

Fuller Theological Seminary

The Authority of the New Testament for the Church

Essay for the Class

NT801: New Testament Research Methods

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by

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I. The problem

The writings of the New Testament are the foundational texts for the Christian Churches of all faiths. But according to a majority of our biblical scholars the texts have been developed in and based on the cultural context of the Jewish and Greek-Roman world of the first century and maybe the early second century AD. The question has to be asked: How do we understand biblical inspiration - the authority of the New Testament - in view of these issues?

How do we understand the truth of the writings we have accepted as basic for our life in the churches and for our fellowship together?

The understanding of the nature of the inspiration of the word of God has often put a wedge between those who felt it necessary to insist on the literal truth of everything said in Scripture and those who insist on understanding the word of God through the eyes of modern science usually reducing the meaning expressed in Scripture to a few or more essentials. Is there another way between both extremes?

II. Cultural relativism

It has been clearly established that the New Testament is heavily indebted to the culture in which the writers of the New Testament lived when they wrote these texts. The concepts and metaphors and other elements of communication in the New Testament are based on the assumption that the reader of these texts is familiar with the surrounding culture. The Jewish context is highly visible through constant references to the Old Testament and to typically Jewish customs referred to in the New Testament. Similarly elements of the

Hellenistic (Greek-Roman) culture are explicitly referred to and implicitly understood as the basis for communication almost everywhere in the New Testament. A study of the historical and cultural context is necessary to help understand the message of the New Testament.

Given the cultural binding of the New Testament message then how can we discern between cultural relativism and God's word for us today?

III. The nature of Truth

One of the major problems I observe is our understanding of "truth". In our modern society we strive for the ideal neutral observer who is reporting objective truth to us. The same expectation is brought to the text of Scripture. The one who expects literal "scientific" truth from Scripture develops ways to explain problems in the text away in order to be able to shape the text according to the demands that our notion of truth places on texts. The one who sees Scripture from a "scientific" view simply sees large passages of Scripture as evidently false rejecting large parts without giving those texts a chance to speak for themselves.

Both those views do violence to what the authors of the New Testament intended to say and have the need to change and reject the meaning of what the authors of the New Testament were expressing in their writings.

The New Testament writers did not have the idealized view of truth. They clearly wrote for the instruction and education of the early Christians in the Christian faith and were naturally describing as best as they could their (meaning the early Churches') side of the story. They definitely felt that they had the freedom to organize the material to suit that purpose in order to express the points they felt were the message of Christ. Our access to those important events mentioned in the New Testament is almost exclusively through those writers. No modern historian was around when those texts were written.

The notion of the "objective scientific" truth is a modernist notion which became popular in the enlightenment period and is an ideal that has been recognized as impossible to reach in recent years as we move into the postmodern age. All communication is always biased. There is no neutral observer. I do not intend to say by that that the message of the New Testament is completely relativistic. There certainly is a core of truth that can be more or less clearly seen in the New Testament and in the history of the Early Church. But our standards for truth cannot be imposed by us on the New Testament. The New Testament must be free to set up its own terms for how to understand it.

IV. History

Often statements are made that certain things in the New Testament have been proven or disproven. The New Testament is partially history and nothing in history can ever be proven in the classical scientific sense since historical events are singular, unrepeatable events. Evidence has to be gathered and then needs to be interpreted in order to argue for or against a certain event taking place. One of the problems with interpretation is again that we often almost unconsciously inject elements of contemporary thought in order to do these interpretations. It is hard work to become aware of this baggage.

The matter is further complicated by the scarcity of information. Historians are depending on information that has survived. The surviving material usually does not give an adequate

representation of cultural events. For example written sources are customarily written from members of the ruling class and not from the regular people. History also needs to be interpreted and thus for example the understanding of the events in the first century AD has varied in the last centuries. It might be more accurate to speak about a dialogue between two cultures - a cross cultural experience. It should be understood that there is a large amount of speculation going on in regards to incidences in the New Testament based on a number of approaches to infer the information we lack from other sources. Claims in these areas need to be carefully scrutinized in order to evaluate their worth for the understanding of the New Testament.

V. Biblical Criticism

There have been a number of different styles of biblical criticism with the intent to discover more meaning about the New Testament. While they all have been successful in highlighting characteristics of the New Testament text most of those have gone beyond that in inferring more about the New Testament. Some examples are the speculation about nonexistent sources and inferences what might have happened in the Early Church. Those conclusions are difficult to substantiate since there is usually scarcely any historical information backing up those claims.

VI. Conclusion

The New Testament is the authority for the Church. But to be properly applied it must first be understood in the best way possible. To gain more understanding we need to learn about the culture in which the New Testament was written, we need to become aware of differences in the way we think and perceive things. Finally we need to try to relive what the Early Church did by engaging in some of the same practices they engaged in and follow the ways they thought about things. Examples are studying the word of God, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's supper etc. Those ways of thinking, customs and ceremonies are a link to what was going on during the New Testament period. Doing those things will at least partially allow us to understand the New Testament texts better and allows us to establish authoritative rules for the Church by contextualizing those of the New Testament period. Criticizing the New Testament as a supposedly "neutral observer" has been shown as not possible and it is doubtful what benefit this might bring. Only by reliving the ancient texts will we gain more access to the message of the New Testament and be able to apply the truth of the New Testament today. That is when we will experience the authority of the New Testament. Jesus said "Follow me" and not "Analyze me!".