VI,17. In: BC 590/“Werk des Gesetzes, sondern Werke und Früchte des Geistes“, BSLK 967,18–19.
- 15 “for otherwise they are not good works” (FC SD VI,15. In: BC 589/“dann sonst seind es nicht gute Werk“, BSLK 966,37–38).

- 16 FC SD VI,15. In: BC 589/“den unwandelbaren Willen Gottes, nach welchem sich die Menschen in ihrem Leben verhalten sollen”, BSLK 966,39–42.
- 17 E.g. Rom 6.
- 18 E.g. Rom 12:1, Heb 3:13, 10:25.
- 19 Cf. e.g. Mt 5:21–37, 19:18–19, Rom 13:9, Jas 2:11.
- 20 Cf. e.g. 1Pet 1:16, 1Thess. 4:1–7, 1Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21, 1Tim 1:8–10.
- 21 Cf. e.g. Mt 19:4–6, 1Cor 7, 1Tim 2:11–15, 4:1–5.
- 22 Cf. e.g. Mt 16:19, 26:26–28, 28:18–20, John 20:21–23, 1Cor 11:23–25 etc.
- 23 Cf. e.g. 1Cor 7:10, 11:23, 14:37, 1Thess 4:2.
- 24 Cf. e.g. 1Cor 7:6, 11:16.
- 25 Cf. e.g. Acts 15:19–20, Mt 8:22, 19:21, also aspects from the Haustafeln (e.g. Eph 5:21–6:9).
- 26 Old and new, bondage in sin and freedom in salvation, life in darkness and life in the light, life in the flesh and life in the Spirit are contrasted in e.g. following biblical passages: Rom 6, 8:1–17, 1Cor 6:9–11, Gal 5:16–26, Eph 4:17–5:20, Col 3:1–17, 1Thess 5:1–11, Tit 3:3–8, 1Pet 1:13–16.
- 27 Cf. e.g. Mt 10:35–39, Lk 14:26.
- 28 Cf. e.g. Mt 19:1–15, 1Cor 7, Eph 5:21–6:9, Col 3:18–4:1, 1Pet 2:18–3:7.
- 29 E.g. Mt 16:24–25, Lk 14:25–27.
- 30 Cf. e.g. Rom 13:8–10.
- 31 Cf. Apol IV,50. In: BC 128/BSLK 170.
- 32 Luther’s objection to the medieval doctrine of understanding is explicitly against an approach which conceives the understanding of faith as a result of man’s understanding, instead of seeing it as being given by God’s word (*non secundum dicentem Deum, sed secundum recipientem hominem* – WA.TR 3,670,17–19).
- 33 The mnemonic for the four fold sense of Scripture is as follows: “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.” (WA 5,644,37f; it could be rendered as follows: the letter teaches us what has happened; the allegory what we should believe, the moral sense of the text what we should do, the anagogic sense of the text is what we should hope). Luther, however, differentiates between justifying faith literally through the word and strengthening faith through the allegorical interpretation (*constitutio fidei per sensum literalem / confirmatio fidei per sensum allegoricum*).
- 34 E.g. anthropomorphisms, parables, pronouncements, typologies, prophetic symbolic actions, visions and even great parts of the Revelation of John.
- 35 E.g. Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28:12/John 1:51), the bronze snake (Num 21:8f/John 3:14), Jonah (Mt 12:39–42, 16:4).
- 36 Cf. e.g. Mt 12:6,41,42.
- 37 Model: 1Cor 10:6.11, image: Heb 9:23, shadow: Col 2:17, Heb 10:1 and mirror: 1Cor 13:12, 2Cor 3:18.
- 38 = according to the trinitarian confession; so that there is no discrepancy to the truths of faith.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Apol</b>	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
<b>AS</b>	The Smalkald Articles
<b>BC</b>	The Book of Concord, ed. Robert Kolb/Timothy J. Wengert, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 2000
<b>BSLK</b>	Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, ed. 1930, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 12 <sup>th</sup> edition 1998
<b>CA</b>	The Augsburg Confession
<b>Cf.</b>	compare
<b>E.g.</b>	for example
<b>Einigungssätze</b>	Einigungssätze zwischen der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Altpreußens und der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche (in Sachsen und anderen Staaten). Vollausgabe, ed. Gerhard Heinzelmann/Wilhelm Martin Oesch, Frankfurt am Main 1948 (reprint Groß Oesingen, n.d.)
<b>FC SD</b>	The Formula of Concord. Solida Declaratio
<b>OUH</b>	Oberurseler Hefte
<b>WA</b>	Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Luthers = Luther, Martin: D. Martin Luthers Werke. 120 Bände, Weimar 1883–2009
<b>WA.DB</b>	Weimarer Ausgabe. Deutsche Bibel
<b>WA.TR</b>	Weimarer Ausgabe. Tischreden

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