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2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "The Authoritative Hermeneutics in Irenaeus and Tertullian"



Presentation

Adriani M. Rodrigues, Ph.D. student (Theological Studies) at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, MI presented his research paper with the title: "The Authoritative Hermeneutics in Irenaeus and Tertullian". The following exposition summarizes his paper, rendering the main points of his findings.

Background

Adriani Rodrigues pointed to the fact that between A.D. 90 and 150 the Scriptures were interpreted with an approach called "functional hermeneutics" (David Dockery), which basically means that the text was applied to the reader's own situation without giving attention to the original situation and context in which and for which it was written. Heretical movements however (many of them labeled today as gnostic movements) led to a closer analysis of Scripture interpretation. Who has the right to interpret Scripture and how should it be done? Gnostics were convinced that salvation can just be achieved when one has access to a certain secret teaching, which was passed down orally from the apostles and found in a hidden form in the Bible. Consequently, "only those who knew how to read the Bible in a certain way could gain access to this knowledge" [1], and thus, to salvation. With that said, the hermeneutical approach used so far was of no help against gnostic movements. Rodrigues argued that during this time the transition from a *functional* to an *authoritative* hermeneutics took place, mainly in and by the writings of Irenaeus (c. 115-202) and Tertullian (c. 160-225). To describe their approaches was the subject of his paper.

The Authoritative Hermeneutics in Irenaeus

Irenaeus was very much concerned with the right interpretation of Scripture and tried to develop an approach that differed from the allegorical approach that was used so far. According to Rodrigues, there have been two main concepts that marked Irenaeus' method: a) the notion of the rule of truth/faith and b) the role of tradition.

a) The Rule of Truth/Faith

The key and final authority, for Irenaeus, to rightly interpret Holy Scripture, is the rule of truth, or rule of faith. This is

defined as "an organic system or framework which constitutes the shape and the meaning of God's revelation. Without the system, God's revelation is not intelligible. Placed within another system, that revelation is distorted and perverted." [2] To employ a picture used by Irenaeus and cited by Rodrigues: Scripture presents a picture, like a beautiful mosaic of a king, done by a skilful artist, composed of beautiful gems and jewels. Those, who do not care for this picture but use its pieces differently, take the same individual pieces and stones and form a different mosaic out of it, depicting a dog or a fox. In Irenaeus' case the heretics of his time were those who distorted the whole picture given in Scripture. They pulled the biblical system apart and formed their own system. But, so Irenaeus, those who got to know the "correct picture", who have received the rule of faith by means of baptism, cannot be deceived, because they recognize the individual pieces and do not accept the wrong "picture". The right system, which was taught before baptism, is composed for Irenaeus from the main beliefs, such as creation, trinity, incarnation, passion and resurrection as well as judgment and salvation. [3]

Rodrigues pointed out that Irenaeus did not perceive both, Scripture and the rule of faith, to be competitive, but rather the rule flows out of Scripture, or, as Donovan explains: "the Rule of Faith governs right exegesis, and the Scriptures ... explain the Rule of Faith" [4].

b) The Role of Tradition

The question that came up then was: How can one know, what the right rule of faith is? What is the right picture? Who decides what system of belief is "the one"? Irenaeus' pointed to a) a geographical uniformity (all churches in the world teach the same) and b) a chronological uniformity (he considered the teachings in his days as the same as the apostles' teachings - the churches' bishops understood the Christian truth correctly, because they inherited this by apostolic succession). Going along the argumentative line of gnostics ("truth was not delivered by written documents") Irenaeus tries to prove that the oral tradition really belongs to the Church, giving even a list of bishops, who, standing in apostolic succession, guarantee for the true understanding of the Christian doctrine. Rodrigues pointed further to an additional *gift of truth* that was necessary in Irenaeus' understanding for the right interpretation of the truth. The interpreter, i.e. the bishop in Irenaeus' argumentation, has to have the same revelatory gift which filled the prophets and apostles. "Even though the rule of truth is the key to interpret the Scriptures, this key must be handled by gifted interpreters." (Rodrigues)

The Authoritative Hermeneutics in Tertullian

The key aspects for Tertullian's hermeneutics are strongly connected to how he understands the rule of truth/faith and tradition. The major question for him was: who has the right to use and interpret Scripture at all? For him, just the Church has this right. Rodrigues recognized a threefold definition of the *rule of faith* in Tertullian: given to the Church; THE instrument by which people get converted into Christians; the right faith. Certain aspects, like the doctrinal unity of all churches, prove that the church of his day was the apostolic church. For him, the rule of faith is enough for Christians. Asking questions that go beyond the rule of faith lead automatically into heresy, according to Tertullian.

An Evaluation of the Authoritative Hermeneutics

Tradition and Scripture

Without going into many details, Rodrigues pointed to the fact that so far he distinguished rather roughly between *oral tradition* and *written Scripture*. For a deeper look a closer definition was necessary. One distinction between *tradition* and *Scripture* by O. Cullmann seemed helpful: "apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical [or post-apostolic] tradition, the former being the foundation of the latter" [5] - using the term *apostolic* in a strict historical sense and with the understanding that the apostolate cannot be delegated but is given uniquely. Cullmann had the view that "by establishing the principle of a [biblical] canon the Church ... declared implicitly that from that time every subsequent tradition must be submitted to the control of the apostolic tradition" [6]. To look at the rule of faith from this perspective shows that this rule, "though transmitted in oral form, was accepted as a norm alongside scripture because it was considered as having been fixed by the apostles. What matters is not whether the apostolic tradition was oral or written, but that it was fixed by the apostles" [7]

Rodrigues stated that in the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian "the rule of faith does not represent an ecclesiastical tradition that has the same authority as the Scriptures" (Rodrigues). For the view of the authoritative hermeneutics the rule of faith was no problem. The notion, however, that the bishops, who supposedly stood in apostolic succession, got a gift of truth to correctly understand and teach the truth, according to Irenaeus, seems to say that the interpretation given by the bishops was still considered the last norm!

Hermeneutical Limitations

Concluding, Rodrigues referred to main limitations in Irenaeus' and Tertullian's hermeneutical approach of authority. One was the application field, or scope, of the rule of faith/truth: the rule as a summary of spiritual truth can generally guide the proper interpretation of a biblical passage, but "the richness of the Scriptural revelation cannot be merely reduced to a summary" (Rodrigues); thus the rule should not confine exegesis, as it would if one goes according to Tertullian, who submits Scripture to the rule of faith. Judging the result of exegesis could be a worthy task for the rule of faith, but guiding the exegetical process may result in very ambiguous interpretations, as can be seen in several of Irenaeus' and Tertullian's text interpretations.

Conclusion: Authoritative Hermeneutics in a Nutshell:

Noteworthy:

- a) emphasis of the church/fellowship of believers as the place of Bible interpretation
- b) the summary of apostolic belief as a guiding tool for interpreting the biblical text was highlighted

Disadvantages:

- a) no provision of exegetical methodology; can only control the results of interpretations of the biblical text
- b) danger of ignoring the differences between apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions (when e.g. Irenaeus argues for "the certain gift of truth")
- c) inclines to limit Scriptural interpretation to summary of beliefs (Tertullian)

These disadvantages soon made an authority "necessary", somebody, who had the *final say* on a biblical interpretation. This place of authority was more and more then filled by the Church.

Footnotes:

[1] Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 40.

[2] Philip Hefner, "Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus," *The Journal of Religion* 44, no. 4, 1964, 299.

[3] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (1.10.1, ANF 1:330-331).

[4] Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, Mn.: Liturgical Press, 1997), 11.

[5] Oscar Cullmann: "The Tradition," In *The Bible in the Early Church*, edited by Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993), 129-130.

[6] Cullmann, 140.

[7] Cullmann, 138.

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