

Klaus Wegenast

Practical Theology and the Science of Exegesis **Remarks to a relationship to be structured anew**

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1. Introductory remarks to the development of the problem

For many theologians, especially in the German speaking areas, the relationship of the theological discipline to the practice of the Gospel in society is one of a goal-oriented theory. This theory is primarily based on the interpretation of texts, is depended on an activity of application determined by others. This activity of application seems to be of secondary nature for the narrowed theory of practice. In this model practical theology, especially, however, homiletics and the different parts of religious education is something like a one-way street „from the text to the sermon“, „from the text to the instruction model“, „from the text to the situation“ or „from the Gospel to life“. That every theory, also the discipline of exegesis, does have essential presuppositions in the practice, here in the lived practice of religion in a certain society and besides this is dependent on theological and historical contexts, is blended out just as a reflection of the possible undesired consequences of the given theoretical aspects. In this context I think also about the uncountable wounded souls of people, who were never allowed to grow up, because the respect (Nachachtung) of biblical facts did not allow it.

At this stage theology in all of its disciplines needs to be asked – especially in the German speaking countries – if she wants to hold on to the traditional hierarchies of thinking or if she should not seek new models of cooperation between the disciplines, but also between theory and practice. For our topic this is the problem: How can the exe-

getical efforts dealing with the situations of origin of faith and its first witnesses, dependent especially on historical and philological methods, and on highly specialized handicraft-knowledge of the practical-theological disciplines, which depends also on the work of social scientists in the activities of the church in society, how can these efforts be placed in a relationship with one another to assure that the Gospel is heard in its truth and the people of today are seen in their societal context.

The time has come to tackle this problem in a comprehensive way. This means that we have to ask equally after the „object“ of the Gospel – this is not only an exegetical question – and after the people in the context of their environment, to whom this Gospel is directed – this is not just a practical-theological problem. Let me speak first to the development of this problem:

When we look at the forms of cooperation between practical theology and scientific exegesis during the past fifty years, we note that they show clearly the different concepts of the individual presuppositions of the disciplines and the functions one assumes of the other. Of exemplary nature are for German Theology the developments in religious education. The special position of religious education between the church and the secular society makes some things more apparent than in other disciplines. Up to the sixties the German religious education was determined by a form of „Bible interpretation“, which worked paying no attention to the results of the exegetical discipline which had at that time reached an important stage. Stories were told, one asked what the text would want to tell us. That which one experienced was summed up in a memory verse. Critical questions for instance in the context of „mythically“ influenced texts were neglected. This was to change at the moment when at the end of the fifties the general awareness of society started to be guided by the insight that the consciousness of truth and reality of the majority, also of the children and youth, did no longer agree with that of the biblical stories. Now the importance of the Bible for each group had to be shown, without ignoring the interpretive process based on the results of historical criticism. For many teachers in the church and school this development meant a liberation from their notoric bad conscience, having to tell their pupils something as truth which they doubted themselves. It also meant that it was necessary that they gained differentiated knowledge of scientific exegesis. Looking back we can say that this turning of religious education to scientific exegesis meant a long overdue contribution for the enlightenment of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Many faithful teachers experienced, however, more or less acute faith difficulties. What was this enlightenment to mean for the

life and action of their pupils? This question led in the sixties first to a coalition between the hermeneutic of Rudolf Bultmann, more accurately the „existential interpretation“ of biblical texts, and a group of religious educators. They developed a didactic of the Bible as „a teaching art, to teach understanding“, which depended on the hermeneutic as „a teaching art of understanding“, as it was done in exegesis. This didactic of the Bible was insofar successful in that it was again and again possible to bring about a dialogue between the selfunderstanding given in the text of a biblical author and of today's youth and their questions dealing with self, world and God. It apparently did not succeed to include the life-world, the normal day and the problems of the pupils into an adequate consideration of their work. Something similar happened in view of the integration of developmental- psychological knowledge, especially as the selection of the contents of instruction for the different age groups was concerned. As a reaction to this situation and also based on the societal conditions the so-called problem-oriented instruction was developed. This was to better clarify the relevance of the tradition over against the real questions of the pupils. For this new form of instruction the biblical texts and the scientific exegesis were only insofar of interest, as they promised to contribute toward the solution of concrete problems in the here and now. The question was no longer if a biblical text was important on theological grounds for a transmission, but if it promised to contribute something to the solution of an actual problem.

I cannot go into more detail here. As one can see, exegesis was now no longer important for religious education. This was again to change at the moment when it became more and more apparent that it was not enough to make aware of problems and to work on them with the help of the Christian tradition, but that we also need to consider that we have to face problems and conflicts, even if we fail. Were not in the Bible experiences mentioned, which could be helpful at this stage? This meant now that everyday experiences, which apparently existed in the Bible, were to be reconstructed and renewed in elementary reflections with the help of the creative and the inspiring power of religious language. But were was in the exegetical science the partner, who could pick up this new question and who could deal with biblical texts in still another way than with the categories of historical criticism? This question remained first unanswered and led on the one hand to a frontal critique of the exegetical discipline by the practical theologians and by some exegetes thinking ahead, on the other hand, it led to attempts by non-exegetes and exegetes to deal with texts of the Old and New Testament with new questions.

Let us first look at the critique: „Historical criticism is bankrupt...Bible-criticism is not bankrupt, because they had lost those things about which they could have said something....; she is bankrupt because she cannot fulfill the task, which most representatives see as her task: To interpret scripture in such a way that the past becomes alive and new possibilities of personal and societal change are made clear for the present.“ (W. Wink, *Bibelauslegung als Interaktion*, 1976,7 = *Biblical Interpretation as Interaction*) Apparently the program of „world-understanding through history“, which in theology held faith and religion methodically in the historical immanence for almost two hundred years, had failed to show the relevance of that which was historically witnessed. In other words, this means that the emancipatory program of the liberal middle class, which placed the truth of faith categorically into the past, was in danger to lose the Gospel for today. The religious educator Ingo Baldermann puts it this way: „It is apparent that that strange boredom with the Bible, which...in the Protestant realm...was articulated so strongly, could only grow on the ground of such an incapable use of the Bible. When the expectation is lacking that in the use of this book still something new and decisive can be learned, why should the sermon and instruction, week after week,...wrestle with these difficult texts?“

2. Exegetical developments

For a few years now the scientific interpretation of Scripture shows first results and side glances are given the problems of the practice of the Gospel. Besides the work of Gerd Theissen (*Biblicher Glaube in evolutionärer Sicht*, 1984 (*Biblical faith in an evolutionary view*); *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben*, 1978 (*Arguments for a critical faith*); *Psychologische Aspekte paulinischer Theologie*, Göttingen 1983 (*Psychological aspects of Pauline theology*), where he attempts to unite humanitarian-scientific and theological attempts to understand in an integrated model, I mention the hermeneutic of the New Testament by Klaus Berger, which starts with the basic sentence: „To interpret not the world from the Gospel, not to see the world as case of application for a general Norm kept in Scripture, but to disclose the Gospel from the situation (that is, also from the social situation), to discover the meaning of the Gospel from this basis anew, or to allow it to open itself.“⁽¹⁹⁾ This needs to be noticed. However, we should not just start by the pressing experiences of reality, as Berger suggests, but with the everyday experience of our hearers in the context of a secular society, and that not without knowledge of the work as done by G.Soeffner „*Auslegung des Alltags – Der Alltag der Auslegung*“,

Frankfurt 1989 (Interpretation of the weekday – The weekday of Interpretation).

He would now be the place to mention this further authors, who are working on different new approaches to understand the Bible, representatives of a psycho-analytical interpretation with different emphases, materialistic interpreters, linguistic interpreters and protagonists of a so-called interactional reading, only to mention some. There is no time. And how about the aesthetic-reception originating in the science of literature, which with convincing arguments makes us aware of the fact that each interpreter includes himself and his/ her life-story into the process of interpretation and „fills“ the text to be interpreted with his/her experiences and with it constitutes it anew?

Besides some fragmentary hints I did not find in the exegetical literature much of a discussion dealing with the possibilities and limits of interpretations mentioned. I finish this part with the citation out of a recent publication done by my Bern colleague Ulrich Luz and published by Fortress-Press (Matthew in History. Interpretation, Influence and Effect, Minneapolis 1994):

„Historical-critical research therefore only had an emancipative character, and helped contribute to the autonomy of the rational human subject, but it could not help establish the fundamental theological question of truth. This is – I think – the basic problem of historical-critical exegesis, the results of which today can be seen in its theological and existential insignificance. The historical-critical method today has lost even this emancipative character, and that is the final reason why it has become meaningless for us.“(11)

Thus far so bad. Luz then tries to sketch a few perspectives for a new reading of the Bible. This makes a practitioner curious and lets us hope that it will lead to a new quality of cooperation between exegesis and practical theology. Before I will say more to this, let me take a quick look at that which carefully I like to refer to as the selfunderstanding of practical theology.

3. And Practical Theology?

Here it cannot be my task to sketch the history of origin of the scientific discipline of practical theology, not even starting with the time after the Second World War. It will only be possible, in a few strokes to place before us an outline of that which is presently intended by Practical Theology: Practical Theology, with all of its subdisciplines and

because of the competition of priority between churchly partial systems, needs today be construed as an „open system“ (P.C.Bloth). Its character as „sum total“, out of very different disciplines and fields of action, she needs „to seek and discern from the relation to today's religious and social pluralistic context, which modern 'differentiation' was once its constitutional base and still is.“(109) The total 'sum' of the practical theological disciplines refers to, this we can say, not first of all with history, as for instance is the case of exegesis, but in cooperation with different humanitarian and social sciences with present-day societal action of the „church“. Thereby she examines and projects also conditions by which communication science, psychology, aesthetics and others are theologically received and analysed and formed onto present life-forms of the Christian religion. Analysis and construction of action are the challenge.

As practical theology she is referred to the total societal field and beyond institutional boundaries of the different churches, on which again and again „church“ in a theological sense can occur. As religious education practical theology forces the church to face the questions and attempts to understand faith and religion also from its psychological and sociological function and to transmit theology selectively. And it is here that the questions arises which possible models of cooperation between exegesis and religious education should be taken, knowing of the apparent and different secular sciences on which they are also dependent.

4. Difficulties and obstacles of a cooperation between exegesis and practical theology

From our outline of bible didactics of the past thirty years and the sketch of the scientific interpretation of the Bible, as well as of the tasks of Practical Theology, there are besides possible perspectives of a fruitful cooperation, which we like to look at in this last section, also several difficulties.

First I like to refer to the already put into apostrophies, the clarity about the relationship of the Bible and the practice of the Gospel and its simulating language, which is especially disturbing there, where we have to do with complex questions. What does the often used phrase mean „a text needs to be spoken into a certain situation“? Apparently here is everything simplification. What does text mean here? Which interpretation measures are considered? Where does one assume the tertium comparationis between „text and situation“? What is meant by situation? Looking at it closely everything is unclear and probably

places before us a mirror of unreflected practice. As if we should transmit or communicate texts! What needs to be transmitted, is not the text, but if I am right, the Gospel, which needs to seek language ever anew and which under some circumstances could be changed through holy texts.

The second difficulty I note in that the Scripture science as a rule leaves the societal usage of its results to other disciplines or at once to the practitioners and avoids the discussion with the laity or even the practitioners. This leads then to the fatal coexistence, to which Christian Gremmels had pointed to already in the early seventies: „Scientific specialists decide on correct and false interpretation of Scripture, while practical specialists are not at all touched by it decide about correct and false organisation of church structures.“

Another difficulty for a successful cooperation I see in the fact that exegetes seldom ask with clear categories for the content of experience of biblical statements and they are not interested to face an explicit social-science and theological-responsible discussion with present life-reality as prerequisite for one's own understanding. This is true inspite of the movement mentioned, which we examined previously. Instead of learning more, one fails to recognize the importance of the present scientific-methodological questions and this in part with a pseudotheological fervour.

5. Perspectives for an actual cooperation between exegesis and religious education

A cooperation between exegesis and practical theology is, as we noticed before, always also determined by a specific history of theology and by societal conditions, especially in the area of the relationship between religion and the world.

Before a promising and successful cooperation between the two disciplines it is important one is aware of this condition. This means for both cooperating disciplines, that they should, for example, also realize which relationships to other theological and non-theological sciences are clear and which are not. The situation is in no way this, that exegesis is ONLY theology and practical theology is overloaded by secular sciences.

Let us start with the possibilities which after a clearing of the meaning of other sciences for one's own doing would speak for a cooperation, for example, by the interpretation of Scripture. Such a cooperative in-

terpretation can not be exhausted in that the text of the past as past is to be made understandable for today, but needs to make aware that the present experience of reality and insight of faith is an important prerequisite for the interpretation and needs to be included in the exegetical work. For this there is needed next to the known historical-critical instrument a whole arrangement of other approaches to the biblical tradition, which needs to be activated. It will also be necessary to correct the relationship of authority having been developed through the centuries between the so-called experts and the laity of interpretation. In this connection I like to mention in first place the desirable dialogue between scientific exegesis and the present experience of the so-called laity, as already tested in the so-called interactional reading, but also in biblio-drama and in symbol-didactics for some time. Desirable is also a dialogue between scientific exegesis and interpretive methods of non-theological sciences. I am thinking here of the methods of in-depth-psychology, linguistics of different kinds etc. In such dialogues not only creative capabilities could be set free, but also the discovery is possible that different interaction forms in the context of exegesis can lead to surprising insights in the process of understanding. This I have especially experienced in connection with different responsible forms used with youth and adults in religious education in the work with the Bible. In other words this would mean that the content and relationship dimension in the process of interpreting texts is distinguished, but also related to one another.

Another chance for a sensible cooperation between religious education and scientific exegesis lies in the well known fact that not only the biblical text has a certain „Sitz im Leben“, that is, a certain situation of origin with specific kinds of communicative action in the context with the constitution and change of reality, but also today's hearing and reflecting the Bible is tied without a doubt to life-historical, societal and cultural presuppositions.

The work with tradition within the New Testament is for that which is meant an impressive example. Thus there is in the writings of the New Testament nowhere an „exegesis“, for example, texts out of the tradition Israel's used for themselves and with the understanding that by pure explanation of such texts one could present the „Holy“ and his eternal will. By such „exegeses“ the tradition and the situation of single persons and groups are related in a reciprocal interpretive process. This means: referring to tradition is not enough for establishing a theological statement. A tradition gains meaningfulness and binding force for the present only when it helps to understand present experience of reality anew and in this process itself being understood anew, under circumstances can also be critically changed.

Peter Biehl, religious educator in Göttingen, states: „Present relevance of biblical tradition is not primarily given by scientific work, but made possible and experience in that it becomes real in present life-relationships of Christianity and the church. In that persons, groups and institutions in their faith, behaviour and action use today biblical tradition and this usage is responsible within the context of their peers, only then critical memory becomes possible in an 'emancipatory intention'.“

From this we gain consequences for a future cooperation:

1. As system of relation for the interpretation of biblical tradition the question concerning the constitution and change of reality through communicative action is recommended for exegesis and for religious education. Thereby biblical theology through exegesis gains insofar a fundamental importance as it mentions the basic difficulties in the individual system of relation from the past and present in the horizon of human experience. I am thinking here of presuppositions and consequences of domination, the question of sense or nonsense of suffering, of evil and the acceptance of guilt; about enthusiastic joy and thankfulness...and then about forms of solving conflicts, the change of things, new beginnings, forms of resistance etc.

2. The manifold and more-dimensionality of cooperation between an exegesis, which reflects the biblical tradition in the context of present-day experiences of reality, and a religious education, which uses present-day experiences of reality in instruction each time new with the questions of traditions, how she faces it in a discussion with today's questions, this being a continuous task.

3. The scientific exegesis has a far greater horizon in such a cooperation. The domination of the historical-critical method, not as yet adequately reflected as to its prerequisites and consequences, is relativized and the task of further methodical clearing of yet unusual interpretive forms of interdisciplinary work is being tackled. That is: Neither exegesis, nor religious education can remain the same after the dialogue. Exegesis will contribute within the frame of the sketched reciprocal process of understanding between tradition and reality, that the agonizing reality is being changed and she will also in view of today's faith- and reality experience bring about objective criticism to tradition, for example, will try to question the societally selfunderstood culture of obedience in the Old and New Testaments.

Religious education, whose task it is to analyse and to construct today's practice of the Gospel in instructional learning processes, will not only work with these means of education and didactic, psychology

and sociology, but will also assume questions which come about through the new work with the Bible. Therefore in the future there cannot be a questionless church practice, which legitimates itself through the citation of pleasing texts of the Bible or through societal theories, as it can no longer exist unconditional validity of exegetical statements. Both would mean the necessity for a fundamental change of the communicative dimension of practice and theory of the church and theology on all levels.

We have arrived at the end of our considerations and ask for practicable ways for a change of reality.