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RESPONDING TO “*THINKING IT OVER ...*” ISSUE #23

A CALL FOR EXEGESIS AND CRITICAL THINKING IN AFRICA

I am responding to David Brondos’s recent “Thinking It Over” piece, because the situation we face in Ethiopia is similar to the situation he describes in Mexico:

Among many evangelicals, however, the adherence to the sola scriptura principle leads to literalistic readings of Scripture that many Lutherans regard as highly problematic, since such readings tend to generate fundamentalist forms of Christianity and contribute, in God’s name, to oppressive and unjust treatment of some groups, such as women.¹

Insisting on the authority of Scripture by itself is not enough. Even the devil knows and accepts the authority of Scripture and used it to tempt the Lord (Mt 4:1ff). What we represent, stand and argue for is more important than the mere authority of Scripture. All over Ethiopia, as well as the rest of Africa, people makes claims about the fear of God and God’s power, but there is not much critical thinking about God. We see the negative effect of this when some people in power use the name and Word of God to mislead, abuse and oppress others. In Africa, as in the past in Europe and the West, ecclesiastical authorities tend to be mistaken as speaking for God.

Luther and the Reformers reacted to the situation, and struggled to make *sola Scriptura* the real and only authority. However, soon after the Reformation it became evident that *sola Scriptura* by itself could not become the solution for all the problems we face both in- and outside the church. For example, some verses of the Bible telling slaves to be obedient

to their masters worked negatively against those who were slaves in the USA and elsewhere.

Critical thinking is not bad. Questioning authoritative speech, including in the Bible, actually can be helpful. This should not be seen as denying the authority of the God revealed through the Scriptures. Hermeneutical questions of application lead to deeper exegetical questions. We need to know what the text meant for its original audience, in order to discern what the text means for us today. Knowing what the text meant by itself does not mean we apply it today as it is. Most would agree with this. But some texts are used in argumentative ways, such as over the question of whether or not women should be ordained.

As Brondos says, many leaders of evangelical churches bypass the first step of exegesis and want to apply directly all the words of the Bible, because they want to see all things occur as in the Bible. Although I was born and raised as a Lutheran, I too was like this. Out of my spiritual eagerness, I wanted to see the literal fulfillment of the words of the Bible. Thus, in reading the Bible I focused mainly on the ethics, not on what God did for the salvation of all people. Now I realize how much I was lacking in exegetical training, as is the case for many church leaders in the global South.

Of course, many popular leaders in the global South, whose churches are dramatically growing in membership, may say that the Holy Spirit is not so much interested in exegetical training, and that their churches' growth a living witness or proof. But my response is that we need to pursue both the training and the evangelism.

In most of the sciences, things are measured with units. We do not as such have any theological unit to measure values. But Brondos does propose a measure or criteria for studying the Bible: "[W]hat ultimately is seen as being in conformity with God's will and command is whatever promotes and contributes to the wholeness and well-being of all."² How then can we measure whether a reading of the Bible or a practice is oppressive or liberating?

I know that all food (*brooma*) is declared clean through prayer and the Word of God (Mk 7:19, 1 Tim 4:3, etc). In principle, I believe this. Because of how I was brought up, I ate lamb, chicken, fish, goat and beef. A close Hindu friend is always criticizing me for slaughtering animals and eating meat. The practice of cloning and the use of the embryo for the treatment of some genetic diseases is acceptable for some Christians. For some abortion is acceptable. There also are people who claim to have sexual desire toward a person of the same gender.

We do not have any direct statement in the Bible for or against some of these practices. Is accepting them oppressive or liberating? Can exegesis help us to understand what is and is not in the text? Sometimes what promotes wholeness and well-being may seem vague, but this measure can be helpful. Some of what we need to deal with today is not even mentioned in the Bible, and may seem to be “extra-biblical,” or even extreme.

We cannot avoid interpreting the Scriptures as a community. Variations in interpretations require dialogue with others. Although I agree that no one is above Scripture, and all are subject to it, and that all believers can interpret Scriptures, still we need to admit that there should be some ecclesiastical authorities, at least those who are trained in biblical exegesis.

The “priesthood of all believers” is often quoted in connection with what Luther said, but this also needs proper exegesis. We need to give proper consideration to the contexts for understanding the background to this understanding, whether in 1 Peter 2:5, 9 or Exodus 19:6. The improper quotation of this phrase from Luther and the continuous translation of the Bible into the vernacular, to some extent, may have contributed toward oppressive readings of the Bible.

So, let us strive to have teachers, who are well trained, and who can train others. Then, as the liberated community of Jesus, where there should be no discrimination (Gal 3:27), we will be able to hold hands and be watchful of oppressive readers of the Bible that are trying to impose their authorities over us under the disguise of the authority of Scripture. May God bless us in this!

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NOTES

¹ David Brondos, “*Sola Scriptura* as a Liberating Principle: Reflections from the Global South,” *Thinking it Over ...*, issue 23 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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