

Exegetical Beginnings: Careful Listening

by Richard Carlson, Glatfelter Professor of Biblical Studies

Exegesis is listening carefully to a biblical text in order to grasp its intention or feel its effect. In one sense, exegetical procedures are attempts to ask the right questions of ancient texts so that they might once more speak with clarity and coherence. In a more personal sense, exegesis “slows down” the workings of a text for the reader so that its inner movements and intended effects can be observed. In this way, a sort of dialogue between text and exegete is established.

The steps suggested here should not be viewed as prescribed rules to be followed woodenly, but as a guide or map of one possible path through the complex adventure that begins with one's first encounter with a text and ends with a sermon.

DIRECT LISTENING TO THE TEXT

Read the text in English and make first impressions.

DIRECT LISTENING is a surface encounter which will pull you into the sense of the text and raise questions for your later critical work. Begin your direct reading with an RSV/NRSV Bible (or the one you will use with the congregation).

- Read through the text several times and listen carefully to it. Jot down answers to the following questions, as well as any problems and puzzles for future work. In some places you may have more puzzles and mysteries than answers. No problem! Things that are especially puzzling and problematic to you right now may very well turn out to be the cutting edge of the text's new and surprising word to you and the congregation.

Keep reading and listening until you can come to some resolution on each of these questions. Give your thinking clarity by writing down your conclusions.

1. What is the topic or subject of the text? What is it about? Be as specific as possible.
2. What does the text say about its topic or subject? Let the text speak for itself, even if it seems alien or unclear.
3. What does the text intend to do to its reader? That is, what is its function or objective or goal? Does it urge some action or attitude? Does it give encouragement, settle an argument, correct a misperception, create faith, and reorient priorities? Does it instruct, command, inspire, clarify, convert, comfort or disturb? (Hint: ask what is the

“opposite” this text wants to change or move against and what difference to this “opposite” is intended.)

4. How does the text go about meeting its intention, objective, or goal? Does it tell a story, reason logically, explain, announce?
5. What are the key words, words repeated in or central to the text? List the polarities or opposites present in the text (such as light and darkness, then and now, faith and disbelief). Try to classify them. Which side of the polarity is the text “pushing”?
6. What is the shape of the text? Is there movement or development? What is the train of thought? What is the logic of movement (visual, rhetorical, loose association of ideas or images, reversal, contrast)?
7. What is familiar about this text? How are we like the first readers? What are the gaps between the text’s world and ours?
8. With whom do you identify? The sender or the receivers of the text? Are we the good people or the bad people? The believers or the faithless? The oppressed or the oppressors?
9. What claims or assertions does the text make? What kind of God is this? What does this God do? What does it say about humanity, the church, the world, our daily lives and relationships?