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Knowledge and Faith in New Testament Exegesis

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The theme of my address is inspired by the first two verses of 1 Cor 13.

If I speak the languages of men and angels but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I can remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

This passage extols the superiority of love over various kinds of knowledge. This knowledge covers the languages of men and angels, the gift of prophecy, the knowledge of mysteries, knowledge in general, and even faith. Today, however, I would like to apply the knowledge spoken of here to our theological education. Therefore, I am going to change the text a little to make it apply to my theme for this lecture. Such a change is legitimate, and in no way a departure from the spirit of our text. I paraphrase vs 2 as follows:

“And if I have all formal, theological education, but do not have a living relationship to Christ, I am nothing”.

Now it must be clear to all of us that the Apostle does not set knowledge over against love or love over against knowledge. He is not saying that we

should choose between the two, that we should decide to cling either to academic knowledge or to a life filled with God's love and Spirit. It is not a question of either the one or the other! What the Apostle is saying is that all the knowledge in the world is not worth having, if one is devoid of the love, life, and power of God. This means that Paul wants to combine a solid theological education with a true Christian faith, and a Spirit-led ministry into a harmonious unity. It is my understanding that the thought to which I give expression here and which has been the guiding principle of my own life, is the very thought that lies behind the vision in the creation of the *Society for Reformed Life Theology*, namely, to offer to Christian leaders inspiration and encouragement to never separate a true scholarly achievement from a life in close communion with and utter dependence upon our Lord, Jesus Christ, so that our theology will be in the service of the Church.

We have seen only too clearly the evil of clinging to the one without also possessing the other. For more than 200 years, following the European Enlightenment, Christian theology in European and American universities placed all the emphasis on scientific knowledge, on research, on asking questions and looking for answers. Theology became quite speculative and was reduced to a mere academic discipline like any other discipline within the field of humanistic studies, severed from the life of the Church. Now it is true that the Bible is a text, and as a text it was written down in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It is also true that on the linguistic and grammatical levels, the Bible and its interpretation must be approached as any other text. The Biblical text, like any other text, is written according to certain grammatical rules and these rules are universally valid for any text written in that language. Thus, when, for example, Paul wrote his letters, he did not use Greek in his own esoteric way; he did not put into his

words and sentences a meaning that was contrary to the natural meaning of words and sentences in the Hellenic language. Otherwise, he would not have been able to communicate his message to the various churches. Accordingly, the Greek of the New Testament can and should be compared to other writings in the Hellenic language, and thus other Hellenic literature can throw light on the meaning of the New Testament text. This is not merely desirable; it is a must, and every serious interpreter of the New Testament has no other option in the matter. However, it should also be added that, because the New Testament presents a religious faith that was so different from the religious ideas of the Greeks, a number of its Christian terms and concepts cannot be illuminated by further research into the Greek language. Some of them can be illuminated by a study of the Old Testament, because of their Hebrew-Jewish background, while others are purely Christian concepts which have to be understood within the matrix and spirit of Christianity. Thus, our task in interpreting the New Testament is a very complex undertaking, requiring the best of equipment, both intellectual and spiritual.

Now, in the process of following the above pursuits, gradually and perhaps even imperceptibly, theology departed from the living faith of the Bible, it lost touch with the inner witness of the Holy Spirit and opened itself to whatever philosophical currents were in vogue, making them its methodological principles and criteria for interpreting the Bible. Once Theology was severed from the Christian Faith and its principles, it acquiesced in whatever winds of philosophical ideas were current, and it was reduced to a science of unbelief and liberalism. Theologians became literary critics instead of interpreters of the Word of God.

At the other extreme were those Christians who shied away from theology and formal education, who naively held on to their churches' traditional beliefs and views, as they had been taught them in Sunday school, and who could not grow in knowledge and understanding into the mysteries of God. They kept drinking the milk of rudimentary Christian teaching all their life instead of going on to partaking of fast food. What they should have done would have been—in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews—to have left behind them the elementary teachings about Christ, and to have gone on toward perfection or maturity (6:1). But they did not. Instead, any new insight, including a better understanding based on the original texts of the Bible, was to them tantamount to departing from the faith—as they had received it within their denomination—and it was, therefore, looked upon with suspicion. Such people became more 'conservative' than the Biblical authors themselves! They became obscurantists. Their viewpoint can be summarized by a story related of an old woman, for whom the *King James Version*, first published in 1611, was the inspired Word of God, come down from heaven. She not only could not accept other translations, but also the original text of the New Testament was in her eyes suspect! When confronted with the evidence of the original of the New Testament, she said: "If the *King James' Version* was good enough for Peter and Paul, then it is good enough for me, too"!

Unfortunately, this attitude still characterizes many Christians today in the conservative camp of the Christian Church, and such an attitude damages the Christian cause. These people are earnest and mean well. They are afraid of being led astray, as, indeed, many have by clever infidels; and guided by their uncertainty, insecurity, and ignorance, are afraid that knowledge may shake up their faith. Therefore, they do not want to know!

They reject everything new: they throw out of the bathtub not only the water but also the baby that is in it!

It must be emphasized that God's truth can never suffer at the hands of factual truth. No true facts can ever harm the truth of God, the Bible, or our faith. What harms us is our ignorance. We need to have a healthy view of our faith, of the Bible, and to remember that we do not possess all truth, or that truth will die with us.



Little knowledge is a very dangerous thing. It was lack of a solid foundation in Biblical teaching that led to the rise of all the heretical movements, both in old times and in modern times. In ancient times, Marcion was unable to reconcile the severity of the God of the Old Testament with the gracious and loving God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament. Accordingly, he thought that the God of the New Testament had nothing to do with the Hebrew God of the Old Testament. He could not fathom that History presents God's dealings with man. In Old Testament times God was educating his people in a number of stages and preparing the way for the advent of the Messiah. Had Marcion been able to understand this, he would have seen the unity of the Bible and would not have had any problem with the New Testament doctrine, that before grace and love and forgiveness can operate, man must become conscious of his sinfulness and furthermore, that as a result of his sin, man deserved nothing but damnation. Only when man has become conscious of his evil plight, can he be in a position to appreciate God's grace and salvation. Or, think of the Jehovah Witnesses. Because their founder did not understand the Greek language and how it functions, it was surmised that

since the definite article before ‘God’ was absent in the third clause of John 1:1, the eternal Logos was only *a* god, but not fully God. Therefore, their teaching reduces Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, the Creator of the universe, to a second rate divinity, a creature of God, like the old Arians did. Greek grammar, however, teaches us that the definite article could not have been used in this construction, as I have shown in a long article published earlier this year¹. Thus, when John says “and the Word was God”, he places the Word or Logos on the same level as God the Father.

The New Testament strongly encourages training or formal education and it does it both by example and by precept. It is true that many of Jesus’ disciples—though not all—were simple fishermen. In the capacity and in accordance with the gifts that God had given to each, they served the Lord, though with regards to most of them we know absolutely nothing about their work. From this lack of information, we can surmise that most of the disciples had a relatively limited ministry. The two best-known among them are Peter and John. However, the man who exerted the greatest influence in the Early Church and, through the New Testament, on all the History of the Church, is the Apostle Paul. Paul was an educated person. He had not only studied at the feet of Gamaliel—the most renowned Jewish teacher of his day—but he also had received a Hellenic education. This becomes clear from his letters, which exhibit a higher linguistic level than for example, the Gospel of Mark; from his occasional references to Hellenic authors; from various utterances in his letters, and not least from his insight

¹ Jan v.d. Watt and Chrys C. Caragounis, “A Grammatical Analysis of John 1:1” *Filologia Neotestamentaria*, Vol. XXI, 41, (2008) [published in 2010], pp. 91-138, esp. pp. 119-123.

into the situation of the heathen, as seen, for example, in his Areopagus speech (Acts 17). Apollos was another learned man. In Acts 18:24 Luke describes him as ἄνῆρ λόγιος. The adjective λόγιος characterizes Apollos as an *educated, erudite, cultured, sophisticated* man. And if he is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews—as certain ancient Christian authors thought,—he must have had a higher education than even Paul, since Hebrews belongs linguistically to the top level of Hellenic style in the New Testament. It should also be noted that he came from Alexandria, which, at this time was and for centuries previously had been the most important Hellenistic city. Nor must we forget that the author of the Third Gospel and Acts himself, namely, Luke, was a professional doctor, having studied the Greek medicine of the times. When he undertook to write the Gospel that goes by his name, he indicates in the prologue (Lk 1:1-4) that because he had not been a disciple of Jesus, and consequently had not witnessed with his own eyes what Jesus had done, he took every pain to research and to interview people, in order to discover the facts about the various incidents in the life and ministry of Jesus, so that his account would be reliable.

Writing to Timothy, Paul says: “Study to present yourself to God as one δόκιμος, that is, ‘approved’, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, one who correctly expounds the Word of God” (2 Tim 2:15). This is a very important text. The verb for ‘study’ is σπούδασον. This verb has a wider application: ‘to be diligent’, ‘to consider’, ‘to pay attention to’, ‘to make sure’, and ‘to study’. Even though in the present context the author is not speaking strictly of academic studies, the whole tenor of this verse cannot imply any less. Timothy must ‘be diligent’, ‘make sure’, ‘equip himself’ with everything necessary in order to be ‘approved’ by God, a minister of the Gospel who does not need to feel ashamed, one who is capable of ex-

pounding the Word of truth correctly. If this is not about *studying* and *equipping* ourselves to serve the living God and His Gospel of truth, then I do not know what it is. In 1 Tim 4:15, using a different verb, μελετῶ, he exhorts Timothy: “Concentrate on these matters, give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress”. The verb translated ‘concentrate’ is μελετῶ, which may be rendered by ‘concentrate on’, ‘think of’, ‘apply yourself to’, and thus ‘study’. In fact, in later Greek both of these verbs, μελετῶ and σπουδάζω, actually have as their primary meaning the meaning “to study”! This meaning has been inherent throughout the history of these verbs, even though in earlier times it was not the uppermost meaning. It was, nevertheless, implicit. Once again Paul exhorts Timothy *to apply himself to, to equip himself, to study*. We thus see that both of the verbs used in these texts bear a sense that includes the meanings of ‘studying’, ‘being diligent’, ‘applying oneself’ to a learning process in order to equip oneself fully and to be able to teach. As for the word δόκιμος, ‘approved’, around the time of the New Testament it was applied to a list of ancient Greek authors, who were considered ‘the approved authors’ ‘the accepted authors’, ‘the standard authors’, that is, the authors who set the linguistic standard for all others to follow. This being the meaning of the word, it becomes obvious that our calling is to be such ‘approved’ ministers of the Gospel, Christian workers, whom God can use to set the standard for others to follow. Our conduct and work is to be exemplary; we should set the example for others and especially the younger generation to follow.



Now, our discipline of New Testament exegesis is the discipline concerned with the actual interpretation of texts. Exegesis has many, very

many handmaids doing ground work for it. They all help to make the meaning of the text clearer. Each of these handmaids treats different aspects of very varied nature and all of them together combine in offering their results, so that the exegete will arrive at sound exegetical judgments. In other words, the duty of the exegete is ὀρθοτομεῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας “to expound correctly the Word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

Perhaps the primary handmaids of exegesis—and I speak of New Testament exegesis—are grammar and philology. These are the disciplines of texts *par excellence*. The communication must be understood as a language event, as a linguistic communication, before its ramifications on the spiritual level can be apprehended, appreciated, and applied. This is to exercise the supreme gift that God has given to man in creation: *Reason, Λόγος!* It is that which distinguishes Man from Beast. This Logos is responsible for the mental, the intellectual, the spiritual processes in man’s mind. This conceived Logos is externalized by language, when what one conceives in the recesses of one’s mind and soul, receives form and is communicated to others through words (λέξεις ‘words’ < λέγω, ‘to say’, ‘to speak’). Thus, language is the medium in which we conceive and communicate that which God has placed in our thinking faculty, our νοῦς².

But the situation of understanding the communication on the linguistic level is complicated here, because although the New Testament authors write in Greek, they are Jews with Aramaic as their mother tongue and Hebrew as the language of their Old Testament Scriptures. In addition to this basic Greek linguistic equipment, proper New Testament exegesis requires knowledge of the Greek language and of Greek literature as a

² See further my study “The Concept of Logos” in <www.chrys-caragounis.com>, under “Recent Studies”.

whole. This is so, because many knotty problems in the New Testament text require a deeper knowledge of the Greek language, and how it is used in literature than a mere smattering of so-called “New Testament Greek”. Knowledge of the Jewish background and of the languages of the Old Testament is an important presupposition. Moreover, history and archeology are also significant. Insight into the thought-patterns of the ancients, such as mythology, philosophical thinking, the aesthetic arts, ancient rhetoric, history of ideas, sociology, anthropology not infrequently contribute to clarifying certain aspects of the New Testament text, while the modern disciplines of semantics and text linguistics are important tools of analysis. Finally, Textual History and Textual Criticism, are indispensable in understanding the process of the transmission of the New Testament text, in other words, how the Bible came down to us, as well as working with the original text.

Perhaps the above list of methodological disciplines in the work of New Testament exegesis may be felt to be altogether too formidable, too demanding, too difficult to attain, impossible to master. Here I would like to remind you that we who teach theology, and in particular interpret the New Testament, that is, we, who in various ways proclaim the Gospel, have been entrusted with the most important task in the world! If this book is the Word of God to man, then there is no other task in the whole world that is more important than trying to explain the meaning of God’s message to man! We must, therefore, apply ourselves with diligence, with dedication, with fervour to it, not counting the cost. We must study in order to become δόκιμοι, ‘approved’ in the sight of God, in order that we may be ministers of the Word who do not need to be ashamed, able to expound correctly and authoritatively the Word of God.



But when we have learned our Greek and Hebrew, when we have studied the background materials, when we have mastered the various methods and disciplines, enumerated above, there is still something more that is needed. All these formal qualifications will be to no avail unless we are in living touch with Jesus Christ and our qualifications and gifts are laid at the foot of the cross.

No one who is not a born again believer has the right to become a theologian or a minister of the Gospel. Moreover, no one should approach the Altar of God to minister on it, unless he is called by God. To be a minister, to be a theologian is not a profession, like any other profession. You do not choose this line of work. You are called to it. And the One who calls is the Lord of the Church, the Eternal Word, the Logos, who was incarnated in order to concretize God's love to man. Thus, no one should preach or teach the Bible who has not experienced the saving faith of Christ and the regenerating and renewing working of the Holy Spirit, and who has not been called by God to do that. Today the Christian Church especially in the West is faced with immense problems, because for centuries it has had unbelieving theologians teach and educate its clergy and pastors. Like people, like priests! (Hos 4:9). The head was filled, while the heart was emptied. The flame of the Spirit just went out. We increased in knowledge, but became impoverished in life and love—the things that really matter.

If you think of Paul, he was the most brilliant mind in the Early Church, yet all his theological thinking—the most original ever—was Christ-oriented. His own testimony was: “I am crucified with Christ”. All his

thinking, all his originality had its source in a life that was hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). The same was the case with those intellectual giants, the Early Church Fathers, Fathers, like Chrysostom and Augustine. And the same was the case with the great Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin and many others. They were among the most educated people of their day, yet they had received the call of God to proclaim the eternal Gospel and they did it in a superb way.

If you will pardon a personal testimony — I spent some five years researching and writing a recent book on *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*³. This book contains a lot of linguistic and philological discussion, all geared to interpreting the New Testament more correctly. It shows the weaknesses of the past use of the Hellenic language in the exegesis of the New Testament. This book deals with the historical development of the Hellenic language from Homeric times (c. 800 B.C.) to A.D. 2000, and in some respects takes account of even the earliest form of Greek we have, i.e. Mycenaean Greek (1500-1200 B.C.). All this evidence is brought to bear on the exegesis of the New Testament text. The New Testament was written in the middle of the historical development of the Hellenic language, at a time when the language was changing from ancient to modern. Since the New Testament contains both earlier and later elements, the entire history of Greek is necessary in its interpretation. My book takes up thousands of texts that were studied with one purpose, one high, steadfast intent: to elucidate the meaning of the New Testament text. Thus, the investigation of grammatical structures and syntax, and other

³ Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament. Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 167), Tübingen: Mohr 2004, XX + 732 pp.; American corrected paperback edition: Baker Academic, 2007

linguistic phenomena, was done in constant prayer. Yes, I read secular, pagan texts in prayer!, asking the Lord to help me understand them, interpret them correctly and apply the results gained to the text of the New Testament. You see, nothing is unholy reading when it is consecrated to Christ and is done for His glory! I strove to attain the highest stringency in scientific linguistic and philological inquiry in the spirit of utter dependence upon Christ and His guidance. Everything in the service of the Gospel.

Christ is not served by slothful piety. We have a fight to fight. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against evil spiritual beings, the principalities and powers which govern the disobedient of this world (cf. Eph 6:12), whose fight against God's truth has today reached unprecedented intensity. Today there is great confusion among our nations, and great evil; human societies are in ferment and turmoil, and one can almost see how Satan has them all in his grip. The worst thing is the growing humanistic, anti-Christian mentality, which has become so tyrannical in Europe. Many Church leaders speak and act in such a way that they might be described as serving the cause of world rather than the cause of Christ. Therefore, we, who still believe in the Lord, need to arm ourselves, we need to equip ourselves with every spiritual and intellectual preparation in order to stand up against the evil day, and having done all to stand firmly (cf. Eph 6:13).

Because there is so much false theology, so much fallacious teaching that leads astray the simple-minded, that undermines the Christian faith, there is need for theologians who are willing to study, and to study, and to study again; to equip themselves fully both in knowledge and in faith and

to make the glory of Christ and the upbuilding of His Church the purpose of their life and service.

We need ministers who will follow the example of Paul, when he said:

You know how I lived the whole time I was with you ... I served the Lord with great humility and tears, although I was severely tested ... You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house ... I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me ... I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:18-27).

This is the sort of ministers that we need.

And this is my prayer for you, too. That you who teach may attain the highest possible qualifications in theological education, but that you also may remain in daily contact with the Lord, in dependence upon Him and His Holy Spirit. We do not need scholars with full heads and empty hearts, but scholars, whose heart is throbbing with the life and love of Christ, in order to translate the knowledge they have acquired to a responsible and authoritative interpretation of the Bible. And I pray for the ministers, too, that they shall exert themselves to their best ability and study to be 'approved' of God in their most important calling and task, to take care of the flock, the Church of God, which Christ has entrusted into their hands. Finally, I pray that the Lord may be pleased to honour the aspirations, the commitment, and the work of the *Society for Reformed Life Theology*. I pray that God may give wisdom to its leaders to guide its affairs in the true

spirit of the Christian Faith, so that those involved in its work may become God's instrument to bring great blessing to the people of Korea.