

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR COURSES IN EXEGESIS

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Ἐραυνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς. Every time our students enter or leave our chapel they pass under a symbol which bears this inscription. It is the first of the original four symbols which grace the West wall of our chapel, representing the four chief disciplines covered in our Seminary curriculum: Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology. For a number of years now these symbols have also appeared on the cover of our Seminary catalog.

It was of course not by chance but by choice that the symbol representing Biblical Theology, a scroll with Jesus' words from John 5:39, occupies the first position among the four, also on our catalog cover. This shows at a glance how this discipline is rated, what priority it receives at our Seminary. The importance we accord this discipline is clearly spelled out in the catalog: "Thorough, intensive, and reverent study of the Holy Scriptures is the very heart of our Seminary training. No one can be a God-pleasing public witness of Christ unless with a believing heart he fully understands the whole message which our God and Savior would have us proclaim to sinful men for their salvation now and hereafter" (Sem. Cat., p.23). This emphasis on Biblical Theology is also evident in the catalog statement of the Seminary's objectives: "Reverent, thorough, and scholarly study of the Holy Scriptures and a clear apprehension and faithful application of its contents, especially of its basic messages of Law and Gospel, are considered fundamental in realizing the Seminary's practical purpose of training and equipping men for the practical tasks of the public ministry. In every phase of its training program the Seminary strives to remain faithful to the Holy Scriptures, to give evidence of thorough scholarship, and to effect professional proficiency" (Ibid. p. 3).

The emphasis on Biblical Theology in our entire ministerial training program is also reflected in the curriculum of our pre-seminary school, NWC, and is expressed in the first statement of objectives in its catalog: "NWC considers its fundamental objective to be the preparation of students qualified to enter WLS. It stresses language studies, which will enable the church's pastors to work in the original languages of the Scriptures and in the theological literature of the Christian church" (NWC Cat., p.5).

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It is no secret that Biblical Theology is not accorded such high priority in the ministerial training program of many theological seminaries today, even some that bear the name Lutheran. At least there is considerable easing up on the requirement for knowledge of the original biblical languages; courses in these often being listed under electives. Without a doubt this in no little way accounts for the growing weakening in the doctrinal and confessional stance of the graduates of such seminaries and through them of their churches. All of which ought to serve as an important lesson for us not to neglect or ever treat lightly the study and use of the original biblical languages in our exegetical courses. Here we shall let Luther speak, as he does in his 1524 tract "To the Councilmen of All German Cities, that they establish and support Christian schools" (excerpts from a quotation in Reu's Homiletics, p. 345f): "There is a great difference between a simple preacher and an expounder of Scripture, or as Paul puts it, a prophet." Speaking of the "simple preacher" he writes: "To interpret and treat the Scriptures for himself, and to oppose false teachers, this is a task beyond his powers. It cannot be done without a knowledge of languages." Later on he says: "Where there is a knowledge of the language, the preaching is fresh and strong. . . .In proportion as we love the Gospel, let us watch over the languages. . . .We shall not long preserve the Gospel without the languages. For they are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which one carries this jewel; they are the vessel in which one holds this wine; they are the larder in which this food is stored."

These words of Luther merely help to underscore the great need for thorough, in depth Bible study and thus also justify the importance we place on it throughout our course of study for future ministers of the Word. And so it comes as no surprise that the agenda for this conference of representatives from our various seminaries not only includes but lists as first to be presented and discussed the topic:

#### BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR COURSES IN EXEGESIS

One version of the assigned topic handed to me reads: "Basic Requirements for Exegetical Courses at Bible Schools and Seminaries." Consequently I assumed that this paper was not only to set down which exegetical courses are required to be taken on the seminary level, but was also to deal with prerequisites for these exegetical courses.

Pre-Seminary Requirements

Over-all Knowledge of the Scriptures. That this would be presupposed on the part of students enrolled in advanced exegetical study of the Scriptures, might seem so self-evident as not needing to be stated. Yet though it is so obvious, better perhaps because it is so obvious as to be easily overlooked, it needs to be pointed out. Every statement in the Scriptures has to be interpreted not only on the basis of the meaning of the individual words and sentences, but also in keeping with the context, immediate and remote, yes, also the context of the Scriptures as a whole. Therefore the more thorough an over-all knowledge of the Scriptures a person possesses, the better will he be equipped to reach a Scripturally correct understanding of a given word or passage.

This knowledge of the Scriptures must include more than acquaintance with the facts of biblical history. It also needs to involve more than only a passing acquaintance with the chief doctrines of the Bible, especially the doctrines of justification and sanctification.

On the elementary school level such over-all knowledge of the Bible and its chief doctrines is dispensed in our Bible History and Catechism courses in our Christian day schools, Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools and confirmation classes. It stands to reason, however, that for those contemplating preparing themselves for the holy ministry there must follow a more in depth study of the Scriptures and of scriptural teachings.

Accordingly we find in the catalogs of our Synod's preparatory schools religion courses like: Old Testament and Catechism, New Testament (Gospel and Acts), Christian Doctrine, with emphasis on justification and sanctification. The NWC catalog under Religion lists a course in the OT with the description: "A survey of the history and literature of Israel. This is presented with special emphasis on (a) the message of the Old Testament and (b) its setting in the life, thought, and history of the Ancient Near East." Also listed is a course entitled "New Testament Introduction and Survey," with the description: "All the books of the New Testament are read and briefly discussed. External details of their composition and transmission are examined." It is to be assumed that courses corresponding to these are taught in our world mission Bible schools.

At our Seminary this study of the Scriptures is continued in an even more intensive manner in the Introduction (Isagogics) courses, the NT in the

Junior class, the OT in the Middler and Senior classes. All books of the Bible, excepting those studied in the exegesis courses, are covered in the course of the three Seminary years.

Thorough Grounding in the Original Languages of the Scriptures. As already indicated in an earlier comment, this is no longer a prerequisite in many theological seminaries of our day. By way of example, the '75-'76 catalog of Lutheran Theological Seminary of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, under "Pre-Seminary Studies" contains the following: "Traditionally, theological schools in America have expected their students to prepare themselves for theological study by a broad undergraduate program in the liberal arts. When it came to a choice of concentration, students were often encouraged to major in classical languages . . . Today, however, because of the wide range of undergraduate programs and majors offered by a great diversity of institutions of higher education, it is no longer feasible nor realistic to demand one particular type of undergraduate preparation as a prerequisite for theological study. . . . The accelerating rate at which students in undergraduate programs at some of our most distinguished colleges and universities are urged toward a major field often makes impossible the development, even by superior students, of a broad humanities program." This is not to say that the Biblical languages are completely neglected. Thus the statement is made under "First Year of Studies": "Students without Greek upon entrance to the Seminary will study Greek during the middle term," which was January 5 to 30. Later on it speaks of "language courses which must be taken for credit or audit."

How seriously we still take the matter of Bible study on the basis of the original Biblical languages and therefore of requiring a thorough grounding in these languages for those entering our Seminary as regular students, is evident in the NWC courses in Hebrew and Greek. The study of Greek begins, as it has for many years, in the Freshman class as Elementary Greek. Sophomores take Intermediate Greek, which includes reading Xenophon's Anabasis. The Juniors have an option: either "Survey of the Greek Language," with "selections from Homer and Herodotus, readings from Plato and the dramatics; Hellenistic Greek (LXX, Apocrypha, or Church Fathers);" or "Advanced Intermediate Greek," including "selected readings from history, drama, and philosophy." Juniors also have as a required course "Exegesis of John on the basis of the Greek text. Study of vocabulary, grammar, and textual criticism." Seniors read the Book of Acts in Greek and do an "exegetical reading of the First Epistle

to the Corinthians on the basis of the Greek text, with an emphasis on the doctrinal and practical aspects of Paul's writing."

The study of Hebrew begins, as it always has, in the Junior year with Elementary Hebrew, including "exercises in translating Biblical Hebrew." The Senior course in Intermediate Hebrew consists in "Readings from Old Testament texts (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, Judges, selected Psalms)."

For further study in either Greek or Hebrew the catalog lists a number of electives, open to Juniors and Seniors.

Obviously we consider these language courses to be attainable pre-Seminary requirements for our circumstances here. As for our world mission fields, we can only say they would be desirable to the extent that they are realistically attainable under their circumstances.

#### Seminary Courses

To complete the picture as to which exegetical courses are required for Seminary graduation beyond those given at NWC, our Seminary catalog states: "A course in the interpretation of both an Old and a New Testament book is given in each of the three Seminary years." They are as follows: Juniors - Genesis 1-25 and Galatians; Middlers - Selected Psalms and Ephesians; Seniors - Isaiah 40-66 and Romans.

Besides these courses, the Juniors have a first quarter two hour course in Advanced Hebrew Grammar and a second quarter two hour course in Advanced New Testament Grammar.

Under basic requirements for courses in exegesis we here add two courses given to the Juniors at our Seminary: Hermeneutics and Textual Criticism. While it might be desirable that both of these courses would precede actual exegetical study of Biblical books, they must of necessity be given side by side with exegetical courses: Hermeneutics in the first quarter, Textual Criticism in the third quarter.

Hermeneutics. My Random House Dictionary gives this definition for this word: "1. The science of interpretation, esp. of the Scriptures. 2. The branch of theology which treats the principles of Biblical exegesis." By saying "esp. of the Scriptures," it is implied that this science is also applicable to literature other than the Scriptures. And so it is. Whenever we read a piece of literature, be it a letter, a treatise, a legal document, or a book, we, consciously or not, apply the science of hermeneutics. In fact, up to a point we apply the same principles in Bible interpretation as in the interpre-

tation of any other writing. To begin with, this means that we must aim to understand a writer's, also a Biblical writer's, words exactly as he meant them. Thus we need to consider them both in their historical and grammatical settings. "The historical setting," to quote Prof. Kuske's Basic Points Stressed in Hermeneutics, "is important simply because God worked out His plan of salvation in history and revealed His saving truth in connection with the lives of believers at specific times and places in history. . . The grammatical setting is important since Scripture uses human languages and therefore the rules of language in general and of these languages in particular will determine the simple, plain meaning of each word and thought." This also means that we must determine the nature of a Biblical book and ask ourselves whether or not in any given situation or expression figurative language is being used. 6-Jensen

While the aforementioned principles apply to interpretation of non-Biblical as well as Biblical literature, Biblical interpretation is unique in that it involves basic presuppositions, we call them presuppositions of faith, which do not apply to any other writing or book. In fact, unless the interpreter approaches the Bible with these presuppositions, he is bound sooner or later to go wrong. The first of these presuppositions is this, that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God. It is therefore also inerrant in everything that it says and so is the only safe and true interpreter of itself. The true Bible interpreter will above all approach the Scriptures with the presupposition that it is Christocentric. "All Scripture is written because of Christ and has a connection with the revelation of God in Christ, some passages directly, some more remotely. Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ" ( From the Statement on Scripture, adopted by the Synodical Conference in 1958 and subsequently by all its four constituent synods.).

To quote Prof. Kuske once more: "The process of interpreting Scripture, then, does involve reason in dealing with the externals, but it is faith alone worked in us by the Holy Ghost which is the determining factor in understanding and accepting the truths of Scripture. All true interpretation will never let man's reason take a superior position to divinely revealed truths. Rather, man's reason will always be taken captive under the sum total of divinely revealed truth. Thus does Scripture interpret itself, moving ever in the hermeneutical circle (from the verse to the chapter to the book to the whole of Scripture and then back to the verse again) with Christ at the center."

At this point it would be well to add a requirement for exegesis that might easily be overlooked just because it is so self-evident: expertise in the vernacular in which the message of the Bible is to be transmitted, whether this be English, German, Scandinavian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Indonesian, or any of the many African languages. We know how concerned Luther was about conveying the meaning of the words of the Scriptures in the language of his people. Defending his at times rather free translation of some of the psalms, he wrote in 1533: "What purpose does it serve unnecessarily to abide by the words so rigidly and strictly that people can get no sense out of them? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew idioms, but if he understands the Hebrew writer, he must see to it that he grasps his meaning and must think: Now let me see. How does a German speak in this case?" What time and labor it often cost him to find the answer to this question, is evident from his well-known statement: "It often happened that for two or three or four weeks we sought and asked for a single word and at times did not find it then" (Plass, What Luther Says, Vol. I, p 105f). Translating is really only one aspect of interpreting. Thus what applies to translating applies equally if not more so to interpreting. The interpreter or exegete must needs be well-versed in the language in which he is to expound the truths of Scripture, be it his own native tongue or, if he is an expatriate missionary, the tongue of the people he has been called to serve with the Word.

If this presentation on Hermeneutics has become unproportionately long, it is because of all basic requirements for sound exegesis this must be considered tops. What good finally is the greatest expertise in working with the original languages of the Bible or the most complete acquaintance with the Bible otherwise if the individual's approach to the Bible lacks the proper presuppositions of faith? And sooner or later in his theological training for the ministry of the Word every student must have learned and been moved to subscribe to these principles of Scripture interpretation.

Textual Criticism. Having said the foregoing, what follows must seem like an anti-climax. And it is true, Textual Criticism cannot be ranked with Hermeneutics in importance among the basic requirements for courses in exegesis. For one, so much scholarly work has over the years been done in trying to arrive at a text that as closely as possible represents the autographs that the exegete of today can work with confidence with the major text editions available. Also, by far the majority of variants with which textual criticism concerns itself are of minor consequence, none of them in any way affecting the Biblical truths themselves. As for the New Testament, the student now has at his disposal a Greek text put out by the United Bible Societies which evaluates the variant readings and grades them by means of the letters A, B, C, and D. To top it off, a companion volume to this Greek text, edited by Bruce M. Metzger, copyrighted in 1971, is now available in its third edition with the title: A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. Its chief purpose, as stated in the Preface by the editor, is "to set forth the reasons that led the committee, or a majority of the members of the committee, to adopt certain variant readings for inclusion in the text and to relegate certain other readings to the apparatus." And yet, good and valuable as this volume is, some of its conclusions are based on the historical critical method which the editor espouses. For this reason alone it is essential that the student learn for himself to evaluate the variant readings. This is the aim and purpose of our course in Textual Criticism, for which Prof. Kuske put down for us the basic points that are stressed.

1. The principal witnesses to the NT (papyri, uncials, minuscles which are generally the Byzantine text, church fathers, versions, lectionaries) are studied so that this external evidence can help determine whether a reading was ancient and widespread.

2. The materials and methods of copying the NT text for the first 1400 years are studied so that the possibility of scribal error or alteration can be understood and evaluated properly.



3. An overview of the history of the printing of the NT text from 1500 A.D. to the present is given to explain the development of the Textus Receptus and its rejection by many of the leaders of "modern textual criticism."

4. The three prevailing theories of textual criticism today are evaluated to determine to what degree each follows valid principles in part and invalid principals in part.

5. The proper method of textual criticism is outlined and practiced:
- a) The reading which has the best external evidences (ancient and widespread) is preferred.
  - b) If the external evidence is not decisive, the reading with the best internal evidence (which best fits the context, author's usage, the least likely reading to be the result of scribal error or alteration) is preferred.

We can hardly close our presentation on the basic requirements for sound exegesis without speaking of a requirement that is in a class by itself, faith-born love of the Savior. Jesus himself once said: "If a man love me, he will keep my words. . . He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings; and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me" (Jn 14:23f). The greater one's love for the Savior, the more precious will His words (and that finally includes all of Scripture) be to him. The more eager and determined will he also be to learn just what the Lord means to say in all of Scripture. This means that sincere prayer must always accompany Bible study. Here it is certainly true: "Fleissig gebetet ist ueber die Haelfte studieret." Luther once answered Spalatin's question as to which method of study one interested in theology ought to pursue: "That the Holy Scriptures cannot be penetrated by study and talent is most certain. Therefore your first duty is to begin to pray, and to pray to this effect that if it please God to accomplish something for His glory - not for yours or any other person's - He very graciously grant you a true understanding of His words. For no master of the divine word exists except the Author of these words, as He says: 'They shall be all taught of God' (Jn 6:45). You must, therefore, completely despair of your own industry and rely solely on the inspiration of the Spirit" (Plass, What Luther Says, Vol. I, p.77). We, therefore, close our paper with a prayer well suited to begin any Bible study:

O Holy Spirit, grant us grace  
That we our Lord and Savior  
In faith and fervent love embrace  
And truly serve Him ever.

Help us that we Thy saving Word  
In faithful hearts may treasure;  
Let e'er that Bread of Life afford  
New grace in richest measure. Amen.

(TLH, 293)