

## A FEW THOUGHTS MADE WHILE CROSSING A MINEFIELD

*BY BASIL GRAFAS*

As one trained and at home in the fields of history and theology, discussing exegesis, hermeneutics and Bible translation may be something akin to waltzing through a minefield; inadvisable at best. Nevertheless, I stumbled on an old article by the then Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) that started me thinking. It is not as though I quote popes at every opportunity either, but his thoughts resonated in me. I think they also provide cautions that those of us who are evangelicals engaged in the mission of the Church, whether as translators, church planters, teachers or missionaries, would do well to heed.

‘Biblical Interpretation in Crisis’, the 1988 Erasmus Lecture probed the impact of modern ‘scientific’ methods on biblical understanding.<sup>1</sup> The author sets the tone for his paper by citing the book, *History of the Antichrist* by Wladimir Solowjew. In it, the antichrist commended himself to believers on the grounds that he had received a doctorate in theology at the University of Tübingen and had pioneered innovative works in the field of exegesis. Ratzinger follows with a short history of how modernism took over the field of scholarly biblical interpretation, a position that it holds to this day.

It is, as many of us know, a sad story flowing from Immanuel Kant’s pen. By placing an impenetrable divide between God and human beings, Kant decreed for future generations that we could indeed believe the Bible, but we could never afford to it the same sort of unshakable trust we give to scientific methods. It also meant that we could believe God, but that belief was not in any way connected to how we study the Bible. God was altogether too incomprehensible to be of use in such a detailed, analytical exercise. This later became just another book that could, with the tools of historical-critical method, be placed on the examination ta-

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, ‘Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The 1988 Erasmus Lecture’, in *First Things*, see [www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis](http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis) (18 July 2009).

ble and dissected to our heart's content. It became a very human collection of stories, myths and aphorisms and nothing more than that. Finally, in their fascination with all things new, modern scholars effectively cut off the interpretation of the Bible from any methods that predated the modern. As Ratzinger noted, the exegesis of the church fathers was, under the assault of the modern, pigeonholed as 'allegory' and therefore not reliable. Likewise, the medieval or Reformational interpretation was labeled as 'pre-critical' and anything pre-critical must be less than something critical. As in every other area of our contemporary lives, we succumbed to the modern.

Ratzinger notes that modern exegesis, unlike earlier versions that intermingled method with doctrine and devotion as a spiritual exercise of worship, claimed 'an exactness and certitude similar to natural sciences'. Any walk through a decent biblical/theological library or the website of an organization committed to translation verifies the essential truth of this. Having said this, I do not mean that people who exegete or translate think that they have an infallible tool for making perfect analyses. Most of the capable people I have met in these pursuits have a very real appreciation of the tenuousness of their products. Nevertheless, I often get the impression that they have great confidence in the tools they employ, even if they have a healthy skepticism of their own ability to see things clearly and objectively. If anything, the tools might need a bit of tweaking, or perhaps we need a bit more technology or modern insight to help us over the hump.

The author, without throwing out the considerable contributions of the last two hundred years or more, questions the heart of the modern enterprise and makes suggestions that redress the greater errors of Enlightenment hubris. He quotes Romano Guardini's appraisal of the new methods as producing false certainty based on overly simplistic consideration of all the factors impinging on meaning. Ratzinger points out that they are false because the new methods fail to account for the 'depth and dynamism of the word'. Words have thick and dynamic meanings that are intertwined with a variety of contexts. In other words, for all of their scientific trappings, modern methods of interpretation tend to be simplistic, narrow and unsophisticated.

Ratzinger further points out that modern theologians such as Bultmann and Dibelius paved the way for serious problems in contemporary

interpretation (whether they are done by theological liberals, conservatives or evangelicals) by debasing historical and social context, only valuing the word itself. In other words, only the meaning of words spoken matters; their contexts do not. Communication equated to words that acted as symbols for ideas, but their settings and the speech acts that accompanied were completely divorced from meaning.

This is disastrous for interpretation. It disembodied words and made their historic contents superfluous. More dangerously, it led to a *docetic Christology in which the reality, that is the concrete fleshly existence of Christ and especially of man, is removed from the realm of meaning*. All you have to do is separate the kernel of truth from the historic, cultural husk and you can be sure that you have done well in your interpretive task. Does that sound familiar?

The best part of Ratzinger's article was his list of hopes for the future of biblical interpretation. Let me list and summarize each:

1. Scientific exegesis must recognize its own philosophical presuppositions and prejudices in its ground rules for interpretation. It must then consider what the outcomes have been because of these.
2. Exegesis can no longer be conducted in a *unilinear, synchronic fashion. Exegesis must recognize itself as a historical discipline* in order to evaluate the utility of its methods compared in a non-prejudicial way to those of other times and places. In other words, the newest methods we have developed along a pretty narrow line do not ensure that we have better or wiser interpretation. We need to compare our approaches to others critically and then learn from them. Perhaps, another way of looking at what Ratzinger meant is to say that simply refining a methodology, regardless of how carefully, is no protection from significant error. Furthermore, only maintaining changes and improvements within a family of tools is also not sufficient. The Bible is bigger than that. The cardinal did not say it that way, but I think it is exactly what he meant.
3. *Philological and scientific literary methods are and will remain critically important for a proper exegesis*, but an accurate understanding of the *philosophical implications of their interpretive*

*process is required.* This requires a comparison with other methods and their philosophical assumptions. *Thus, it is not sufficient to scan simply the last one hundred and fifty years.*

4. We need to critically examine our exegetical methods and see what impact they have had on our real engagement with the text. This, in the author's opinion will lead to a new, fruitful collaboration between exegesis and systematic theology.
5. Finally, the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the church.

The current pope has given us much to consider in this cautionary article, whether we engage his thoughts as theologians, pastors, missionaries, teachers or translators. If we are Western, we have been trained in methods that have been shaped tremendously by modernism. We would do well to heed Ratzinger's warning and examine ourselves.