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Carl M. Leth

Olivet Nazarene University, cleth@olivet.edu

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Carl M. Leth

Prophezei – A Reformation Model for Interpretation of Scripture

The topic of this meeting – *The Future of Scripture* – is not new. The nature of the authority and interpretation of Scripture has been a recurrent question throughout the history of the church. As such, it may be that prior conversations may not only be of interest to us, but may even serve as a resource for us as we consider this question in our own context. It is in that hope that we revisit the work of Ulrich Zwingli and the development of reform in 16th century Zurich.

To learn productively from historical events it is necessary that we understand them on their own terms. To productively consider the place of Scripture in the Reformation it will be necessary for us to move beyond – or behind – our popular characterizations of the question. In this case, those characterizations shape how we think about the legacy of the Reformation regarding biblical authority.

The question of biblical authority always must have at least two aspects. The first is the question of the essential authority of the text. To what extent should it be considered normative? In any number of Protestant pulpits on any given Reformation Sunday we may hear the declaration that the Reformers reclaimed the primary authority of Scripture for doctrine and life. But, in fact, the primacy of the authority of Scripture was a given for medieval Catholic theology. On this question there was relatively little difference in principal between the Reformers and their medieval Catholic predecessors. Tradition, as an alternative source for doctrine, was largely the legacy of the hyper-Catholicism emerging from the Council of Trent.¹

The second aspect of the question of Biblical authority is the rightful understanding or interpretation of the text. Assuming we regard the biblical text as authoritative, how should we interpret the text rightly, that is, authoritatively? For the most part, pre-reformation theology worked from the assumption that tradition was the church's considered historical reflection on the meaning of Scripture. That is, tradition, not as an alternative to Scripture, but a hermeneutical

¹ See Alister McGrath's treatment in *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, Blackwell, 1987, 122-151.

assumption concerning the right interpretation of Scripture. On this second question the marked divergence of the Reformation with the Catholic precedents emerges. It is precisely here that we find the most significant innovations of the Reformation with regard to Scripture – how Scripture may be rightly interpreted. As a result the Reformation – in its varied streams – redefines the shape of Western Christianity with regard to Scripture.

This paper proposes a focused inquiry into the model of scriptural interpretation that is embodied in the practice of Prophezei in Zurich at the outset of the Reformation. Prophezei was the interpretive creation of Ulrich Zwingli, the early Swiss Reformer who led the reformation of Zurich. It actualizes his assumptions about Scripture, its authority, and its right interpretation.

Prophezei

On June 19, 1525, with a prayer of invocation, Ulrich Zwingli officially marked the beginning of Prophezei in Zurich.² The name was given by Zwingli himself, drawn from I Corinthians 14. Instituted for the purpose of biblical study, Prophezei was an integral part of the Zurich reformation and reflects the unique mixture of influences in that reformation. It is as a product of the Swiss, Humanist and Reformation concerns and characteristics that Prophezei is formed. It may be said to be a reflection of Ulrich Zwingli and the Zurich reformation in microcosm.³ It embodies those dynamics and brings them to bear in seeking the right interpretation, and use, of Scripture.

Prophezei was a liturgical as well as interpretive reform initiative. As replacement for the regular morning services, clergy, teachers, students, and interested laymen from the city were encouraged to attend. The hour (or more) of Bible study took place each morning except Friday (market day) and Sunday at 7 o'clock (8 o'clock in the winter) in the Choir of the Gross Münster of Zurich.⁴ The study was opened by a Latin prayer after which someone (usually a student) would read up to a chapter of the Old Testament out of the Latin Vulgate.⁵ Then the Hebrew text would be read with comments and clarification. This would be followed by a reading of the Greek Septuagint (usually by Zwingli himself), also with relevant comments and explanation.

² Z IV, 365.

³ Locher, *Zwingli's Thought*, 28.

⁴ Fritz Schmidt-Clausing, "Das Prophezeigebet," *Zwingliana* 12(1964): 13. For the liturgical order of Prophezei see Z IV, 701-703. For a description of Prophezei to the Large and Small Councils of Zurich, see Z IV, 666.

⁵ The Prophezei in the Great Münster was designed exclusively for the study of the Old Testament. Once the entire Testament had been studied they were to start over again. The New Testament was handled by Oswald Myconius in the Frau münster in the afternoons.

The text would then be considered (in Latin) by the group as a whole. Following this thorough exploration the Prophezei would shift to Swiss German. Another participant (usually Leo Jud or Caspar Megander) would offer a German version of the opening prayer, and the text under study would become the basis of a sermon, preached to the people who had gathered into the church to take part in this latter part of the Prophezei. The service would then be concluded with a lengthy intercessory prayer.

Prophezei was an attempt to facilitate the recovery of the true religion taught in scripture. For Zwingli, “the Spirit demands obedience towards Scripture, in contrast to all human authority.”⁶ In fidelity to the Word we are faithful to the true will of God as he has revealed it in history. The infallible church was not one dependent upon tradition or Papal authority, but “that one alone which rests upon the Word of God only.”⁷ The false human additions to God’s message must be stripped away until only the clear, simple message of God remains. In this endeavor the humanist call to return to the sources made common cause with the basic reformed concern to recover God’s true biblical message. Those who have fallen into errors of false religion “we can easily vanquish by leading them back to the source.”⁸ Prophezei is offered as a hermeneutical process that could lead reliably to that recovery.

Scientific Method

The whole study method of Prophezei can be understood as an attempt by the most scientific resources available to determine the original message of Scripture. The basic text for Biblical study must be the original languages. Zwingli was convinced that the Old Testament could not be understood without an exact knowledge of Hebrew. Failure to gain a correct understanding of Hebrew had often led earlier translators and exegetes into error.⁹ Zwingli’s high regard for the importance of Hebrew is reflected in the impressive faculty of Hebrew scholars who were to come to Zurich.¹⁰ To understand Scripture required the ability and knowledge to understand the peculiarities of the Hebrew language and culture. Attention must be given to

⁶ Locher, *Zwingli’s Thought*, 188.

⁷ CTFR, 137; Z III, 707.

⁸ CTFR, 373.

⁹ Edwin Künzli, “Zwingli’s Jesaja Erklärungen,” *Zwingliana* 10(1957): 489.

¹⁰ Ceporin (Jakob Wiesendanger), who had studied Hebrew under Reuchlin, was the first Hebraist. He was followed after his death by Konrad Pellikan. Zwingli himself developed a considerable competency in Hebrew, studying under Andreas Boeschenstein, who also taught Melanchthon. Emil Egli, “Zwingli als Hebraer,” *Zwingliana* 1(1900): 154-155.

understanding the figures of speech, schematisms, and idioms of the language and the time, place, occasions, persons and other circumstances of the scriptural account.¹¹ Such was Zwingli's concern to recover the original Hebrew context of Scripture that he was accused of coming to his understanding of the Old Testament under Jewish influence. In fact, while denying this charge, Zwingli acknowledges that on at least two occasions a Jew from Winterthur had attended the Prophezei to observe their treatment of the Hebrew text and indicate whether it was accurate.¹²

It bears noting that in Zwingli's view it was not only necessary to understand Hebrew to understand the Old Testament, but it was also necessary to understand the New Testament properly. This was because the New Testament was written by persons out of a Jewish context and their writing (even in Greek) would reflect that context.

The Greek Septuagint was used as a study aid to the Hebrew and Latin texts. Its antiquity and particularly the fact that it predated "pointing" made it a valuable resource. It was frequently used to correct or support the Vulgate translation. However, it was clearly used as a supplemental aid to study. Zwingli usually taught the Septuagint himself and the results of Prophezei have been shown to be largely a product of Zwingli's influence. Those facts would lead one to expect a preponderance of weight given to the Septuagint. However, the citations of the Septuagint number less than the Hebrew (most cited) or the Latin.¹³ The primary goal must always be the recovery of the original language and the Greek Septuagint could only assist in that attempt – never supplant it.

An overwhelming concern with philology is an identifying characteristic of the exegesis of Prophezei. "What is most apparent is the great attention paid to words; it was not only that the exact meaning must be discovered, but also derivations and the implications of derivations."¹⁴ The resulting commentaries are dominated by philological-exegetical material. The Zurich scholars were deeply concerned with recovering the original text in its true meaning. It was only in recovering the original context that they could recover the message of true religion bare of the misleading accretions of human teachings.

¹¹ Edwin Künzli, "Zwingli als Ausleger des Alten Testaments," Z XIV, 882.

¹² Z III, 138-139

¹³ Edwin Künzli, "Quellenprobleme und mystischer Schriftsinn in Zwingli's Genesis- und Esoduskommentar I," Zwingliana 9(1951): 186. Also Künzli, Jesaja," 488.

¹⁴ Potter, Zwingli, 222.

That is not to say that secular sources were to be ignored or rejected. The fact that Zwingli sought Jewish counsel indicates his willingness to seek help in any quarter. Although they were to be used with caution, the ancient secular writers were a valuable resource for information regarding linguistic practices, history, technical information or knowledge of the natural sciences. For historical information Herodotus and Livy were favored sources, For natural science Pliny the Elder was frequently cited and Cicero was a favorite general source of information. These were used, however, only as resources to determine and illuminate the source text of the Bible.¹⁵

Sources in the Christian tradition were also used. Jerome was an important model in his comparative study and philological interest. Augustine is an important theological source for Zwingli but his lack of philological interest in preference for philosophical and theological concerns limits his contribution to the exegetical work of the Prophezei. Besides what he may have learned directly from local Jews, knowledge of Hebrew exegesis and lexicography is drawn primarily from Nicholas of Lyra and Reuchlin. To a lesser extent, Oecolampadius is used (particularly in Isaiah) as a source.

Any source or tool which could help unmask the true religion of Scripture was welcome. The church could only be renewed when the message of Scripture was confronted in its pure simplicity. The scientific exegesis of the Prophezei was directed toward that goal. Every tool and effort was employed in an effort to recover that true sense of Scripture.

The Role of the Spirit

Given the aggressive attention given to scientific method in the Prophezei one might conclude that this is simply an anticipation of modern biblical scholarship and its approach to biblical interpretation. In fact, Gottfried Locher contends that “the method followed by Zwingli, Jud, and Bibliander was exactly that of Kittel’s *Theologisches Wörterbuch*.”¹⁶ This would, however, overlook the defining role of the Holy Spirit in Zwingli’s approach to Scripture. The prayer used to begin Prophezei – first in Latin and later in Swiss German to open the preaching service of the Prophezei – gives us a clear indication of the spiritual nature of the task at hand.

Almighty, eternal and merciful God, whose word is a lamp unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly

¹⁵ ZB, 87.

¹⁶ Locher, Zwingli’s Thought, 28.

understand Thy Word and that our lives may be conformed (or transformed) according to what we have rightly understood, that in nothing we may be displeasing unto thy Majesty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁷

This prayer is an adaptation of an ancient collect for Pentecost Sunday, addressing the Trinity and invoking the action of the Holy Spirit in the study of the Scriptures in Prophezei.¹⁸ As Bromiley notes, “The Word is mediated through written documents, but has its character and effectiveness as Word only insofar as it is directed and applied by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ Having done all in our human ability in Prophezei we still will not encounter the Word apart from the Holy Spirit. Zwingli ultimately distinguishes between the Word and Scripture. The true Word is not the one “which consists of letters or sentences but...that which shines in the heart.”²⁰ It is the action of the Holy Spirit that changes the Scripture to the Word of God by revealing it to our hearts. Scripture without the Spirit is only words.²¹

Interpretation of Scripture, then, must be understood as an essentially spiritual exercise, resourced by the scientific tools of study but as a preliminary exercise, however valuable. The clarity of God’s Word is guaranteed by reliance upon God in addressing it to us. The proper approach to the Word is our humility and dependence upon the inner speaking of the Spirit rather than on human learning or understanding.²² When we approach the interpretation of Scripture rightly – that is spiritually – we may have confidence that God will reveal himself to us. Once given inner illumination we realize a confidence and assurance based upon the Word.²³ For Zwingli, the activity of the Spirit to reveal can never be coerced or controlled because God acts in total freedom. Nonetheless, when faithful believers seek the true Word of God, they transform the Choir of the Gross Münster into a magnet field for the Holy Spirit.²⁴ Zwingli’s confidence in the (free) work of the Holy Spirit allows him to expect that “the Holy Spirit unfailingly reveals the meaning of the Bible to those who truly seek to know God’s message.”²⁵

¹⁷ Locher, Zwingli’s Thought, 28.

¹⁸ Schmidt-Clausing, “Das Prophezeigebet,” 21. „... (D)ie Anrufung des Heiligen Geistes nicht nur as Epiklese, sondern auch für das recte sapere bzw. recte intellegere alter liturgischer Brauch war und geblieben ist.“ Ibid, 15,

¹⁹ Bromiley, ZB, 55

²⁰ CTFR, 18.

²¹ Z I, 379-80.

²² Z I, 360.

²³ Z I, 361.

²⁴ Schmidt-Clausing, “Das Prophezeigebet,” 21

²⁵ Potter, 87.

The illumination of the Word by the Holy Spirit is the necessary counterpart to the scientific study of Scriptures. Only the Word can properly and unfailingly reveal the will of God. The written word is ultimately not to be measured by the understanding of men, but “only through the Word of God written in the minds of the faithful.”²⁶ The best efforts and tools of man should be employed in service to the understanding of Scripture but they cannot convey the true Word. That is the domain of the Spirit.

Community as Context

Prophezei as scientific study of Scripture and a functional invitation to the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit remains incomplete until we consider the context in which Prophezei takes place – Christian community. Zwingli is indelibly formed by his Swiss identity. One of the consequences of this formation is his foundational understanding of community as the context for God’s work. This is easily recognized in his civic approach to reformation. Zwingli’s reformation was a reformation of religious life in the city and for the canton of Zurich. It is also evident in his development and understanding of Prophezei. This formation shapes the understanding of Scripture that emerges from Prophezei in two aspects.

First, interpretation of Scripture takes place in community as an exercise of the community. The gathered pastor-scholars, teachers, students, and lay persons comprise an interpretive community. Prophezei utilizes the expertise of the participants – some more than others - but the interpretive task is shared. The abilities and insights of those attending Prophezei were to be shared in a format encouraging the questions and opinions of all participants. Rather than a lecture it took the form of a seminar. This communal dimension serves to balance the pneumatological emphasis, or perhaps to properly frame it. The work of the Holy Spirit was expected to function effectively in the corporate consideration of the text.²⁷

Our understanding of this communal context should also include some meaningful inclusion of the community of Christian tradition. While the immediate context of reformation tended to de-emphasize tradition as an authoritative hermeneutic the voices of the Fathers

²⁶ CTFR, 381.

²⁷ This corporate role in balancing the internal indications of the Spirit is evident also in Zwingli’s consideration of the preaching office. The affirmation of the community was a necessary supporting indicator of the commissioning of the Spirit. Z IV, 389.

continued to be participants in the interpretive conversation. Though it would not be accurate to portray Prophezei as an interpretive exercise consciously referencing the consensual tradition it would also be inaccurate to portray it as working independently of it.

The other aspect of community as context is the broader religious community served by the Gross Münster and the religious leaders involved in Prophezei. It is not incidental that the interpretive work of the Prophezei is turned immediately to the preaching task. Having applied all of our human ability in an attempt to recover the “simple” message of Scripture and invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit to illuminate and reveal the true Word the process remains incomplete. The opening prayer invoking the illumination of the Word by the Spirit, repeated now in Swiss German, also asks that this encounter of Man and Word will effect transformation.²⁸ Zwingli’s driving concern was for reformation and renewal, resulting in the salvation of the people of Zurich. Man must be transformed by the power and in the presence of the Word. It is interaction with the Word which accomplishes the transformation. “The receivers of the Word should be changed into that which they have rightly understood in the Prophezei. And that is the Word, which is identical with the Holy Spirit.”²⁹

For this reason it is easily seen that the summary sermon in the vernacular should not be understood as an alien addition but as an integral part of Prophezei. Prophezei would be incomplete until it facilitated transformation of the people – and through them the city and beyond. The completed Prophezei, then, does not properly end with the intercessory prayer, but is realized in the streets of Zurich and the villages of the Canton. As Potter notes, in the accomplishment of the “Christianismus Renascens...the Prophezei was the powerhouse.”³⁰ Julius Schweitzer has developed the intriguing analysis that in Zwingli’s revised liturgy of the Eucharist the transformation of the elements is not entirely removed from the service. Rather, the transformation is pronounced upon the congregation. They become the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Schmidt-Clausing argues that the same dynamic is basic to the Prophezei.³¹ “Outwardly the reforming work at Zurich was severely practical, but at bottom the practical

²⁸ ZB, 78.

²⁹ Schmidt-Clausing, “Das Prophezeigebet,” 29 (translation mine)

³⁰ Potter, 224.

³¹ Schmidt-Clausing, “Das Prophezeigebet,” 21, 29.

measures were simply an outworking on the inward revolution accomplished by the preaching of the divine Word.”³²

The Synergy of Prophezei

In Zwingli’s Prophezei we encounter the key themes of the Zurich reformation acted out in a microcosm of the reform as a whole. Located at the center is the text of Scripture and its interpretation. The emphatic attention to scientific method should dispel any casual notions of pre-critical exegesis as simply non-critical.³³ Prophezei differs from modern critical method not in the use of critical tools but in its presuppositions about the text and the context of interpretation. Prophezei’s pneumatological assumptions reflect an understanding of the text as more than mere text. Because the deep (true) meaning of Scripture is revealed (only) by the Spirit our approach to that meaning must go beyond scientific exegesis. That meaning will be accessible only through the Spirit, to the one who comes in humility and spiritual openness. Scientific method may disclose the “mechanics” of the text but can never disclose the Word within the text. This assumption concerning Scripture is, of course, no Zwinglian innovation but simply embeds the classic understanding of Scripture in the practice of Prophezei.

Both the practice of scientific methodology and seeking the illumination of the Spirit take place in community. Housed (literally) in the local congregation scriptural interpretation is an inescapably corporate ecclesial function. Critical exegesis serves the reflective work of the church but does not control it. The corporate context (both the critical expertise and spiritual judgment) serves as a corrective to over-spiritualized or individual interpretation of Scripture. Both critical resources and Spirit illumination are best understood within the context of the corporate reflection of the Church.

The fact that all these resources finally see their fruition in the transformative effect of the Word on the broader community provides a guiding telos for the enterprise of biblical interpretation. The exercise of Prophezei is only valuable (faithful) when it contributes to the constructive renewal of the community of faith and the civic community. Neither scholarship nor personal spiritual illumination for their own sakes realize the intention of Prophezei.

³² Schmidt-Clausing, “Das Prophezeigebet,” 29.

³³ See Muller and Thompson, *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, 3-16, 123-158. For a fuller discussion of this point.

Connection

Considered in its parts Prophezei brings little new to the task of interpretation. Considered as a whole, however, Prophezei presents a creative hermeneutical approach that works from a dynamic synergy that may serve us in our contemporary Wesleyan conversation concerning the future of Scripture. Rejecting the polarities of critical scholarship and spiritual interpretation Prophezei integrates them into an interpretive whole. Affirming the particular illumination of the Holy Spirit with the communal task of reflection and confirmation, Prophezei attempts to balance freedom and accountability. The soteriological purpose of Scriptural interpretation embedded in Prophezei brings these competing elements into meaningful focus, highlighting the proper “end” of Scripture and its interpretation.

As Wesleyans, the commitments and values of Prophezei should be, at least, congenial dialogue partners. For Zwingli, as for Wesley, Scripture is the foundational authority with reason, tradition, and experience serving primarily (if not exclusively) interpretive roles. In a way that citation of Wesley’s “quadrilateral” sometimes does not, Prophezei makes the foundational character of Scripture’s authority clear. Wesley’s interest in scientific method would also find common cause with Zwingli’s scientific exegesis in Prophezei. Wesley’s single-minded focus on soteriology certainly resonates with the transformative purpose of Prophezei. Though, perhaps the corporate emphasis of Prophezei suggests a helpful balance to a Wesleyan soteriological focus that sometimes becomes dominantly personal or individual.

The question posed by this conference concerns the future of Scripture. Ulrich Zwingli’s creation of Prophezei provides a useful historical precedent and point of traditional reference. At the very least, Zwingli’s Prophezei calls out to us that the way forward should involve an integrative synergy that values critical scholarship, affirms the spiritual character of Scripture and its interpretation, embeds the task of interpretation within the church, and purposefully envisions the end of Scriptural interpretation in effecting the redemptive work of a redeeming God.