

WHAT DOES “ALWAYS BEING REFORMED” EXEGESIS MEAN  
FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION?

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*Introduction*

Much contemporary Christian discussion currently focuses upon the Reformation. However, we must be careful to note that the Reformation being celebrated in 2017 is specifically the Magisterial Reformation of Martin Luther (31 October 1517, with his nailing of his theses to the Wittenberg castle church door) and of his immediate followers John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, as well as some others such as John Knox in Scotland. This is not necessarily a celebration of other reformations, such as the reformations of Jan Hus a century earlier or John Wycliffe two centuries earlier, the English Reformation of Thomas Cranmer, or the Radical Reformation, and in particular the Anabaptist Reformation, the last with its rejection of infant baptism and endorsement of the believers' church. However, despite the differences, many of these reforming groups have accepted what have become some of the major shibboleths of reformation. These include the five “solas” of Scripture, faith, grace, Christ, and glory of God.<sup>1</sup> Along with them is often invoked the Latin phrase *semper reformanda*. The phrase is often and usually translated as “always reforming,” and has come to be one of the hallmarks of the

1. Readers will note that I will avoid as much as possible the use of the Latin phrasing for any and all phrases associated with the Reformation and its shibboleths. I have found that it appears that far too many scholars wish to invoke the Latin terminology than wish to clarify it. Therefore, I think it better to avoid it, if at all possible. However, since we are discussing particular formulations, I will have to use such terminology more than I wish.

mindset of the Reformation. In this paper, I wish to address the implications of this important summative statement for the notion of exegesis. The problem is this: what does it mean that we are “always reforming” exegesis? Does this notion of “always reforming” provide boundaries on the approaches, methods, or conclusions that we can employ and arrive at within our exegesis? Or does it imply that we have freedom in our exegesis continually to develop exegetical methods, and with them conclusions, that progress even if they move away from what was envisioned by the Reformers? If there is freedom implied, what are the controls and boundaries of that freedom with respect to our exegetical practice? There are no doubt other implications of this phrase for exegesis as well. In this paper, I will first examine the phrase itself and its status within our knowledge of the Reformation. I will then examine the notion of exegesis in light of this historical discussion. I will finally propose ways that we can keep the spirit of “always reforming” present in our exegesis while retaining our relationship with the Reformation.

#### *Semper Reformanda and the History of this Phrase*

The phrase *semper reformanda* is closely associated with our notions of the Reformation, or at least with the Magisterial Reformation. This is to the point where discussion of the Reformation and its identifying characteristics often invokes *semper reformanda* as one of its hallmarks. This hallmark is often treated as if it sets important parameters for not just how we view the Reformation itself as a historical phenomenon but how we are to continue to view our relationship to the Reformation, that is, as people who are attempting to be faithful to the best tenets of the Reformation.

One must, therefore, note that there are a number of considerations directed to the phrase before we examine how it has a direct impact upon exegesis. First, the phrase is not simply *semper reformanda*, but (some version of) *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum dei* (“the reformed church, always being reformed, according to the word of God”). There are a number of dimensions to this fuller expression—even if it is

abbreviated as *semper reformanda*. One of these dimensions is to note that (and I acknowledge that I am speaking outside my area of expertise here and so subject to correction) *reformanda* is a Latin passive gerundive in the nominative singular. The Latin gerundive is a form not found in English, but is essentially a conjugated “verbal adjective” that usually expresses the sense of “necessity.”<sup>2</sup> Although *semper reformanda* is usually translated “always reforming,” a very strong case can be made for the phrase being rendered “always being reformed” or even “always to be reformed.” The first captures the participial quality of the verb and the second captures the sense of necessity of the gerundive. This immediately changes the situation regarding the use of this phrase, a factor I will return to below.

A second of these considerations is that the phrase “always being reformed” is specifically modifying the church, and not just the church but the reformed church. This places the notion of constantly or continually being reformed within the context of the church as itself already a reformed entity. This excludes those churches that are not reformed and those that are not interested in being reformed—in other words, a church following in the spirit of the Reformation or Reformations.

A third consideration is the prepositional phrase “according to the word of God.” The prepositional phrase, even if set off by commas as it often is when written, is an adjunct of the participial gerundive *reformanda*. Being reformed is to be done according to the word of God. The preposition itself, *secundum*, indicates the basis or ground of the action, and may be rendered in a variety of ways, such as “according to” or “in accordance with.”<sup>3</sup> The reformed church is always to be reformed, and it is always being reformed “according to the word of God.” More could be said about this entire phrase, but I believe that what I have said is sufficient to indicate that any definition of what it means to be

2. Gildersleeve and Lodge, *Gildersleeve's Latin Grammar*, par. 251. This form is sometimes referred to as the future passive participle.

3. Cf. Atherstone, “Implications,” 31, who renders the phrase “under the word of God.” The sense of the preposition is following along after, a linear metaphor, not a hierarchical one with one entity over another. The entire phrase is sometimes written as a complete sentence with the verb *est*.

“always being reformed,” if the phrase is adopted as a shibboleth of enduring value to the contemporary church, must also take these other definitional contextual indicators into account.

The fourth consideration regarding this phrase is that this phrase was, in fact, not a phrase familiar to the major reformers themselves. There has been some recent debate about the origins of this phrase, with one scholar even suggesting that the entire phrase was based upon a lecture that was given by Karl Barth in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Barth is responsible for much—some of it good and some of it bad—but we cannot lay this phrase at his feet. This phrase, or at least the heart of it, apparently predates him by 250 years. The phrase seems to have been formulated in at least a roughly equivalent form, not by the original reformers, but a full century and a half later during the Dutch Second Reformation. According to Andrew Atherstone, the “roots” of the phrase originate with the theologians Jodocus van Lodenstein (1629–1677) and Jacobus Koelman (1632–1695), on the basis of the writings of fellow Dutch theologian Johannes Hoornbeeck (1618–1666).<sup>5</sup> All three of these theologians were influenced by the Dutch theologian Gisbertus Voetius (Gijsbert Voet) (1589–1676), who was a participant in the Synod of Dort in 1619 that was responsible for formulating the five points of Calvinism. However, even this is not certain. Michael Horton attributes the entire phrase itself to van Lodenstein but without a reference to where one might find it in his work,<sup>6</sup> while R. Scott Clark believes that the final prepositional phrase was not added until the twentieth century by the modern Princetonian Edward Dowey (1918–2003) but again without reference.<sup>7</sup> The phrase has become recognizably favored by later writers, became especially prominent in the twentieth century, and continues to be heralded today, especially in this time of Reformation celebration. However, there are several

4. This view is attributed to Michael Bush (“Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” 285–99) by Atherstone, “Implications,” 31.

5. See Atherstone, “Implications,” 31. For a summary of views, see Koffeman, “*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*,” esp. 1–2.

6. Horton, “Semper Reformanda,” 1.

7. Clark, “Always Abusing,” 1.

observations to make about the later formulation of this phrase. The first is that it was not associated with the Magisterial Reformation. Whatever one may think of the phrase and whatever one may think about the later Dutch Second Reformation, this phrase was not associated with the origins and even first hundred or so years of the Magisterial Reformation—and certainly not associated with any of the other preceding or contemporary Reformations so far as I have been able to ascertain. The second observation about this phrase and its later origins is that it originated within the context of later Dutch Reformation thought, especially the kind of theology formulated around the Synod of Dort and its rejection of Arminianism and endorsement of the five main points of belief of Reformed theology. Not only is it later, but its origins are specific to that Dutch Reformation thought of a subsequent century, a generally intolerant and hard-lined Reformation belief that has tended towards exclusion rather than cooperation.

The third observation is that we must understand the phrase within the context of the implications of the Synod of Dort and its theology. There were many varieties of Reformation thought, even within the Magisterial Reformation. The Synod of Dort was an attempt to come to terms with and respond to some of the ways in which Reformation ideas had developed, in particular the beliefs of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) who had already died by the time of the Synod. Arminius was opposed for developing some ideas within Calvinism—whose thought had come to dominate Dutch Reformed theology—especially views of God’s decree regarding salvation (occurring after the fall, infralapsarianism, rather than before the fall, supralapsarianism), grace, and atonement.<sup>8</sup> The irony of all of this is that the statement that the Reformed church is always to be reforming according to the word of God characterizes Arminius more than it does those who formulated the saying and who were responding to Arminius,

8. For discussion of Arminius and his beliefs, see Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 179–82, who notes that the “entire controversy took place among Calvin’s followers” (180); cf. Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, 399–401; Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 765.

especially since it is arguable that the Arminian view was arrived at through contemplation of Scripture, rather than being imposed from without.

The fifth consideration is that this statement, as indicated above, continues to be invoked in more recent times. As a representative statement, we may turn to a formulation of Karl Barth. Barth attempted to define the statement in his *Church Dogmatics*. After discussing and in essence attempting to reject modernism (despite his own use of its methods in his own exegesis) and with it progress, Barth states,

What counts in the Church is not progress but reformation—its existence as *ecclesia semper reformanda*. *Semper reformari* [always reformed], however, does not mean always to go with the time, to let the current spirit of the age be the judge of what is true and false, but in every age, and in controversy with the spirit of the age, to ask concerning the form and doctrine and order and ministry which is in accordance with the unalterable essence of the Church. It means to carry out to-day better than yesterday the Christian community's one task which needs no revision, and in this way to 'sing unto the Lord a new song.' It means never to grow tired of returning not to the origin in time but to the origin in substance of the community. The Church is catholic when it is engaged in this *semper reformari*, so that Catholicism has nothing to do with conservatism either . . . Therefore neither flirtation with the old nor flirtation with the new makes the Church the true Church, but a calm consideration of that which as its abiding possession is superior to every yesterday and to-day and is therefore the criterion of its catholicity.<sup>9</sup>

We need not debate the level of nonsense contained within this statement, which in many ways is typical of the verbosity and obscurity of Barth throughout his work.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the lack of sense, the major factor that Barth clearly excludes is what it means for the church to be reformed according to the word of God. In keeping with Barth's neo-orthodox inclinations, one that defines orthodox theological terms with modern theological

9. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1:705.

10. Commented upon, but of course rejected, by his translators in Bromiley and Torrance, "Editors' Preface," viii.

concepts,<sup>11</sup> he neglects to mention that it is the church being reformed according to the word of God that is what defines the reformed church. I think that this is an important—and I would argue, at least for Barth’s formulation, telling and even damning—formulation of the issue.

So what are we to do with such a phrase in relation to exegesis, especially knowing its checkered history and the consequences that it has already wrought?

#### *Exegesis in Relation to Semper Reformanda*

The simple and most straightforward answer to the question of what to make of this phrase in relation to exegesis is simply to reject it as impertinent. The phrase was formulated—if it was formulated at all by them and not later—in a later Reformation for a particular, and I might add narrow, group within Reformation circles. The phrase is, in many respects, a product of its time, an object of somewhat curious historical and theological interest.

Despite having said this, I also think that there is something of importance in this phrase that deserves further discussion—if for no other reason than many have taken sides regarding this phrase, using it for either preservative or progressive purposes, as Barth makes clear. I wish to side with neither, but to think out loud further about how a statement addressed to the church—taking reformed church in the sense of any protestant church, including one in the Anabaptist reformed tradition—might envision an ongoing process of being reformed according to or in accordance with God’s word.

The scope of my discussion must be limited to exegesis, not any greater or further extensions of what is meant by *semper reformanda* in other contexts. On the basis of what I have

11. Some recent scholarship wishes to reject Barth as a neo-orthodox theologian and represent him as thoroughly orthodox. The fact that he uses orthodox terminology in new (and arguably unorthodox) ways is the major, though not the only, argument in favor of his status as such. See Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 214–26, esp. 224.

mentioned above, I believe that there are several characteristics of “always being reformed” that must be duly considered in a discussion of exegesis. These include the meaning of the phrase “always being reformed,” the context of it defining the “reformed church,” and the further definition of being reformed “according to the word of God.” Before we can talk about exegesis, or rather, if we are to speak of exegesis in light of this phrase, we must understand these three components of its composition.

The first is what is meant by the phrase “always being reformed” itself. The word “being reformed” may indicate a variety of notions. In one respect, Barth clearly grasped that many interpret the notion of “reforming” in its broadest sense of constant change and adaptation, what some might call “progress.” There is no doubt that the term may mean that. However, it probably only has that sense if it is not being used in the context of the entire phrase. As it is used in the context of the entire phrase, “always being reformed” includes at least three elements to its meaning. The first is that the gerundive is an attribute of the “reformed church.” In other words, there is a conscious play on the word “reform” that cannot be satisfied quite so easily by any other word. “Being reformed” in this context seems to indicate not just change or adaptation or even progress, but change that is within the reformation spirit of the reformed church. That is, this “reforming” must be consistent with the spirit of the Reformation, and in particular the church that is the product of the Reformation. However, having said that, is it entirely clear, especially in light of the development of the phrase itself, what such a reforming spirit means? Arminius no doubt thought of himself as bringing a necessary—and for him scripturally motivated—critique and correction to the major tenets of Calvinistic Dutch Reformed thought. He considered himself a Dutch Reformed theologian, and had been given the task of thinking about particular doctrines in light of his knowledge of Scripture. He happened to arrive at conclusions that were found to be outside the bounds of what had already been decided constituted the limits of such thought (and arguably thereby were perhaps more theological than scriptural). Many later thinkers who would consider

themselves Reformed in theology have arrived at much more radical and progressive conclusions than did Arminius, including someone like Barth, but not only Barth. There are numerous Reformed thinkers whose thought would now fall well beyond the extended boundaries drawn by Arminius. In other words, the question is raised what it means to be being reformed in light of how reformation within a reformed context has been previously defined.

The second element is that of agency. The passive verb implies an external agent. The reformed church is being reformed, but by whom or what? The church might be the implied agent, in which case being reformed is something that is enacted by the reformed church. That, however, seems redundant, as it is the church that is in need of being reformed. The following prepositional phrase does not strictly indicate agency, but it does indicate the standard or point of comparison for being reformed—the word of God. Even if the church is not being reformed by the word of God, it is at least being reformed in accordance with the word of God, that is, to be brought into accordance and conformity with the word of God. This formulation indicates that the agent of the church being reformed is God. The church by its nature as a human institution, despite its being reformed, is in constant need of being further reformed. This reformation does not occur by means of the church itself but is being done by God to bring it into conformity with the standard he has established in Scripture.

The third element is the necessity of being reformed. The gerundive has a sense of necessity that is to be implemented on its governing noun, the church. The sense of necessity indicates that this is not a normal or natural process, one that can and will occur simply by the nature of the church existing, but requires the actions of the agent, God, working through various means. What it means, so the phrase seems to say, is that being reformed is a necessary part of what it means to be the reformed church, subject to God's reforming activity to bring it into accordance with his word.

The second phrase is the notion of the "reformed church." For those who originally formulated this saying, the reformed church

was the Reformed Church as found in the Netherlands in the early to mid-seventeenth century. In particular, the phrase “reformed church, always being reformed, according to the word of God” is a specific formulation by those who sided with those who strongly and even polemically rejected their being reformed by Arminius. By their formulation, any other Reformed church—or at least any Reformed church that did not subscribe to the Canons of Dort, and in particular the five main points of Calvinist doctrine—would not fall within the ambit of this phrase. At least that is how they treated Arminius and his followers. This means that any other church, even if it identified itself as Reformed, if it did not subscribe to these canons would arguably fall outside the purview of this phrasing. This means that there are many churches that would intentionally not fall within the understanding of this phrase. I find it difficult to know what to think about this phrase in relation to these other churches, when the phrase was consciously written to exclude them by definition, as what it meant to be a reformed church had already been defined through the Synod of Dort.

The third phrase is “according to the word of God.” This phrase is an important one, as we witnessed by observing that Barth’s discussion takes place wholly apart from it, and is weakened because of it. This modifying prepositional phrase, it seems to me, is in fact the crucial phrase for this entire shibboleth. What it means to be the reformed church and what it means to always be being reformed is determined by being reformed according to the authority and standard of the word of God. The word of God provides the standard against which the reformed church must function to be the reformed church and provides the scope of what always being reformed entails. This, however, does not necessarily solve the problem of trying to formulate a view of what is appropriate exegesis, since as we have already noted from the outset there have been those who have believed that their views have in fact been according to the word of God, not only Arminius but many others since that time, such as even the Anabaptists on their view of baptism.

Reformed theologians continue to the present to struggle with what this phrase means. In 2006, in the introduction to a book

that he edited entitled *Always Reforming*, A. T. B. McGowan noted the same kind of tension that Barth had noted: the failure to live up to the phrase “always reforming” (note that this is how he and his fellow authors translate and interpret it) by using the phrase either to “justify abandoning the core of Reformation theology and departing from received orthodoxy” or to justify “a rigid confessionalism, giving the impression that the final codification of truth has already taken place and that there is no further need for reformation.”<sup>12</sup> His argument for “always reforming” is that “God speaks today . . . Theologians make mistakes . . . New issues require new thinking . . . Scripture must have priority over Confessions . . .” and “The right of private judgment [sic].”<sup>13</sup> If these observations constitute the argument for always reforming, there are also necessary boundaries to it. These include theology being subordinate to Scripture, occurring in the church, and respecting tradition, as well as being done in a proper way.<sup>14</sup> What McGowan does not say is what the role of exegesis is within the notion of always reforming (or being reformed). In fact, a case may well be made that those other than followers in the footsteps of the Dutch reformers need not pay any attention to this phrase at all, after all, those who formulated it had very little tolerance for other positions, and even for those who held relatively similar views to themselves. Nevertheless, if we take the phrase in the sense of indicating that the reformed church is the church not just of the Magisterial Reformation but the church inspired by various attempts at reformation in an effort to purge the church of unnecessary and erroneous beliefs and attempting to do so on the basis of Scripture, then I think that we might still be able to

12. McGowan, “Introduction,” 13.

13. *Ibid.*, 13–16. Not only is the parallelism off, but the author seems to shift from the importance of always reforming to the reasons for it.

14. *Ibid.*, 16–17. I note that within the volume, none of the essays, even though they are addressed to a variety of topics within reformation theology, specifically addresses the topic of exegesis, even though a couple are more biblical than others. One essay has a short discussion of exegesis: Gamble, “Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” esp. 213–14, where two paragraphs are devoted to exegesis, though without reference to “always reforming.”

redeem a phrase that is arguably as problematic as it is productive.

*Implications of Exegesis that is Always Being Reformed*

The history of exegesis is a long and complex one that cannot be traced in detail here. There are a number of surveys of biblical interpretation that offer insights into how the field has developed over the years. The Reformers used a form of grammatical-historical exegesis that inherited much from earlier medieval theology but drew upon the revival of classical learning of the Renaissance. The Enlightenment developed such methods further into what has come to be known as historical criticism. The history of historical criticism is filled with a range of further developments. These include various views of the Greek language, the historical context of early Christianity, the appropriate historical issues attending the composition of the various books, developments in source, form, redaction, and tradition criticism, views of the canon and its formation and interpretation, structuralism and poststructuralism, literary interpretation and its various progeny such as reader-response and narrative criticism, and a wide variety of types of ideological criticisms, such as feminist and other gender-oriented criticisms, postcolonialism, and cultural studies, no doubt among many others. I have no way of knowing, but I am willing to surmise that there is probably at least one exegete among those who have practiced each of these and other forms of criticism that would consider him or herself as being faithful to what the word of God indicates and who believes that he or she is interpreting within the purview of the reformed church. Even if I am wrong and there are some criticisms that may be excluded on this criterion, there still remain a large number to be included and the issue of how to include some and exclude others. The question is how do we determine which forms of exegesis fall within legitimate bounds and which ones do not?

For some, this may be an easy question to ask and to answer. Some might posit that the way that we determine legitimate forms of exegesis in the spirit of always being reformed is on the

basis of its results. This, however, simply begs the question. If we already know the results that are acceptable, then what does it mean to be reforming, except to rediscover, perhaps in new language, what we already know. There is no place for new knowledge (admitting that the Reformers did not know everything) or correcting mistaken knowledge (admitting that the Reformers did not get everything correct and may in fact have made errors), to say nothing of finding new ways to approach and even reformulate old knowledge.

In light of this discussion, I suggest that any exegetical method must promote the notion of reforming thought in accordance with the word of God. That is, it must use the word of God as the standard against which any reforming interpretation occurs. There may well be those who reject such a starting point. I can understand their hesitation. However, I am attempting to define exegesis in light of being reformed according to the word of God.

How do we test such a method? This is not so easy. I have examined eight relatively recent and standard introductions to New Testament exegesis. These include books on exegesis (in roughly chronological order of their first publication) by Werner Kümmel, Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann, John Hayes and Carl Holladay, Gordon Fee, Werner Stenger, Michael Gorman, Richard Erickson, and Craig Blomberg and Jennifer Foutz Markley. There may be others, but these are the ones I have used. Just so I am clear, all of them include the text of Scripture somewhere in their discussion of exegesis. However, how they present their approach in relation to Scripture as providing the basis for exegesis varies considerably.

Kümmel offers two points of view for exegesis: the first “to learn from the text what it says about the historical circumstances at the time,” including composition, author, readers and intellectual milieu,<sup>15</sup> and the second “to discover the objective meaning of the text.”<sup>16</sup> Both are legitimate, but history is listed first. Kümmel then turns to textual criticism, language,

15. Kaiser and Kümmel, *Exegetical Method*, 43.

16. *Ibid.*, 44.

introduction, and exegesis itself. In this case, Scripture is fighting with history, and in fact is already in second place.

Conzelmann and Lindemann begin their methodological discussion with basic concepts. One of these is the “text” of the New Testament books whose “significance is found in their special prominence that the Christian church accords them as ‘sacred writings.’”<sup>17</sup> Note that Conzelmann and Lindemann do not say that they *are* sacred writings, only that the church accords them that status. However, they do recognize that the Bible is different from other ancient writings in its “message”: “It is a collection of specific historical documents that attest to and present the Jewish, as well as the Christian faith, according to a great variety of theological opinions. The only . . . presupposition for the exegesis of these witnesses is the assumption that their expressions are somehow meaningful and that it is therefore worthwhile to pay attention to them.”<sup>18</sup> After a few more preliminary statements, the authors turn to tools, language, text, literary genres, exegetical methods, source, form, and redaction criticisms, before considering the environment of primitive Christianity and then the content of the New Testament and the history of early Christianity.

Hayes and Holladay situate exegesis as both an everyday activity and a specialized discipline, and then problematize the exegetical process around issues such as critical distance, language, culture, history, processes of composition, multiple texts, and, lastly, the fact that some consider them sacred. By this, they mean that “Scriptures,” because there are many, “bears special relationships to the communities that consider them sacred.”<sup>19</sup> They later add: “That the Bible falls into the category of sacred Scripture needs no special comment.”<sup>20</sup> They do comment further, to note that there has been abundant biblical exegesis

17. Conzelmann and Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament*, 1.

18. *Ibid.*, 3. The excluded phrase is “and for the time being preliminary.” I don’t see any place where the authors retract or modify this statement elsewhere.

19. Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

through the centuries and that it is encompassed in tradition. After some comments on meaning, they break down exegesis into its various types of criticism.

Fee states right at the outset that exegesis “is used in this book in a consciously limited sense to refer to the historical investigation into the meaning of the biblical text.”<sup>21</sup> By this he means that it inquires regarding what the author meant, what the author said, and what the author intended his audience to understand. In keeping with this, Fee begins with historical context and proceeds to genre-based analysis of individual pericopes.

Stenger asks the question of whether New Testament exegesis is a concept. His answer is “no”:

No, not if by that term we mean that the New Testament—or the whole Bible for that matter—is to be read differently or interpreted by methods different from those applied to the countless other books that make up the enormous library of humankind. Serious biblical exegesis, exegesis that reflects the intellectual gains of the modern age, stands or falls with the principle of the equality of the exegetical methods applied to the Bible with those applied to other books.<sup>22</sup>

It is no wonder that he must then discuss the “theological problems of the historical-critical method.” He admits that he cannot “solve the problem of how one is to make that qualitative transition from the historical elements of biblical texts to theological statements that are relevant for today.”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, he proceeds through his exegetical method from the problem of the original text to questions of form and method.

Gorman begins with the recognition that reading the Bible will present problems of interpretation, especially as the Bible is religious literature: “literature that makes claims on us.” Such despair, he assures his readers, is “unnecessary,” as there are recognized ways of interpreting the Bible.<sup>24</sup> He defines exegesis as “the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a

21. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 27.

22. Stenger, *Introduction*, 1.

23. *Ibid.*, 7.

24. Gorman, *Elements*, 9.

text,” which he equates with a conversation.<sup>25</sup> He does however offer three basic types of approach to exegesis, including synchronic, diachronic, and existential.<sup>26</sup> His own method is “eclectic,” drawing upon the three different types, while recognizing that there is no one correct method.<sup>27</sup> He then outlines his approach, starting with survey and proceeding to analysis and then synthesis.

After problematizing the notion of the clarity of the Bible, Blomberg and Markley engage in misguided etymologizing by contending that “exegesis” comes from two Greek words that refer “to the process of leading out from a text its original meaning.”<sup>28</sup> They then almost immediately offer a summary and then the fuller version of their ten-step program, beginning with textual criticism, and then (somewhat surprisingly) translation, historical-cultural context, literary context, word studies, grammar, interpretive problems, outlining, theology, and application. The order is strange at best, but clearly demotes some of the essentials of understanding.

I turn now to the last of the exegesis books I have surveyed, but not the last one written. Erickson’s book begins where none of the others do. He begins with this statement: “In my view there is scarcely anything more important to the health and welfare of the Christian church than a firm grasp of the message embedded in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>29</sup> He continues by saying that he has taught exegesis for a long time (hence justifying his book, a feature not unique to his book) and then admitting that he is a Christian and writes from that standpoint. He then offers his assumptions, not about exegesis but about himself as a Christian writing this book on exegesis. They include (these are his headings): “The Inspired Word of God,” “Holy Scripture and the ‘Word of Life,’” “Flocks and Shepherds” (the role of informed

25. Ibid., 10.

26. Ibid., 12–20. However, I would disagree with his classification (and even definitions) of many of these methods.

27. Ibid., 23.

28. Blomberg and Markley, *Handbook*, xii.

29. Erickson, *Beginner’s Guide*, 17.

teachers in the church), and “The Holy Spirit as Interpreter”—all before he (then) defines exegesis, including recognizing the importance of the original languages.<sup>30</sup> His method itself proceeds with the text, its structure, language (what he calls syntax and discourse analysis), before history and culture, and then various genres.

If we take the Reformed manifesto seriously, we see that there are some interesting questions to be raised for those involved in exegesis by the various books on exegesis itself—even if none of them that I found actually uses the phrase we are considering.

First, even though there are no doubt a number of exegetes who hold to a similar position as that of Erickson, few seem to be willing to state it and none so clearly as he does. Erickson clearly places himself within the Reformation tradition of being reformed by doing exegesis according to the word of God. By stating his position as he does, he in effect places the reformation phrase as the beginning point of his exegesis in such a way that it cannot help but affect how he does exegesis (or guides students in doing exegesis) and what his results are.

Second, the alternative assumptions that are posited by some of the exegetical guides inevitably lead their treatments of exegesis in other directions. Since Stenger begins with treating exegesis of the Bible as if it were identical with reading any other work of literature, it comes as no surprise that he has to raise—even though he cannot answer—the problem of how theology and the historical-critical method interact with each other. Those who begin with questions of history also move in different directions, usually ways that demote the status of the text even if in subtle ways. For example, Kümmel raises historical questions first, and then ends up endorsing translations as sufficient for the exegetical task. This is not much different from the approach that Fee takes, when he tells students at the outset that their knowledge of Greek need not extend beyond the alphabet to do sufficient exegesis.<sup>31</sup> Even the treatment by Blomberg

30. *Ibid.*, 18–20, 21–22.

31. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 29.

and Markley, although it recognizes the place of Greek, places translation before consideration of word studies and grammar (whether these should be separated or treated in this order or one of them at all is another question), clearly indicating that translation is a sufficient initial step in understanding the text. The most potentially destructive example is probably found in Conzelmann and Lindemann, whose distant view of the text of Scripture turns very early to critical methods that focus upon the text in order to discuss what lies behind the text, as in source, form, and redaction criticism.

I would propose that exegesis in the spirit of the Reformation phrase of the reformed church “always being reformed” according to the word of God needs to be reformulated in the following ways. First, the presuppositions of exegesis must be clearly acknowledged. I commend Erickson for doing what few others have been willing to do and that is to lay out his assumptions regarding Scripture at the outset of his treatment. He does not minimize or hide or subordinate to a chapter on application his views of the importance of the divine nature of Scripture. This approach inaugurates exegesis at least from the right starting point, that it is being conducted with the inspired sacredness of Scripture acknowledged.

Second, exegesis must not just acknowledge a view of Scripture, but it must place Scripture at the center of exegesis. In other words, the object of exegesis is not history or culture or religion or other forms and types of literature, but the object of exegesis that a church being reformed according to the word of God must focus upon, God’s word. I like to make the distinction between first-order and second-order exegesis. First-order exegesis places Scripture at its center. Second-order exegesis encompasses all of the related exegetical concerns that emanate out from this central concern. None of the treatments that I surveyed took such an approach. They all may have acknowledged a place for the Bible in some way, but these places varied according to the exegetical treatment. These ranged from being central and focal to secondary and subordinate. In none of them was there a clear declaration that the text needed to be, first and foremost, the ground of interpretation and the test and check of interpretation.

Third, if Scripture is at the center of exegesis, then we must utilize all of the best resources for studying that text. In a previous study, I surveyed the approaches to language found in these same introductions to exegesis.<sup>32</sup> I note that only Erickson recognizes in any significant way the importance of utilizing the most recent linguistic analytical tools for studying the text, while all of the others used traditional grammar as the extent of their linguistic investigation. This is not to say that modern linguistics is the exegetical panacea—as there are a variety of methods and models for linguistic analysis, some with greater strengths than others—but the exegete who places the biblical text at the center of exegetical practice will want to avail him or herself of the most useful and insightful approaches to language, those that have been developed over the last fifty or one-hundred years in response to increasing and developing knowledge of language.

Fourth, such an exegetical approach allows us to organize appropriately the variety of exegetical options. Gorman provides an attempt at such organization in his distinction between synchronic, diachronic, and existential methods. However, he does so without recognizing the necessary prior step of focusing upon the study of Scripture itself as central to the exegetical task. This is perhaps because Gorman's overriding exegetical interest is theological interpretation of Scripture. For him, that is the primary goal of exegesis, whereas I would say that theological interpretation, of whatever kind, is a second-order interpretation that must be dependent upon and reflective of previous study of the text of Scripture. However, there are other ways of organizing the varied methods of exegetical enquiry. Some of these emphasize the constitution of the text, that is, what makes up the text, others focus upon the nature of those involved in the text and their social relations, and still others focus upon the major ideas, teachings, or theology of the text. All of these can and must be organized in an appropriate array as dependent upon primary consideration of the text of Scripture itself.

Fifth, such exegesis must be done within the sphere of the church as itself an institution being reformed. This statement

32. Porter, "What is the Relationship."

seems to imply that only those who are members of Christ's church (using the term in its sense of universal church) are qualified as exegetes of Scripture. There is no doubt that many outside the church have provided interesting insights into the interpretation of Scripture and will continue to do so. However, I do not believe that, no matter what their effort or insight, they will ever achieve the kind of transformative understanding indicated by this phrase. That is, they will never be fully engaged in exegesis that is being reformed according to the word of God and in service of the church. Failure to be a part of the church, the essential body for reforming exegesis, necessitates their never being fully conversant in the language of that body. Even if they practice the same methods, their results can never penetrate to the heart of the notion of what being reformed according to the word of God entails. For this kind of exegesis, one must be able to make the kinds of affirmations that Erickson so boldly does.

Sixth, we must be open to both discovering new exegetical insights and reaffirming traditional knowledge. As already noted, there have been two unfortunate tendencies to use the phrase regarding "always being reformed," one to reinforce traditional belief and squelch new thought and the other to encourage new thought and dismiss tradition. Neither is helpful or necessary. Just as the Dutch Second Reformation clarified the thought of Calvin, so subsequent Christian interpreters have legitimately further interpreted their predecessors. This process has continued, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad, throughout the history of the Christian church, especially since the time of the Reformations, magisterial or otherwise. New Testament exegesis must be a part of this process of evaluation, confirmation, and development of our understandings of the text of Scripture. If it is done within the purview of what it means to be within Christ's church and in accordance with God's word, then there can be legitimate parameters on the exegetical process and its conclusions.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has raised the question of what is meant by the reformation shibboleth “the reformed church always being reformed according to the word of God.” This is in many ways a more problematic than helpful phrase, due to its interpretation and its history. However, in many ways the phrase not only serves as a cogent reminder of some of the priorities of reformation in its various forms, including the Magisterial Reformation and others besides, but serves as a contemporary standard by which we can examine and evaluate the exegesis that we do. It is unfortunate that many, if not most, of the guides to learning of exegesis seem to lack a vital underlying plank regarding their view of Scripture in their superstructure for establishing the exegetical process. However, I believe that it is possible to conceive of a new way of organizing our exegetical task that places the text of Scripture—God’s word—at the heart of exegesis so that we can be a reformed church (with a lower case r) that is being reformed through our exegetical process in accordance with the word of God, and it is incumbent upon us as exegetes to see that that is responsibly instigated.

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