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Word of God—Words of Man

An Examination of Hermeneutical Principles of some Sixteenth Century Non-Lutheran Writers.

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One may generally place the hermeneutical principles of sixteenth century expositors in two categories. The first group consists of principles which evolved incidentally in the heat of ideological battles or which were hastily coined to justify a position or defend it against detractors. In the second group one finds principles which have systematically and intentionally been written into official documents or which emerged from a scholar's study after careful weighing of evidence. There are some statements, of course, which do not fit into either one of these two categories; they shall not concern us here.

As might be expected from the difference in origin, some of the hermeneutical principles are often contradictory. At times we find in the writings of one man a marked difference between what he asserts as a principle and what he actually practises when attempting to score a point against an opponent or detractor. Such discrepancies must be expected in an age in which theological positions were staunchly defended and new ideas forged in the heat of controversy over the right understanding of Scripture and the authority by which reform may be undertaken and justified.

Sixteenth century reformers had inherited, of course, the fourfold principle of hermeneutic, sometimes referred to as the *Quadrila*.¹ Needless to say, most reformers rejected it, substituting, each for reasons of his own, a kind of interpretation that seemed germane to the authority and dignity of the texts. At the same time, many of them engaged in forms of interpretation which we would now term 'existential'. It is not our task here to speculate on the various reasons for such rejection of traditional principles; better by far to demonstrate how some of the reformers adjusted to their respective difficulties and what hermeneutical principles they did in fact advocate or work with.

Among the earliest writers on the subject were the Zurich Reformer H. Zwingli and the Strassburg Reformer Martin Bucer. Both had, of course, been preceded by the work of Erasmus who is, in many respects, the genius to whom all other Biblical scholars of the period are

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¹ The fourfold sense of interpreting Scripture was made particularly prominent in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. According to him, one should understand a text in its historical or literal sense, allegorically, tropologically or morally, and anagogically or eschatologically. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sunday Sermons*, 20; *St. John* 1, lecture 15, and elsewhere.

indebted, not only on account of his vast erudition, but chiefly because he is the first to offer a radical departure from the hermeneutic of the Schoolmen in their dependence on Thomistic categories.

After a brief sketch of Erasmian hermeneutic we will then proceed to give an overview of the hermeneutic of Zwingli and Calvin. Martin Bucer and Caspar von Schwenckfeld will each be given some attention as will some of the Reformed Confessional statements of the period.

Erasmus of Rotterdam

A recent study by J. W. Aldridge offers an excellent analysis of Erasmian hermeneutic.² We can do no better here than to summarize briefly what this author states to be the chief elements in the principles which the great humanist scholar evolved.

The starting point and foundation stone of any viable hermeneutic for Erasmus is his call 'ad fontes'. This return to the sources implies an initial preoccupation with the original languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew) of the Biblical texts and necessitates the study of their respective syntax and grammar as prerequisite to theological studies. To what extent Erasmus reflects similar demands by the great fifteenth century scholar Lorenzo Valla must be left unanswered at this point. Kinship between the two men is unmistakable, however.

Erasmus's early work, the *Enchiridion*, contains a second hermeneutical principle which, according to Aldridge, was later abandoned by the humanist scholar during a period of major theological controversies. This is usually described as the 'philosophia Christi' and expresses heavy reliance on an almost simplistic love ethic of Christ, to attain which Erasmus advocated as the most desirable goal of Christian life and scholarship. It must be stressed that this 'philosophia Christi' is not an abstract or speculative principle for Erasmus, but rather of the very essence of rational encounter with the relevant Biblical records and with the living Christ as the universal Church knows him.

Closely related to and often intertwined with the second is a third principle which Aldridge calls the principle of erudition. It is no less than a learned, objective, scientific and grammatical study of the sources.³ While this may be Erasmus's most distinctive contribution in the field of Biblical hermeneutic, he is often criticised because of it, since it allows for the tendency of treating Biblical texts on a par with others, subject to the same principles and problems of transmission, and so on. This, in turn, may obscure the Word-of-God-character of the same. His main antagonist on this point proved to be Luther himself. Any effort to use a historico-critical approach to the Bible appeared to the latter as the intrusion of human wisdom upon divine affairs, the interpolating of words of men into the Word of God. Needless to say, Erasmus proves to be the more modern of the two and may as such impress us as rather relevant.

² J. W. Aldridge, *The Hermeneutic of Erasmus*, Richmond J. Knox Press, 1966.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

There is one chief criticism of Erasmus, however, and Aldridge leaves it with his readers as a significant caveat. It is the Reformer's tendency to give wide attention to *method* of Biblical hermeneutic at the expense of *meaning*. In doing so he was undoubtedly the forerunner of both textual and historical criticism, but may also be held accountable for much of the current dilemma in delineating Biblical authority and clarifying in what way and to what extent the texts of the Church's Canon are, in fact, Word of God which, as Barth would have it, 'breaks through to us of its own accord'. Yet even this criticism would prove invalid if it should be demonstrated that *meaning* is given even as we struggle with *methods* of clarification. Can we then seriously fault Erasmus's hermeneutic and the principles of those who patterned themselves after him in their respective efforts to give the texts their historical place and us the right approach to their message in an existential challenge and response?

Calvin and Zwingli

Zwingli speaks less directly on the matter of interpretation than one might expect from one to whom transmission of the Gospel is of central concern. His tendency to evolve principles in concrete situations in which he serves as Pastor and Teacher of the flock is apparent. In the *Exposition of the 67 Articles* he develops at some length what he understands by the Gospel, how it confronts man and by what method it may be clarified. The first five Articles, fourteen and fifteen and again Article fifty give ample opportunity for studying his chief hermeneutical method. His starting point is the inherent unity of the Gospel. Such unity does not, however, exclude the possibility of differences in detail, such as arrangement of material and view point. Using the post Easter accounts in John, Luke and Mark he demonstrates rather convincingly that variations and/or omissions do not detract from the authority of the evangelists' testimony. This authority rests not so much in textual precision as it does in the knowledge that 'he who believes Christ, the Son of God, to be his salvation and surety by which he may come to God, shall be saved' (Article 50, p. 388).

It is evident almost at once that Zwingli is not a Biblicist of the same type as Calvin. He affirms the validity and usefulness of Scripture, and acknowledges that it contains the Gospel which is the definitive announcement of the forgiveness of sin. Against the Anabaptists as well as against the Romans (he often calls them Papists), he maintains Scripture to be its own interpreter, but he disallows any reference to the work of the Holy Spirit if such is not in keeping with the written record of Canonical writings. He is particularly insistent on the Gospel being the supreme authority, constitutive of the Church itself and in no way under its sway or control.

Calvin has taken Biblical hermeneutic to the heart of his system where it lies centrally embedded in his exposition on the knowledge of God (*Institutes* I. vi-ix).

Having demonstrated how natural religion falls short of providing the true knowledge of God, Calvin proceeds to show that Scripture

alone is an adequate guide and teacher. He makes this claim because he asserts that it is, in fact, light of God's Word to those who are regarded worthy. He has not yet arrived at an explicitly stated doctrine of predestination and election, but leaves little doubt even in this context of his Systematics that there are different stages of knowledge and that Scripture, far from being a clear and exclusive key to unlock the divine mysteries for everyone, in fact veils as much as it reveals to those who are not chosen to comprehend.

Within the community of faith, however, Scripture serves in preventing error, in manifesting the creator-redeemer and in establishing and sustaining the Church. It can do all this because it is God speaking in person. In other words, God's Spirit moves through its words, thus providing access to the knowledge that reveals not only God as creator but as the Father of the mediator by whose work believers are redeemed.

Following this principle, it becomes clear, of course, that Scripture cannot be used simply to convict unbelievers of error. 'A detractor will not be convinced simply by having Scripture thrust at him' (I. vii. 4).

What then gives Scripture its unique place in the economy of God's dealing with man? Calvin lists several reasons of varying value but without prejudice:

(1) Reason proves the sufficiency of Scripture which is its own best authentication. (He agrees with Zwingli on this point).

(2) The antiquity of Scripture and its truthfulness are forceful arguments in favour of its authority.

(3) Both the reported miracles and the announced prophecies of the Scriptures have been confirmed by the experience of subsequent generations.

(4) Scripture is trustworthy in its transmission of the Law of God.

(5) The Church verifies in its own life the trustworthiness of the Biblical witness.

It is not for us to defend this highly reasonable Biblicism of Calvin. What is striking, however, is the authoritative manner in which he rallies arguments for the authority of Scripture to defend a position that depends neither on the testimony of Reason (as was the case with Erasmus), nor upon the sole activity of the Spirit who may or may not lead to a meaning in keeping with the directions in the written record itself or in the understanding thereof during past generations of interpreters. (This latter Spiritual hermeneutic was prominent with Schwenckfeld and other radical interpreters of the time.)

Calvin like Zwingli refuses to admit evidence of a 'spiritual nature' if this should prove contrary to the written record or arrive at new insights, independent of it. Such a spirit, if it should exist at all, would have to be treated as false and fought by the pure, unmitigated Word of God, as found in Scripture; for ultimately all the attributes of God, cited by Scripture, are in agreement with what Nature says about

God, albeit on an inferior level, but in harmony with the knowledge that is open to the elect.

Martin Bucer

Bucer's hermeneutic has been given rather exhaustive treatment in a recent analysis by J. Mueller.⁴ The author maintains that Bucer's position is informed by two sources, humanism, on the one hand, and the great ideas of Luther, on the other. In the latter case Bucer, like Luther, adopted the historical and tropological approach to the exclusion of all others. In his exegetical endeavours as elsewhere, he sought to unearth the actual meaning of a passage while at the same time attempting to exhaust its significance to the increase of piety. In addition Bucer was fascinated by philological concerns. He approached the text of Scripture through the original languages.

Bucer is often credited with a unique understanding of revelation according to which Old and New Testaments are closely interwoven as two aspects of the same divine manifestation which should lead ultimately to a totally spiritual existence of the Church on its way to perfection through the agency of Christ. The Strassburg Reformer was willing to admit, however, that none of the hermeneutical rules or principles in themselves are able to unveil the hidden meaning of God's Word, unless it be by the operation of the same Holy Spirit who initially led the writers of Scripture and who must now act in the disclosure of the meaning of the texts. It is at this point that Bucer has often been mistaken by the Spiritualists to be one of their kind.

Whether we dismiss him as an eclectic or take him as a serious exponent of two often contradictory positions, Bucer's efforts may be fully appreciated only when they are seen as a conscious contribution toward calling forth true repentance and acceptance of the forgiveness of one's sins, which alone leads to true faith.

Caspar von Schwenckfeld

Schwenckfeld's hermeneutic appears to be almost diametrically opposed to that of Calvin. Although they were never in open dialogue with one another, their respective views become apparent from a perusal of their writings on the matter. The Silesian nobleman presents one with some difficulties at this point. His lack of training in systematic theology becomes painfully apparent when one has to plough through volume after volume of rather discursive material. In addition, one can hardly pin Schwenckfeld down on precisely stated hermeneutical principles. Most of his views on the matter evolved from controversy with 'the preachers', as he liked to call his Lutheran antagonists; as a result, one is seldom sure when orthodox sounding statements are a cover rather than a genuinely held position. Although closer scrutiny may lead one to discern stages in the growth of his hermeneutical understanding, we shall for the purpose of this paper assume an essential homogeneity which is apparent, in any case, during the extensive debate

⁴ J. Mueller, *Martin Bucer's Hermeneutik*, Guetersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1965.

on the subject of the Word of God with Pilgram Marbeck, an Anabaptist, and with Flacius Illyricus, an orthodox Lutheran.⁵

One of the first distinctions which Schwenckfeld insists on (he is, of course, not alone in this) is that of inner and outward word. Related to this is his doctrine of man as essentially a spiritual being, in need of rebirth in his inward nature in order that he might be freed from the bonds of a carnal nature and capable in the inward man of receiving the spiritual word, the seed of regeneration. This concept has affinity with the nobleman's other theological concerns which include a Logos concept (not contained by letter or decree), and an understanding of the Church as spiritual community, almost totally free of any outward manifestations. Schwenckfeld was capable, on this ground, of suspending participation in the Lord's Supper and, on the same ground, of deeming water baptism of little significance in the life of faith.

Schwenckfeld is not denying, however, the validity of Scripture in the life of the outward man; but he clearly distinguishes between Scripture and the Word of God, the latter of which he equates with the inward testimony of the Spirit or with the living Word, Jesus Christ. He is intent therefore on setting himself over against the literalism of the Anabaptists which he rejects in the writings of Pilgram Marbeck (cf *Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum*, VIII for some of the literature for this period), as well as against the 'scribe syndrome' of the followers of Luther. Against both he insists that God gives renewal and life and thus speaks his Word, not through sermons, but by the life-giving Word Jesus Christ himself (cf C.S. XIV, 179; XVI, 53 and elsewhere). As the Spirit is superior to the letter, so is the inward word superior to the external texts. He agrees with Calvin, however, that the mere quoting of Scripture is of no avail, unless it is nurtured by the right understanding. Here Schwenckfeld sets himself apart from Luther's insistence on the letter of Scripture; such slavish literalism is marked as 'literal and blind faith' (C.S. II. 693).

What then would he consider to be adequate hermeneutical principles? From among the wealth of statements on the subject, I should like to refer to two in particular. The first he stated as early as 1529. It deals with the matter in six points (C.S. III. 487 ff); the second comes from a later period and was used in the controversy with Flacius Illyricus (C.S. XVI, 613-624). Ten points are listed in this document, of which I give six:

1. Chief among the principles is the assertion that the true spiritual meaning of a word must be sought by the exegete.
2. This necessitates a reading of the texts of the Canon in their respective context.
3. Such analysis would lead to an internal comparison of texts.
4. To gain an adequate understanding of the text, one must willingly submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Among the many booklets and letters on the subject, cf *Corpus Schwenckfeldianum*, XII, Documents 782, 792, 780, 813; XIII, Documents 857, 867, 889. The most detailed expositions of Schwenckfeld's hermeneutical principles are found in the writings against Flacius Illyricus, sometime after 1545.

5. One's chief aim (and here he seems to agree with Luther) is to seek Christ.

6. Hence, every correct approach to Scripture must lead to self examination in order that one might thus understand the full significance of the Biblical texts.

We cannot here take time to analyse Schwenckfeld's many booklets on the matter. Suffice it to point out that in the later documents he moves more consciously within the inward-outward controversy. As a result his hermeneutical principles are often in direct denial of the validity of the outward manifestation of the Word for a hearing and heeding of the God who speaks in the revelation of himself. According to Schwenckfeld God can simply not be found in ceremonials, arguments, outward expressions of piety or even in the text of the Bible. He affirms, instead, that God becomes known to the believer solely in his response to the inward longing of the Spirit of grace and truth who works in his inward being.

Confessional Statements

One may expect a fair degree of uniformity both on the question of Biblical authority and on the right hermeneutical approach to the texts of the Canon when comparing the various confessional statements which emerged within the Reformed camp from 1528 onward until 1647. Leaving aside the catechisms of this period and the 67 Articles of Zwingli (referred to above), as well as the 39 Articles and related statements, we have about eighteen formally recognised Reformed Confessional statements. Many of these are very much akin in aims and objectives and some may be traced to common authors or shown to be interdependent to a high degree. Directly or otherwise, many of them contributed to the tenor of the crowning document in this development, the Westminster Confession of 1647.

Prior to the First Helvetic Confession (1536), hermeneutical principles are at best implied, but rarely stated explicitly. From this document onward, however, the authority of Scripture and its interpretation are given prominent treatment in at least one or two Articles, often setting the tone of the entire Confession.

This holy divine Scripture which is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit . . . is the most ancient, most perfect and loftiest teaching . . . etc (*First Helvetic Confession*, Article I).

And this rather grandiose affirmation of the authority on which Reformed faith is to rest solely and decisively is usually followed by a principle or by principles of interpretation which leave no doubt concerning the sympathies of the framers of these confessions.

This holy divine Scripture is to be interpreted in no other way than out of itself and is to be explained by the rule of faith and love (*First Helvetic Confession*, Article 2).

In subsequent confessional statements even more explicit expression of acceptable hermeneutical principles is given. The French

Confession of 1559 lays down in Article 3 what books of the Canon are considered authoritative and asserts in Article 4 that the testimony and accord of the Spirit rather than the consent of the Church is determinative of the authority of Scripture. We find similar statements in the Scottish Confession of 1560 (Article 19), in the Belgic Confession of 1561 (Articles 3-7), in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 (Articles 1, 2—the latter more explicit than that of the First Helvetic Confession), and many others.

One notes again and again a clear rejection of human traditions. 'We reject human traditions, even if they be adorned with high-sounding titles, as though they were divine and apostolical' (*Second Helvetic Confession*, Article 2). The authoritative interpretation is neither private, nor that of the Roman Church but one which is orthodox and genuine and gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (cf *Second Helvetic Confession*. This authority is trustworthy 'because the Holy Ghost witnesses in our hearts that they are from God' (*Belgic Confession*, Article 5). 'Those who say the Scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk, are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same' (*The Scottish Confession*, Article 19). Can the case be stated more concretely? The fires of controversy had obviously sharpened awareness of hermeneutical principles by which alone the framers of these confessions would have the structure of their faith shaped and established. It is of little surprise then to find the entire first chapter of the Westminster Confession devoted to defining Scripture, how it is to be conceived and what authority it has in the Christian community. No other Reformed document has had equal authority and widespread appeal in the post-sixteenth century growth of Reformed Protestantism.

Conclusion

We have been far from exhaustive in this survey of non-Lutheran hermeneutic in the 16th century. Nonetheless, we may draw some tentative conclusions from our investigation thus far. What strikes one is the obvious variety in the approach to Scripture, ranging from the discursive, semi-devotional formulations of the theological dilettante Schwenckfeld to the carefully stated principles of the highly trained eclectic Bucer who is able to employ philology, patristics, careful exegesis and practical theological concerns in arriving at the meaning of Scripture. Then again there is the analytical mind of Calvin, alongside the vast erudition of Erasmus who sought to arrive at meaning by way of scientific method. And all these are somehow comprehended and summarised on a concisely stated common denominator for the use of the Church at large by the framers of confessional statements.

What, if any, are the common factors in all these principles of interpretation? At the risk of over generalisation, I suggest the following:

1. Foremost is a decisive affirmation of the role of the Holy Spirit in unveiling the meaning of the text and placing it in the right context.

2. There is, secondly, a high level of agreement on Jesus Christ being the true 'verbum Dei'.

3. Throughout all the hermeneutical statements we considered rings a note of respect for the authority of Scripture without, however, reaching agreement on the letter of the texts.

4. In all significant principles, concern for the audibility of the Word is expressed, though again there is little agreement on how or by whom this Word may be heard profitably.

5. There is, further, an implicit endeavour to establish the relation between the original word and the rediscovery or re-manifestation of it in the existential situation of this generation or that. Yet again we note lack of consensus on how this relationship becomes operative or how it is manifested in any given context.

6. Finally, it would appear that even the most biblicist among 16th century hermeneuts agree, nonetheless, that any written or spoken word is always derivatively and improperly Word of God and that no method or meaning can make universal claims of being the definitive manifestation of Him who speaks and who, at the same time, gives the hearing which leads to man's ability to meet God in his Word.