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As the poet George Herbert lived out the simplicity of a domestic spirituality that relates us to God in all of life, he could describe prayer as ‘heaven in ordinary’.⁵⁸ It is that ‘godliness with contentment’ that the apostle appraises as ‘great gain’. The saints can afford to remain ‘home-spun’, when they live with the sufficiency of Christ. Perhaps, then, it is the cultural alienation of our times that would compensate by the extraordinary and the dramatic in life, precisely because of its estrangement from God. But the saints have always known that the personal experience of God brings simplicity to life. After all, we need no perspiration if we have inspiration. May then Spiritual Theology, as the Kingdom of God in daily life, and therefore in ordinary life, not be simply the teaching of one discipline but be the whole character of Regent College, now, and in the days to come. For ideally, ‘theology’ should not need any other description to be ‘spiritual’.

Dr James M Houston, founding Principal of Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. This article is the text of his inaugural lecture as the first occupant of the Board of Governors’ Chair of Spiritual Theology. p. 143

What is Spiritual Exegesis?

Gerhard Maier

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‘We are in a phase of slackness’, says Jean-François Lyotard when he answers the question ‘What is postmodern?’—which was addressed to Thomas E. Carroll (1982)—as he speaks generally of ‘tendencies of the times’.

Is such a kind of slackness the reason that especially the methodical work of exegesis is seen as ineffective in our generation? That linguistic discoveries in a certain verse aA in relation to verse bB of the same verse is not seen as that exciting? That we surprisingly realize in analyzing our own sermons how few historical and philological papers or other special theological insights have been helpful? Is it such a kind of slackness that creates the clamour for spiritual exegesis, for something that is really life-giving? May be—but whether you answer this question with yes or no—one thing is sure, there is a new and deep longing for a better and more lively handling of the biblical texts and the understanding is becoming stronger that exegesis is not only or perhaps in a low degree—an explanation of the past but also—and perhaps even much more—the illumination of the future. The biblical statements are in a certain sense each and all future statements rather than processes of literature which are wearisome and limited to the past.

To quote one of the hermeneutic basics of the NT: All this is ‘written down for us on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come’. ([1 Cor 10:11](#)) How deep the discomfort has become with continually more specialized (and with that continually more mute) methods of exegesis shall be illustrated by an article of *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (1990).

⁵⁸ See Noel-Dermont O’Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, IL: 1979).

It refers to a review of the first volume of François Bovon's commentary on Luke which was published in *Ev.Kath. Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* in 1989. It is a review of Josef Ernst from Paderborn and starts with the provocative question: 'Is it still worth writing commentaries today?' It leads to the same basic consideration: Once again, I want to bring up the basic issue: 'Is it still worth writing commentaries today?' It has been asked with good reason whether the common historical-critical commentaries which set their heart on subtle hypotheses of discerning sources and which illuminate the text with a 1000-watt lamp up to the farthest corner can fulfil their task. I have read this commentary from the very beginning to the last page [p. 144](#) and I asked myself: Who besides a couple of specialists profits from this collected edition of historical, religious-historical and linguistical information and brilliant hypothesis on the history of origins and the literary structure etc? What is the spiritual and historical profit? Now, we have arrived at the subject. Has the commentary of the future not to be different from the common ones which work more or less in the same pattern? To my mind, the spiritual dimension of God's word should be more thoroughly worked out.

Precision work in the science of literature is good and important but it is only a kind of preparation. The great classics of the patristics or the theological commentaries of a Martin Luther and of the other reformers which can still be read with great profit are still exemplary. One could add some modern outsiders, who have realized what is the point in exegesis of the Bible. The method of a depth psychological exegesis indicates very clearly, despite all the methodological problems, that more is required than just the scalpel of the historical and literary critic. If the expression of Karl Rahner that the Christian of the future has to be a mystic (unless he wants to be one) is correct, then the hermeneutical reflection and with that the explanation of the New Testament as well has to go in this direction.

Without dealing with the whole content of this review a basic thought should be emphasized: The awakening and strengthening of spiritual life in the church and in every believer has unfortunately been laid aside. But it has to be considered within the scientific work, kept in view, and in accordance with the intentions of the biblical message put on the pedestal—that is: it has to be desired. The intention of this lecture is to outline some ways in this direction. In order to make the survey easier to understand, I choose the form of theses.

FIRST THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE IS NOT ONLY A FUTURE-PROJECT BUT IT IS ALREADY A WIDELY ACCEPTED FACT

There is almost no sermon which doesn't aim at the strengthening or the change of religious life. In this respect it is in the fullest sense 'spiritual exegesis of Scripture'. It is evident to every observer of the situation in the church that biblical texts are often being actualized with wild determination and even without any regard for the context, and spiritualized in a certain sense in opposition to the orthodox exegesis (that means the common exegesis which is taught at universities), sometimes even against the results of exegesis. The widespread use of the slogan 'swords into ploughshares' is a well-known example ([Isaiah 2:4](#)). Here the context is often totally neglected and a political and [P. 145](#) catching slogan is attended to which doesn't want to know of a preceding conversion and a preceding restoration of the messianic kingdom.

And there is a third area: Churches and different kinds of fellowships use a huge amount of devotional literature with a partly strong impact which makes biblical statements productive for life next week—and in this sense may very well be called spiritual exegesis.

But—and this turns the fact into a problem—there are no bridges (or just a few) which lead from the various efforts of a spiritual exegesis of scripture to the orthodox scientific exegesis with its huge philological and historical apparatus. In a way a further exegetical market has been established.

The reference to scientific obligation and integrity on the one hand and to spiritual quality on the other did separate the first market from the second and *vice versa*.

Are we supposed to leave this situation as it is?

SECOND THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS SEEKS TO COMPREHEND THE WORD OF THE LIVING GOD FOR US AND FOR TODAY

Three main characteristics of spiritual exegesis are mentioned by this thesis—three features which lead to a definition of spiritual exegesis.

By this it is presupposed a godly person uses the biblical text as a transmission channel of his will. The human authors are in no way unimportant but of secondary importance. Primarily, there is the understanding that there is a living God. i.e. God speaks and acts especially by his speaking.

To say it with Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* (1657): ‘The God of the Christians is a God of love and comfort. He is a God who lets them deep inside feel their misery and His infinite mercy, who joins them at the base of their soul and fills them with humbleness, joy, trust and love, who makes them unable not to aim at Him ... That is what knowing God as a Christian means’. We seek to put the insight (understanding) in effect that the Bible is a place where we can meet God, a means of communication and not a reference-book of human ideas of faith. Secondly it refers to a comprehension of the intention of the biblical message, that the message is for us ([1 Cor 10:11](#)). The exegete, the listener, the fellowship and the church are supposed to be influenced in their comprehensive behaviour and if necessary changed dramatically. These statements—one cannot stress it too much—want to create a future and not only make the processes of history understandable. Recently, Eduard Lohse has formulated in a lecture of [p. 146](#) commemoration on ‘Theology as exegesis of scripture’ for Hans Conzelmann, ‘The task of New Testament studies is to explain the New Testament as a document of history with the means and methods of historical research’. This statement attempts too little. It narrows New Testament studies to historical investigation, it urges it backwards to explain things of the past and it misses the character of encounter with the Bible by which God wants to prepare further encounters with him—and not only with history—in order to talk personally to me. If we seek to listen to the word for us, then we are in the area which can be described in biblical-historical exegesis as dynamic and ethical understanding.

Thirdly, we have to make clear for ourselves that the Bible is different from, for instance, the annals of an oriental people. From the beginning it is a wrong effort if we fill up the *garstigen Graben* (vile gap) of history from the standpoint of the present time in order to make ourselves coincide with people of that time. Instead, we ought to realize texts were intended by the real author to speak and to have an effect for today. That the biblical message became Scripture means that God’s addressing is always a present addressing. Summing it up: a spiritual exegesis is an exegesis where the biblical message is heard as the voice of the living God, where the life of the hearer is changed, and where it is related to present time and future.

THIRD THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS LIVES UPON THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE INTERPRETATION WHICH IS PLACED IN THE TEXT

This is a very decisive point. In the first instance it is necessary to make a negative definition. It is wrong, in my opinion, to continue the long discussion about *sensus literalis* and *sensus spiritulalis*.

Of course, I am convinced there is a *sensus spiritulalis* in distinction to a *sensus literalis*. But I want to work out a different point. That is the fact that the biblical texts are built in structure upon two foundation pillars: fact and interpretation. If someone reads a biblical text he reads *eo ipso* a certain interpretation. It depends just on the fact that the Bible tells historical events. And there is no account of history, no historical narrative which doesn't offer an interpretation of the facts lying within it. In order to give an example of an extreme case: let's imagine there is a simple index which just counts the wars of a certain age with dates and names on it. Even such an index contains a message, an interpretation: i.e. historiography mainly is historiography of wars respectively; wars are a main aspect of history, thus it is a highly provoking interpretation. One can say Herodotus, the 'father of [p. 147](#) history', wanted to show the conflict between mankind and the reigning powers of history, or Thucydides wanted to grasp the whole sense of what happened, or one can read in Livy that he wanted to remind the Roman people through examples of the historical task—historiography is always combined with interpretation.

Going back to the biblical texts. There is nothing else in spiritual exegesis than to apprehend the interpretations lying within the texts. In this respect, spiritual exegesis is an invitation to agree with these interpretations. So far, spiritual interpretation comes from simple hearing. It is the opposite to the process by which something is put over or put on the Bible. One can conceive this as a continuing recapitulation of the situation in [Luke 19:48](#): 'all the people hung on his words'.

FOURTH THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS PROSPERS ONLY IF IT REMAINS A CONTROLLED EXEGESIS

Besides the endangering by philosophy and politics ([Col 2:8](#)), exegesis has never suffered more than through wrong spiritual exegesis. We all know of the exegete's tendency always to read his own thoughts into the scripture. Everyone knows how the most fantastic theories had to be confirmed by so-called spiritual interpretation. Many associate such key terms as 'spiritual exegesis' with 'wild exegesis'. How can we stop this kind of 'wild exegesis'?

Generally speaking, exact hearing and accurate detection of the interpretation of the biblical message could sufficiently afford relief. But in our experience almost everyone claims to be exceptionally accurate and humble in his exegesis. Therefore it is recommended to look for a precise point of orientation. First I mention philological accuracy. Regarding both the facts and the interpretations, one is always to ask precisely: What is really written in that passage? This question not only proves helpful in answering criticism of the Bible but also against a wrong spirituality of exegesis. Secondly, we have to refer to the historical understanding of the Bible. I have the impression there is a kind of elimination of history going on in the secular as well as in the Christian environment. The frantic holding on to history as the only saving element of theological—scientific exegesis can only stimulate but not prevent the exodus. Nevertheless, all spiritual exegesis should be combined with historical exegesis.

What I want to aim at can be clarified by an example which is mentioned by François Lyotard in his 'memorandum on legitimacy'. The ethnic group of the Cashinava have a certain ritual by which the past is recounted. Lyotard describes it as follows: 'Each of the storytellers [p. 148](#) assures he has himself heard the story he tells. He has been a hearer of the story and its story-teller has been a listener before. Therefore the heroes are to be

their own story-tellers. The time ..., during which the action took place communicates without interruption with the time of the current story which describes the action.' That means the difference between past and present is eliminated by the act of narrating, the singular event made into a continuous recurrence. The current story-teller was present at that time when this or that happened. This is exactly against the sense of the Bible! The Bible tells of unique deeds of God, of definite answers to very particular people, of outlined happenings in a past time which certainly constitutes but is not today's history. That 'always heard' means a representation of the past which set aside the past itself. According to the Bible a single fact remains a fact before the present time, whereas the interpretation of the fact is especially intended for today. Thus the Bible urges us to distinguish between times. Maybe it is one of the greatest of modern heresies that we give up the distinction of times. Historical investigation of the Bible is needed in order to guarantee a true understanding of the Bible in the distinction of times, to work out the realities of unique history which is told in the Bible, and with that to protect spiritual exegesis from a slip into subjectivity and arbitrariness.

A third kind of control lies in the doctrine of the church. I think every exegete goes through a period in which he is allergic to the so called *analogia fidei*.

A particular consideration of understandings of former and present Christians functions as soundly and protectively, in particular if such understandings coincide with each other. Certainly the statement that dogmas and creeds can be criticized by the Bible whereas Scripture according to its character cannot be criticized is still valid. But spiritual exegesis can only remain sound if it remains a regardful exegesis, i.e. if it shows consideration for exegesis of other Christians of former and modern times.

It is supposed to be an exegesis for the common good ([1 Cor 12:7](#)), or to say it with Emmanuel Levinas, it ought to be a responsibility 'for the other'. This cannot be without the other.

FIFTH THESIS: EXEGESIS CAN ONLY BE SPIRITUAL IF IT REMAINS CRITICAL OF THE 'SPIRIT OF THE AGE'

In the last thesis we talked about threats to spiritual exegesis. To these dangers which mainly threaten spiritual exegesis belongs the affinity to the *Zeitgeist*. That is quite normal since spiritual exegesis wants to be God's voice for us and for today (second thesis). If someone looks at [P. 149](#) himself and at the present time he never sees himself abstractly but only in a combination of circumstances. The acceptance of the *Zeitgeist* is motivated by two reasons. On one hand, it is missiologically motivated to get to people where they are in order to lead them sympathetically from their present standpoint to the Bible. On the other hand, there is the motive to speak God's will into one's own time so that people in their time get a concrete message and realize their responsibility.

Some examples may easily illustrate the danger which we are talking about. Günther Brakelmann showed how Protestant sermons in 1871 explained the foundation of the German empire as God's will in history, and the beginning of World War I as a campaign which the God of hosts was leading on the German side for the elimination of Western vices. When Herrman Dörries in 1934 wrote his booklet on German religion and the conversion of Saxony, which sold out and was published in 1935 in a second edition and where he—for that time—provokingly and courageously said: 'Germany's history is the history of Germany with Christianity', the influence of the current situation on choosing this theme didn't have to be explained to anybody. Today everybody knows that the reason why books, articles and sermons on the uniqueness of Christ are issued in quick Sequence is the current trend towards syncretism. Paul Knitter has openly stated in a

contribution to *Evangelische Theologie*, that if we want to avoid the nuclear holocaust and abandon the conditions of unbalance and injustice we have to form our world in a new manner, that religions are obliged mainly to contribute to the survival of mankind and that christendom has finally to abandon its demand for absolute truth.

Spiritual exegesis—whatever the historical situation—presupposes effective reflection of the influences of current cultural trends. It further presupposes that these trends are checked critically in the light of divine revelation. Where the voice of God says something different from the majority opinion—or the minority opinion as well—of our time, there God's voice is supposed to prepare for resistance with a truly prophetic spirit. A kind of exegesis which a) fails to take account of the current situation, b) isn't capable of critical analysis and c) doesn't prepare for spiritual resistance if necessary cannot call itself 'spiritual'.

SIXTH THESIS: IF SOMEONE WANTS TO PRACTICE SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS HE HAS TO FACE THE QUESTION OF HIS AUTHORITY

Scientific exegesis as it is usually understood has not to face the question of the exegete's authority. It is within the scope of 'right' and **P. 150** 'wrong'. A totally nonchristian exegete can do it correctly and a very sincere Christian can do it wrongly.

Earlier we have *en passant* talked about the truly prophetic spirit of spiritual exegesis. Indeed, the one who works hard at spiritual exegesis comes close to a prophet, at least insofar as he is dependent on divine inspiration like a prophet. Without further ado one can say spiritual exegesis presupposes an inspired exegete, i.e. an exegete who is born again.

In common usage of speech one is inclined to go a step further and to demand godly authority for spiritual exegesis. However I don't want to go so far. I want to emphasise that the exegete who wants deliberately to exegete spiritually inevitably has to face the question of his authority. Remember! not a question of authority which is abstract and generally ecclesiastical, but an absolute personal authority.

I recently read in a Christian journal: what does the best officially accepted doctrine help if it proves ineffective in leading the people of this church to be active disciples of Jesus and to a real fellowship? That is our problem exactly. It is not sufficient to go through with his exegesis, to have better arguments than others, to do the context and history, the integrity and the possibility of verification justice. No, if exegesis shows itself ineffective, if it swims along with the stream of time, if it doesn't produce a decisive response, then the exegete is driven to the question: Do I have authority? That he is necessarily driven to this question characterizes his exegesis as spiritual.

SEVENTH THESIS: SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS COMPLETES ITSELF IN THE PRACTICE OF OBEDIENCE

The current orthodox exegesis firstly wants to explain. Sociologically speaking it offers *information*. Biblically speaking it is a particular kind of Greek thinking which Paul formulates in [1 Cor 1:22](#): 'Greeks look for wisdom'. Spiritual exegesis can't be content with that. And for two reasons: a) The explaining-model fails to meet the function of communication of the Bible which can be newly realized today, b) It doesn't agree with the biblical message which intends to create *obedience*. There is no doubt the biblical intention is not merely to change our *knowledge* but especially to change our practice. Exegesis which doesn't create changes of *practice* in the lives of those addressed remains an unfinished bridge, an interrupted process. For instance Spener clearly has realized that

fact as well as Gustaf Stählin, and Emmanuel Levinas for the present time. It is interesting that Stählin as well as Spener have attached importance to the consequences of **P. 151** theological education. Thus Gustav Stählin wrote: 'All ... training and education has to be tied up within the work on the soul of the student. For, even if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul, it wouldn't be of any use. Therefore, the heart of a theological school is the Chapel, the place where the students are led to faith, worship and devotion by daily service'.

For me it is important again to keep in view the relation to the exegete. For only the one who listens obediently is able to exegete spiritually. Without his personal obedience his exegesis is going to be an empty shell, it loses its strength to lead to imitation of obedience. If Niklas Lahmann gives his opinion on theology of the present time: 'Theology doesn't—harshly said—offer religion', if he a little later asks: 'Isn't it important for the Christian religion to adhere to the reality of God's guidance which is taught and witnessed through Jesus?' then necessity comes up with these formulations and questions that we ourselves as exegetes are touched by the encounter and even by fellowship with God, to help our hearers to draw closer to Him. This getting close to God in fellowship can't be completed by knowledge alone. But it leads—to use this ambiguous word again—to obedience. According to Jesus' word and life, obedience alone is able to receive a genuine exegetical understanding ([John 7:17](#)). Thus, one could even clearly formulate: Obedience is the true method of spiritual exegesis.

Again and again we go back to the communicative basic structure of biblical-historical exegesis. The wheel comes full circle in again attaching importance to the encounter which the Bible serves. Because of the general character of 'meeting' one can guess what led Emmanuel Levinas to the confession: 'For me the things which are said don't count as much as the speaking. Speaking is not so much important because of its information content but because of the fact that it is addressed to a partner'.

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Evangelical Spirituality Reviewed

David Parker

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(Abridged)*

1. INTRODUCTION

The current interest in retreats, the popularity of books on spiritual subjects and the search for spiritual directors confirms the view of Richard Lovelace that spirituality is now 'a growth industry'.¹ This is true even amongst evangelicals who in the past have generally been opposed to many of these practices because of their intimate association

¹ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1985), 15.