

“Exegesis & Spirituality”

Reflections on an Article by Gordon Fee

In giving us His word, God’s aim in our lives is “Spiritual” in the sense that we who are redeemed by the death of Christ might be empowered by His Spirit “to will and to do for His own pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Hence the aim of exegesis must be to produce in our lives true Spirituality. This “Spirituality” is defined as living under the control of the Holy Spirit in obedience to the Father through the redemptive grace of the Son. The aim of such Spirituality is a lifestyle of worship. Spirituality must have as its focus a thirst and yearning for God Himself. As the psalmist writes “my soul and my flesh long for you;” “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you; my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). If those who preach and teach God’s word do not themselves yearn and thirst for God, then how can they lead others to that ultimate goal of exegesis, to help fashion people into genuine Spirituality? As the saying goes “You can’t lead where you don’t go”. The danger is that those who teach and preach can get so enamored in analyzing what the Bible says about God, that they slowly let their passion for God run so low, that they don’t spend much time talking with God about what they see in His Word. The interface between the exegesis and one’s own soul life is critical and must be the main focus of anyone who would teach or preach God’s word to others.

Exegesis consists of asking the right questions of the text. These are of two kinds, contextual questions and content questions. Contextual questions can be literary or historical. How is this passage used by the author to convey his message to the culture in the historical setting in which he writes? Content questions relate to identifying the original text, the original meaning of the words, the implications of grammar and the historical-cultural background. There are two extremes in approaching exegesis. One is to approach the scripture from the stance of doubt, with a historical skepticism and an anti-supernatural bias. The academic exegete, using professional jargon, may assume a state of mastery over the text and may turn it on its head, stripping it of power so that it no longer speaks to the believing community. The other extreme is practiced by the popular spiritualist who, highly suspicious of the scholar or seminary trained professor, receives the Word in a free floating personal encounter letting the text “speak” to him in whatever way he or she sees fit. (i.e What is this passage saying to you?). Here the subjective impression of the hearer/reader is stressed. The natural result of these extremes is often mutual distrust between the local church and the academy accompanied by poor exegesis in the church and no spirituality in the academy.

Resolving these extremes requires a rediscovery of the true meaning of exegesis. Exegesis by definition is seeking an author’s own intent in what was written. This implies that “meaning” is located primarily in the author’s divinely inspired intentionality. A text can never mean what was not meant by the author. Remember that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author. We cannot allow the reader’s response to be the measure of what the text means. The Apostle Paul was intentional when he wrote correcting the misunderstanding that the Corinthians had about not associating with immoral people. (1 Cor. 5:9-10) He writes intentionally to correct the misunderstanding that they had concerning the intent of his previous letter. They understood it to mean people outside the church. Paul meant those inside the church. It was his intent that was paramount. Authors are intentional. They do not take kindly to being misquoted, misinterpreted or misconstrued. God is intentional in His word. He means one thing and not another. The goal of exegesis is to discover that divine intent. Now we recognize that there are different genres of biblical writing. Poetry, prose and narrative all have distinctive styles and it is important to understand the role of metaphors, word plays, hyperbole, aphorisms and the like. So when we speak of intentionality, we do not negate issues related to style/form/genre in which an author purposes to communicate.

Yet the ultimate intent of the author of scripture is that it have impact on the spiritual life of the readers. So faithful biblical exegesis belongs within the framework of the believing community for whom and to whom it was written and so within the framework of us today who follow in the train of the original communities for whom these scriptures were written.

While the first task of the exegete is a *historical* one, that is to determine the author’s intended meaning, this first task is not the *ultimate* one. The ultimate task is a Spiritual one, to hear the text in such a way as to lead the reader/hearer into the worship of God and into conformity with His will and His ways. This

is sometimes called *application* of the text and should not be viewed as a part of the exegetical task, rather we need to see that the writers brought their own Spirituality to the writing of the text and that true exegesis is to seek to engage into the author's Spirituality and not just into their words. Our engagement at this level must not just be a descriptive one, but a truly *empathetic* one in which we attempt to "enter in" to the Spirituality of the author so that we ourselves become the passionate lovers of Christ that the apostles/prophets model for us.

For example, what value is it for us to exegete Phil 1:21 "for me to live is Christ, to die is gain" in purely descriptive terms, if we do not engage in Paul's own intent that the Philippians themselves share this view of present life? We can eloquently elaborate on Paul's situation in prison and the possibility of his impending execution, but what is the point if we do not press further to see what he was expecting the Philippians to do with such a statement? Entering into their experience, I am confronted by the reality of what "life" is to me. What motto would I use to describe my life? (eg. "for me to live is to be honored by my family and church). By contrast, I see how fall short I fall, I am cut to the heart and repent crying out with Paul "for me to live *is* Christ. Lord help me make it so!" In this way, I enter into Paul's own self and his Spirituality becomes mine in unity with God.

Thus true exegesis calls us into Spiritual unity with the author of scripture, so much so that we are called to imitate Him. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Phil 4:9: "What things you have learned or received or heard or seen in me, practice these things". True Spirituality, that is life in the Holy Spirit, is precisely the aim of all that Paul writes to them, and he asks them to imitate him to follow his crucified lifestyle as he follows Christ's. They are asked to have the same mindset as Christ, who though He was God, humbled Himself as a servant and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. But they are further asked to imitate Paul whose own life has as its locus, "knowing Christ Jesus my Lord", simultaneously knowing the power of his resurrection as he participates in Christ's sufferings.

This "follow me in the same way that I follow Christ" must be the ultimate call of those who teach or preach God's word. We often are content to put the Bible into people's hands but would not think of telling them to follow our example as we follow Christ. We argue that we are not perfect so to have someone follow us would be to imitate a sinner. This shows that we are not really serious about following Christ. Paul was quite ready to say that he had not yet arrived in his knowledge of Christ (Phil 3:12-14), but he still urges them to follow his example. We are not talking about being perfect, but about having a mindset like Christ that is totally surrendered, so that our lives are lived in conformity with his death, and that the power of the resurrection is lived through our lives. One who is so surrendered has no problem in saying "imitate me". It is time to get serious and get real with God. We are not playing games.

To complete the exegetical circle, we must allow the text to impact us in our being as intended by the Holy Spirit who uses the text to do a work in us at this profound level. Because the scripture is God's Word, it is the subject and we are the object. During the process of exegesis, we momentarily reverse the roles as we act as subject examining the text, which becomes the object. But the process is not complete until we return to the proper posture of being objects being addressed by the subject. The text must move us and mold us the way God intends that it should.

In Biblical exegesis, we are studying God's word. God speaks to us and we listen, but we must hear the text on its own terms and not on ours. The popular notion of spirituality which believes that learning gets in the way of hearing the text in a spiritual way places too much emphasis on the reader/hearer and not enough on the intentionality of the author. Such an approach often give people warm feelings about the biblical text and about God, but does not always lead to obedience or to a living encounter with God as He purposes in giving us the text in the first place. The reason that we need to do good exegesis is that we become passionate to hear, obey and worship. This must be acted out in the community of faith in which we live and move, a community committed to listening to God and walking in his ways. But the ultimate aim of all this is to move us into a unity of Spirituality with the Author of the Word, who says to us "Follow Me". We need to be so tuned into this goal that we do not hesitate to say to others: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ".