

THE REGULA FIDEI AS A HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE IN PATRISTIC EXEGESIS

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The article applies the hermeneutical theory that a presuppositionless exegesis of Scripture is impossible for the patristic explanation of the Bible from the point of view of the *regula fidei*. It examines the anti-gnostic rules laid down by Irenaeus, through Origen, Tertullian and Basil to Augustine and Vincent of Lerins. It explains how the rule of faith developed and was broadened to include the creeds and the liturgy, and how it was used by these fathers to explain Scripture both in preaching and in theological dispute. It then goes on to enquire whether such a pre-comprehension has its roots in the Apostolic Church, adducing New Testament texts, and ends by asking if such a method of exegesis is applicable today. The conclusion is that Gadamer's theory on the fusion of horizons can provide a framework for such a method, which will be of great help in today's ecumenical discussions.

Članek obravnava hermenevitično teorijo, po kateri je nepristranska eksegeza Svetega pisma pri patristični razlagi Svetega pisma s stališča *regule fidei* nemogoča. Raziskuje protignostično pravilo, ki ga je postavil Irenej, nato še Origena, Tertulijana in Bazilija do Avguščina in Vincenca Lerinskega. Razlaga, kako se je pravilo vere razvijalo, se širilo ter vključilo veroizpovedi in liturgije, kako so ga ti očcije uporabljali pri razlaganju Svetega pisma tako v pridigah kot v teološkem razpravljanju. Potem preiskuje, ali tako vnaprejšnje razumevanje nima korenin v apostolski Cerkvi, pritegne besedila Nove zaveze in konča z vprašanjem, če je taka metoda eksegeze danes uporabna. Zaključuje, da je Gadamerjeva teorija o spajanju ravni lahko primerna podlaga taki metodi, ki bi bila v veliko pomoč današnjim ekumenskim razpravljanjem.

Ever since Schleiermacher the purpose of hermeneutics has been comprehension rather than explanation. Again, from Dilthey onwards, it has become an axiom that an objective, presuppositionless understanding of ancient texts is an impossibility. Any reader who approaches a text for the first time does so with pre-conceived categories. Whether such precomprehension is prejudice rather than preunderstanding can only be judged by the willingness of the reader to enter into dialogue with a given passage and modify his own ideas accordingly or to force them upon it without discussion.

It is the purpose of this paper to test these hermeneutical assumptions with reference to the patristic exegesis of Scripture, considering the "Rule of Faith," so often mentioned by the fathers, as the point of departure from which to interpret biblical texts. We shall have to deal, as briefly as possible, with the development and the

criteria of this rule from Irenaeus to Vincent of Lérins to judge whether such a hermeneutical principle rendered scripture more comprehensible or whether it superimposed itself upon the Bible. The last section will enquire about the possible biblical foundation of such an exegetical method and try to answer the question regarding the validity of modern hermeneutical theory.

The first to mention *kānon tes paradoxos hemon* in a not yet technical sense is Clement of Rome,¹ but it is Irenaeus who, we can truly say, created his whole theology around scripture and the *regula fidei*. His main work *Adversus haereses*, as is well known, was written against the Gnostics. These groups made use of their various theosophical systems, which, they claimed, were inherited by means of a secret tradition from some apostle or other, to interpret New Testament texts, read not in their own literary context, but within the context of a specific gnostic system.² The question whether precomprehension is preunderstanding or prejudice, that is, whether it clarifies a text or renders it more obscure, therefore, already arises in the second century and its solution lays the foundation of all subsequent exegesis.

Irenaeus counters such a method of argumentation by establishing some rules of interpretation which later became traditional in the Church. First of all, a passage must not be wrested from its own literary context and twisted to fit a different framework. He gives examples of such misinterpretations from some authors who selected passages from Homer, pieced them together without reference to their own contexts, and claimed that Homer had held their opinions.³ The meaning of a set of words is what their immediate context requires them to mean; that was the mind of the author. Moreover, when dealing with sacred Scripture, which has the one God as its author, the broader context of both Old and New Testaments must be taken into account so as not to attribute embarrassing Old Testament passages to the Demiurge or to human invention as the Gnostics did.⁴ A third rule is that ambiguous and obscure passages, on which the Gnostics often founded their doctrines, are not to be taken as a starting point for theologizing but should be explained from parallel but clear texts.⁵ This is not enough, however. The real meaning of texts requires a further parameter, that of the Rule of Faith.⁶ This compendium of Christian kerygma, the forerunner of the creeds, had not yet assumed fixed formulations and can often be encountered in Irenaeus' two books.⁷ It synthesizes the tradition received publicly, not secretly, from

the apostles through the succession of bishops throughout the whole Church and is verifiable by constancy within universality.⁸ This, and only this, was the true teaching of the apostles received from Christ and transmitted to the Church. Hence any explanation of Scripture contrary to its contents cannot be considered as genuinely Christian and must be rejected. Our author goes further to say that if anyone cannot travel the whole world to verify this unity of doctrine it is possible to do so in the church of Rome, which is a point of confluence for all the faithful from every part of the world. Irenaeus enumerates the succession of the bishops of this church and their witness to the apostolic doctrine, even with the aim of asserting that some of them, Clement for example, are older still than the Gnostics themselves.⁹ The bishop of Lyon, therefore, lays down these simple rules of interpretation: reading within the literary context; explaining obscure passages from clear ones; viewing the Bible as a whole, one God as author of both Testaments; the maintenance of the apostolic tradition condensed in the Rule of Faith, which is public and universal. This is the genuine preunderstanding of individual biblical texts, because it stems from the same source. The real ground of our belief, however, is Scripture itself, tradition contributes to its right interpretation.

If we now turn to the Alexandrians we shall find that Clement, who added a fourth dimension to Irenaeus' concept of "context," that of symbolical reason, agrees with him as regards the error of interpreting Scripture in bits and pieces as the heretics do, and insists on ecclesiastical knowledge as a key to right interpretation.¹⁰ He explicitly calls this the "ecclesiastical rule," which he defines as "The concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord."¹¹ In his introduction to *Stromata* he states how he himself received this rule from those who taught him, probably Tatian, Theodotion and Pantaenus, who preserved the tradition of the Lord handed over to the apostles not only in written form but by word of mouth. The true gnostic is one who interprets Scripture within this tradition.¹²

Origen likewise insists on the Rule of Faith. It may seem paradoxical to appeal to this great writer, whose works were later banned by the second Council of Constantinople, as a witness to the Rule of Faith. He himself, however, in his preface to *De principis*, makes a clear distinction between doctrines which are accepted as certain, pertaining to the Rule of Faith, and others still open to research and dispute. In his own time, the rule testified by such people as Irenaeus was still restricted, but after all the disputes which preceded and followed Nicaea, the Rule of Faith was broadened,

⁸ *Adv. Haer.* 1,10,2.

⁹ *Ibid.* III,2,1.

¹⁰ *Stromata* 7,16.

¹¹ *Ibid.* VI,15.

¹² *Ibid.* I,1.

¹ *Clem.* 7,2; cf. 4,1.

² *Adv. Haer.* 1,9,4.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* III,6,1.

⁵ *Ibid.* II,27,1.

⁶ *Ibid.* 1,9,4.

⁷ *Ibid.* I,10,1-2; I,22,1; *Epistola* 3 and 6.

special place in this book, and they are not explicitly stated in the New Testament we can understand very well what it is that Basil meant. Tradition does not consist only in the Church's teaching and preaching but also in its practices as in its way of life. This is the true context of the written word for it has the selfsame apostolic authority as its source. What counted then was the *kyriakon* and the *apostolikon*, Scripture and tradition were the only means of reaching this source although the inspired word interpreted within the living Church was always considered to be the main foundation of the Rule of Faith.

In the meantime, the creeds were being formulated. The Rule of Faith recited by Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian and Origen, one in substance but differing in its formulation, now loses its flexibility and crystallizes into the several creedal formulations following the Arian controversy. As we shall see later, Augustine considers it as a compendium of biblical theology, but it is much more than that. Baptism, from the first decades of the second century, was accompanied by a profession of faith, which could be either interrogatory or confessional, that is, answer to questions or a positive confession. This was related to the Rule of Faith. Around 330, however, after Nicaea, the Roman Church formulated a symbol, founded on a 2nd century Greek one, which then gave rise to the Apostles' Creed, accepted in the West only in the 9th century. The Council of Nicaea also formulated a creed, which, according to Eusebius, was in accordance with the one he professed at baptism, with anti-Arian additions. After some subsequent experimental attempts at formulating other symbols, the Council of Constantinople, in 381, drew up the final form of the Constantinopolitan Creed, in which the Cappadocian fathers played an important part. Later, the symbol known as *Quicumque*, in Latin, probably stemming from Augustinian sources in North Africa, came into being.¹⁸ This is very relevant to our theme as the next witness to the Rule of Faith which we must examine for its completeness is Augustine. We must dwell at greater length on Augustine because he can be called the theologian of the Rule of Faith, which he mentions, directly or in its equivalents, like "regula pietatis, regula ecclesiastica, regula veritatis, analogia fidei," around one hundred times, and incorporates all that had been said about it earlier, adding his own contribution.

This rule was laid down by Christ and the apostles.¹⁹ It is the fulfilment of what Jesus had promised in John 16:12 about the Paraclete completing the doctrines Christ could not deliver during his lifetime,²⁰ and of Gal 1:6-9 on apostolic authority.²¹ It was

¹⁸ Cf. R. P. C. Hanson, "Confessioni e simboli di fede," *Dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiana I* (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1983), 757-765; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Harlow: Longman, 1981).

¹⁹ *Epist.* 265,6.

²⁰ *In Joh.* 98,7.

²¹ *Enarr. in ps* 115,1.

clarified and standardized. Subsequently, Rufinus, who translated *De principis* into Latin, stated in his own preface that he would leave out those doctrines which were contrary to that rule, which, he states, was so dear to Origen himself.¹³ In fact, when, in *Princ.* IV,2, this Alexandrian theologian explains the criteria of the correct interpretation of Scripture and the use of allegory, he openly states: "And we shall try to make clear what seems to us the right way of understanding scripture, observing that rule and discipline which was delivered by Jesus Christ to the apostles and which they delivered in succession to their followers who teach the heavenly Church." Any subsequent criticism of Origen's theology, therefore, does not weaken his witness to the validity of the Rule of Faith as a criterion for interpreting the Bible.

If we now pass on to Africa, we find Tertullian, who is often accused of belittling Scripture in favour of the Rule of Faith. This is not the case, however. It is true that *De praescriptioe* may actually be called a treatise on this rule, but its purpose is to demonstrate that the heretics, Gnostics especially, play around so much with the Bible that discussion with them on merely scriptural matters becomes impossible. They are able to twist any text in their favour. It is safer for the true believer to begin with the Rule of Faith which is found in all apostolic churches and in those churches in union with them which hold the same faith, for universality of belief and antiquity of doctrine converge in their witness to apostolic origin, and, in the last resort, to Christ's teaching. It is within this context that the Scriptures should be read.¹⁴ He defines this rule in ch. 13. It contains the essence of faith. However, other ancient practices of a liturgical nature not contradicted by biblical authority can also be considered apostolic because of their antiquity.¹⁵ Tradition, therefore, is extended to include ritual; but this is subject to change as long as it does not contradict the backbone of the Rule of Faith which is again summarized in *De virg. vel* 1. Even Peter and Paul had their altercations, but they agreed on the one kerygma.¹⁶ The latter asserts that many preach Christ with insincere intentions, but it is the same Christ that is preached.¹⁷

The validity of the *lex orandi* as a witness to the *lex credendi* is later taken up by Basil, who, in *De Spiritu Sancto* XXVII, enumerates diverse liturgical practices accepted by the Church of which there is no written biblical record. These, he states, derive from the oral and private teaching of the apostles inherited through tradition by the Church. Fortunately the days of gnosticism were then over, otherwise Basil's argument might have been two-edged, but as baptismal confessions of faith obtain a

¹³ *De principis*, Preface.

¹⁴ *De praescript.* 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 28, 32, 37. CSEL 5.

¹⁵ *De corona* 3,4; *De virginibus relaxandis* 2. CSEL 27.

¹⁶ *Adv. Marc.* IV. CSEL 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* V.

handed down by ancient Christians who had explained the Scriptures;²² its antiquity is a pledge of truth against heretical doctrinal innovations.²³

We said earlier that by Augustine's time the contents of the Rule of Faith had been broadened to include recent convictions arrived at by the universal Church. What doctrines, then, did the bishop of Hippo's ecclesiastical rule comprise, or better, which were its sources? It is evident that the Scriptures obtain the first place,²⁴ but as misinterpretation of the Bible can be a source of heresy as well, Augustine gives preference to those biblical texts which are clear and certain.

The Rule of Faith received from the Church at baptism is the creed.²⁵ It is a compendium of biblical teaching. Which creed however? It would be easy to answer that after 381 we have both the Nicene and the Constantinopolitan creeds, but these formulations were not adopted as baptismal creeds in the West till later. Augustine himself comments on the baptismal symbol in *Serm.* 215 and J. N. D. Kelly reconstructs the Hippo creed as follows: "Credimus in deum patrem omnipotentem, universorum creatorem, regem saeculorum, immortalem et invisibilem; Credimus et in filium eius Iesum Christum dominum nostrum, natum de Spiritu sancto ex virgine Maria, crucifixum sub Pontio Pilato, mortuum et sepultum, (qui) tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad caelos, sedet ad dexteram dei patris, inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos; Credimus et in Spiritum sanctum, remissionem peccatorum, resurrectionem carnis, vitam aeternam per sanctam ecclesiam." We find cognate confessions in Carthage and Ruspae.²⁶

Even creeds can be misinterpreted however. There are people, Augustine says, who hold the words of the creed but twist their meaning to their own errors.²⁷ Moreover, the creed does not contain anything about recent controversies, original sin, for example. It too, therefore, needs supporting external evidence which the bishop of Hippo finds first of all in the liturgical practices and in the *lex orandi*.²⁸ The ancient and universal custom of baptizing infants is a witness to the inheritance of Adam's sin, and since official prayers cannot ever contain doctrinal error they can be relied on to interpret the true faith of Christians.

Augustine also appeals to the universal testimony of the ancient fathers and bishops, whose writings are ideal for young people learning rhetoric to read.²⁹ In

Contra Iulianum, for example, he lists John of Constantinople and his fellow bishops, Innocent of Rome, Ambrose of Milan, Cyprian of Carthage, Basil of Cappadocia, Gregory of Nazianzus and Hilary of Gaul as witnesses to tradition and universality against Pelagianism.³⁰ There are, it is true, matters on which these fathers as theologians disagree, but not about the essence of faith.³¹

Augustine also adduces the authority of plenary councils to buttress his convictions, attributing to them the soundest authority,³² and the frequent appeals of the African bishops to Rome demonstrates that they had the highest regard for that see occupied by the successor of Peter.³³

Lastly, one cannot neglect Augustine's respect for the *sensus fidelium*. He makes ample use of Phil 3:16-17: "Let those who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained." God had "revealed" the Rule of Faith to Monica, for example.³⁴ The simple faithful, however, have this rule to guide them until God reveals to them things spiritual, as long as they do not dogmatize their unhealthy opinions and are willing to be corrected by ecclesiastical authority.³⁵ Augustine himself confesses that he is unable to answer the question why God, according to Wisd 4:11, does not take away from this world those who are about to sin and lose grace. He gives a provisional answer and permits other opinions within the framework of the rule, until God reveals better solutions,³⁶ for even the Rule of Faith itself requires some "distinguo" or other to be understood correctly.³⁷ The learned themselves should follow the Rule of Faith taught by the more humble,³⁸ in fact, it is not enough to remain within this rule if one, like the nine healed lepers, does not render thanks to God.³⁹ So construct above the foundation of the rule, do not destroy or subtract, God will add further revelations if you do not permit yourself any doubts.⁴⁰ Each one's understanding of the Rule of Faith is given according to the measure of one's faith.⁴¹ In this way the rule exercises the human mind.⁴²

From what we have said it should now be evident that the Rule of Faith, by Augus-

³⁰ *Contra Iul.* 1,7,30-31.

³¹ *Ench. de fide, spe et carit.* 2; *De peccat. meritis et remis.* 3,5,11; *Contra Iul.* II, VI, 5,11; *Epist.* 54,1,1.

³² *Contra Iul.* 1,7,30-31, II,10,33-34; *Contra Iul. op. impf.* 1,107.

³³ *Epist.* 54,1,1.

³⁴ *Confess.* VIII,12.

³⁵ *Epist.* 187,8; *De bapt.* 5,27,38.

³⁶ *Epist.* 217,4.

³⁷ *In Joh.* 105,8.

³⁸ *De cath. tridibus* 8.

³⁹ *Quaest. evang.* 2,40.

⁴⁰ *In Joh.* 98,7.

⁴¹ *De bono vidui.* 1,2.

⁴² *De Trinitate* 15,27.

²² *Inarr. in ps.* 10,8.

²³ *Contra Iul. op. impf.* 1,22.

²⁴ *Quaest. in Hept.* 5,29; *De Consensu evng.* 1,1,2; *Serm.* 186.

²⁵ *Serm.* 59,5; *Serm.* 186; *Serm.* 215; *De bapt. Contra donat.* III,14,15.

²⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 175f.

²⁷ *De bapt. contra donat.* III,14,19.

²⁸ *De bapt.* 6,25,47; *De unico bapt.* 3,4; *De catra pro mort. ger.* 1,3; *De gen. ad litt.* X,23,39.

²⁹ *De doctr. christ.* IV,3.

time's time, had assumed much broader dimensions than it had had in the time of Irenaeus. It comprised all those doctrines on which the universal Church had attained certainty, basing its development on a deeper understanding of scripture, on the creeds, on tradition, liturgical practice, councils and the faith of the more mature ecclesial members.

However, we must now come to the main point of our study of Augustine: how did his notion of the Rule of Faith affect his biblical interpretation? His exegetical method and principles are laid down in the second and third books of *De doctrina christiana*, which, for obvious reasons, we cannot examine in detail. We shall therefore limit ourselves to those passages which invoke ecclesiastical doctrine as their principle of interpretation.

We must make it clear from the very beginning that the Augustine who preaches to his congregation at Hippo is much freer in his biblical explanations than the writer who explains the doctrine on the Trinity or argues against Julian. There is a pastoral or spiritual exegesis and a stricter, theological, explanation of Scripture. Sometimes a homily can contain reflections on a theme rather than an explanation of a text.

The strictly exegetical method can be summed up in a few rules. The proper sense of scripture is what the author intended to say, if this is clear.⁴³ Attention should be paid to distinguishing between words, a necessary rule when manuscripts were written without leaving a space between words, if this is ambiguous, a separation of words against the Rule of Faith would *a priori* not be correct. If the doubt remains and the alternative does not offend the faith, then the literary context should be taken into account.⁴⁴ Again, what we call punctuation, absent in Augustine's manuscripts, should not induce us to unsound doctrine.⁴⁵ If your manuscript offers no difficulties, the translation is correct, yet your reading offends doctrine, you have certainly misunderstood its meaning.⁴⁶ Moreover, it is the Rule of Faith which determines whether a book is to be considered canonical or not, for the apocrypha not only contain unhistorical narratives but are often against sound doctrine.⁴⁷ If the literal sense of a biblical passage is orthodox, hold on to it.⁴⁸ Differences of interpretation within the limits of the ecclesiastical rule are all acceptable, though they be figurative explanations,⁴⁹ but if an Old Testament text is interpreted in the New Testament, that is its proper meaning.⁵⁰ A figurative exegesis should at least show some analogy with the literal reading

so as not to become fanciful.⁵¹ As the Scripture wrongly interpreted is a source of heresy, a reader can sincerely admit that he has not understood and proffer a possible explanation as long as this does not contradict the Rule of Faith.⁵² Augustine was baffled by such sayings as "When I was with them" in John 17:12,⁵³ "The Father is greater than I" in John 14:28⁵⁴ and the text about Adam's sin in Rom 5:12-20,⁵⁵ but he would not dare explain them against contemporary certain and accepted doctrine. He was more concerned about an orthodox explanation than about a literally exact one because he was convinced that the former was, to say the least, not false even if it did not give the exact rendering.

Four years after Augustine's death Vincent of Lérins summed up the contemporary convictions about the force of ecclesiastical tradition in the well known words: "Here perhaps someone will ask: Since the canon of scripture is complete and in itself sufficient, and more than sufficient on all points, what need is there to join to it the authority of ecclesiastical interpretation? The answer of course is that, owing to the very depth of holy scripture itself, all do not receive it in one and the same sense. . . . so that it seems possible to elicit from it as many opinions as there are men. . . . In the Catholic Church itself we take great care that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and properly 'Catholic,' as the very force and meaning of the word show, which comprehends everything almost universally. And we shall observe this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, consent."⁵⁶ Tradition, however, is not stagnancy, there is room for growth, but growth within the same body, similar to that of the human person, otherwise we must speak of change, not growth.⁵⁷

To sum up our findings about the development of the concept of the Rule of Faith in the first five centuries we can say that it comes to comprehend, beside Scripture, that tradition transmitted by bishops within the apostolic succession, baptismal interrogations and creeds, the approved way of living and believing, the prayer of the Church, the orthodox 'Fathers,' antiquity, universality and consent. Such a rule was used to distinguish heretical from Catholic doctrine; for the spiritual interpretation of the Bible; to determine the sense of ambiguous passages, the canon and inspiration of Scripture; to calm down enthusiasts like the Montanists; to keep the development of doctrine on the right path; to help make explicit some implicit biblical truths. It was there to safeguard Scripture, not to replace it.

⁴³ *Serm.* 7.45.

⁴⁴ *De doct. crist.* III, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Contra Iulianum* 116.

⁴⁷ *De cons. evengel.* 1, 1, 2; *Ench. de fide, spe et carit.* 2; *Contra ep. manich.* 5, 6.

⁴⁸ *Epist.* 193, 4; *De VIII Dilectis quaest.* 3, 4.

⁴⁹ *Epist.* 147, 14; *De gen. ad litt.* 8, 1; *In Joh.* 106, 2; *Enarr. in ps.* 9, 6; 74, 12; 118, 12, 2.

⁵⁰ *Epist.* 102, 37.

⁵¹ *De civ. Dei* 11, 33.

⁵² *In Joh.* 18, 1; 18, 2; *Serm.* 265.

⁵³ *In Joh.* 106, 2.

⁵⁴ *De du. quaest.* LXXXVII 9, 69.

⁵⁵ *De nuptis et concap.* 1, 1, 1.

⁵⁶ *Commentorium* II, 4-III, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* XXIII, 54, 57-58.

It is permissible to enquire, however, if such a theological methodology had any foundation in Scripture itself, whether, that is, we can also find the above mentioned criteria in the strictly apostolic communities of the first century. A careful examination of the New Testament evidence will show that the seed was sown precisely within the primitive community.⁵⁸

We cannot speak of "heresy" in the strict sense in the apostolic Church, but there were certainly theological errors corrected by both Paul and John, apart from external controversy with the Jews. Error in faith was any deviation from the kerygma of the founders of those churches and the corresponding confessions of faith which we find scattered among the New Testament writings.⁵⁹ In reprimanding the Galatians about their change of mind regarding justification by means of the works of the Law, Paul uses first of all his apostolic authority and an appeal to his primitive kerygma (Gal 1:6-9). He then appeals to the Jerusalem council (Gal 2:9) and to the eschatological gift of the Spirit the Galatians had received when they first believed (Gal 3:2). Paul's arguments, of course, were supported by arguments from Scripture, the Old Testament reread with Christian eyes, with the precomprehension deriving from the Christ event.

In dealing with the Corinthians Paul has no qualms of conscience when he communicates outright the man who was living with his step-mother (1 Cor 5:5). When it comes to the question of the resurrection of the dead in ch. 15, however, he turns again to the authority of the primitive kerygma and to a rather obscure baptismal practice then current within that community (1 Cor 15:29).

Colossians and Hebrews presuppose an error consisting in regarding Christ as some sort of superior angel. The liturgical hymn in Col 1:15-20 as well as the advice to keep away from false philosophies (Col 2:8) are adduced to counter that error. Hebrews, too, begins with the fundamental confession of faith of a hymnal nature in 1:2-4 and with a series of scriptural arguments in ch. 1.

The Pastoral Epistles provide precious material for our argument. Their pseudonymity is already a witness to the weight of apostolic authority. It is also well known that while there are few OT quotations there are frequent citations from liturgical hymns (e.g. 1 Tim 3:16) in this group of letters. "Paul" considers Timothy and Titus as his lawful successors and charges them with authority. They are commanded to "guard the deposit of faith" (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) and warned against Hymenaeus and Alexander (2 Tim 2:18), who have already denied the faith. Luke, too, writes Acts to claim the support of history, guided by the Spirit, in favour of Paul's practice of admitting Gentiles into the Church without circumcision.

⁵⁸ P. Grech, "Criteri di ortodossia ed eresia nel NT," *Augustinianum* XXV (1985), 583-596.

⁵⁹ Cf. V. H. Newfield, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963).

John is no less severe than Paul. The narrative in John 6:60-71 about the disciples deserting Jesus because of his discourse on the bread of life reflects John's own circumstances in the face of initial doctism and is countered by Peter's confession in the name of "The twelve" in v. 68. Judas is then quoted as the prototype of those who leave the Church in vv. 70f. It is he who "goes out into the night" (13:30). In the Johannine epistles the writer provides us with more precious material. The break with the initial community has already occurred. The secessionists deny that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 2:18; 2 John 7). The writer appeals again to the primitive preaching "What was from the beginning" (1 John 1:1), to the *sensus fidelium* illuminated by the chrism of the Spirit (1 John 2:20,27) and to his own authority.

So what is orthodoxy in the New Testament? It is that area enclosed within the boundaries of the initial preaching of the apostles with the corresponding confessions of faith, apostolic authority and that of their successors, the "deposit" left by the founders of the several churches, the *lex orandi*; the signs of the Spirit, the *sensus fidelium* and the appeal to the witness of the Old Testament re-interpreted in the light of the Christ event. Therefore, in addition to the method of reading Scripture with the precomprehension of contemporary faith we find all the criteria which we encountered in the fathers to establish the Rule of Faith against doctrinal error.

One can rightly ask, however, whether we can sincerely call the fathers' technique correct exegesis, and whether their doctrine may be considered truly biblical. A recent book edited by C. K. Beale bears the title "The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts." It asks the same questions regarding the explanation of Old Testament texts in the New. The title could apply to patristic exegesis. Some explanations are, however, necessary.

First of all we are accustomed to the historical critical method of contemporary biblical exegesis. The fathers often did not have the instruments we now possess. Few of them knew Hebrew; some Latins, like St. Augustine, did not even know Greek very well. They possessed no knowledge of Semitic literary genres and were only versed in the Greek rhetorical genres. They did not have at their disposal archeological excavations or many extra-biblical historical sources. Even if some, like the Antiochians, insisted on a literal rendering of the texts, they often remained baffled by hundreds of questions which are clear to us today. Moreover, there were initially no manuals of herology or spirituality which they could use in their pastoral practice; they had to rely on the Bible alone to range round the entire Christian experience, but their fundamental conviction was that Christ, through his Spirit, was actually present in their own Church and was explicating that same doctrine originally taught by him and his apostles as he had promised. Their body of doctrine as a whole, therefore, was biblical theology even though based on an insufficient exegesis according to our standards, or on an allegori-

cal one. But are we sure that our own 'aseptic' exegesis yields correct results and not only a fragmentation of 'sources' with no theological soul to vivify them?

The well-known document of the Catholic International Biblical Commission published in 1993 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* showed great concern regarding this problem and argues in line with what we have observed in patristic hermeneutics: "Exegetes necessarily bring certain presuppositions (Fr. *précompréhension*) to biblical writings. In the case of the Catholic exegete it is a question of presupposition based on the certainties of the faith: the Bible is a text inspired by God, entrusted to the Church for the nurturing of faith and the guidance of Christian life. These certainties of faith do not come to an exegete in an unrefined, raw state, but only as developed in the ecclesiastical community through the process of theological reflection ... Moreover, theology's affirmation of the strict relationship between inspired Scripture and Tradition has been both confirmed and made more precise through the advance of exegetical study, which has led exegetes to pay increasing attention to the influence upon texts of the life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*) out of which they were formed."⁶⁰

We began this paper by saying that ever since Schleiermacher, hermeneutics has become a science of comprehension rather than of explanation; and after Dilthey a presuppositionless reading of a text is regendered as impossible. These ideas were brought to a head by Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode*. He was concerned with the historical process of understanding. The presuppositions, or, as he calls them, the horizons, which the modern reader brings with him, and which must be verified when "fused" with the horizons of the text itself to create a new verity, derive from the effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the text itself. We are born within a stream of tradition derived from classical times, which we inherit naturally, and we cannot step outside this historical process to pass judgement from outside our own history *in vacuo*. There is, therefore, an interplay between the texts which are the source of our tradition and our own preunderstanding. This renders it easier for us to comprehend ancient literature as long as we let it speak for itself and do not impose our own prejudice upon it, but broaden both horizons until they meet and fuse together. In Gadamer's own words: "The projecting of the historical horizon, then, is only a phase in the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed. We described the conscious act of this fusion as the task of effective-histori-

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

cal consciousness. Although this has been obscured by aesthetic historical positivism in the train of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of application that exists in all understanding."⁶¹

If St. Augustine had read this passage he would have put his signature to it unconditionally.

Summary

Prosper S. GRECH

THE REGULA FIDEI AS A HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE IN PATRISTIC EXEGESIS

Already in the New Testament prophecy can be considered as a hermeneutic of the Jesus event. The criterion to distinguish true from false prophecy was its concordance with the original kerygma (1 Cor 12:3; 1 John 4:1-2). The same hermeneutical principle was maintained by the Church Fathers. Irenaeus appealed to the *regula fidei* in his controversy against the gnostics, as did Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. Origen, in the fourth book of his *De Principiis* expounds his method of explaining scripture and he too uses the "credo" of his days as the a priori assumption of true interpretation. St. Augustine does the same in *De doctrina christiana* and goes as far as to refer to the Rule of Faith even in such critical problems as the separation of words in continuous writing. The aim of my contribution is to examine the *Sitz im Leben* of both the Rule of Faith and its use in scriptural interpretation, quoting appropriate texts within their historical context. This practice in the patristic Church was taken up with reference to Church tradition by the medieval Church until the Reformation questioned it. As today all churches and confessions profess the same Apostolic Creed, can the same method be adopted as a hermeneutical principle in modern exegesis to facilitate inter-confessional dialogue? And how can the principle be applied today to literary genres? This is the purpose of my paper, and I hope that it will prove a fruitful discussion.

Povzetek

Prosper S. GRECH

REGULA FIDEI KOT HERMENEVTIČNO NAČELO V PATRISTIČNI EKSEGEZI

Že novoavezno prerošitvo lahko imamo za hermenevtilko dogodka Jezus. Merilo razlikovanja pravega prerošitva od lažnega je bila skladnost z izvorno kerigmo (1 Kor 12,3; 1 Jn 4,1-2). Istega hermenevtilnega načela so se držali cerkveni očeti. Irenej se je v sporih z gnostiki skliceval na *regulo fidei*, prav tako Tertulijan in Klemen Aleksandrijski. V četrty knjigi svojega dela *De principijs* razgrinja Origen svojo metodo razlage Svetega pisma in tudi on kredo svojega časa uporablja kot a priori podlago za pravo razlago. Enako sv. Avguštin v *De doctrina christiana*; ta gre tako daleč, da pravilo vere uporablja celo pri tako kritičnih vprašanjih, kot je ločevanje besed v neprekinjenem pisnpu. Cilj mojega prispevka je raziskati *Sitz im Leben* obojega: pravila vere in njegove uporabe v razlagi Svetega pisma. Navajam ustrezna besedila z zgodovinskimi ozadjem. To prakso Cerkev cerkvenih očetov je z vsem spoštovanjem do izročila Cerkve sprejela srednjeveška Cerkev; dokler reformacija vanjo ni podvomila. Ker danes vse cerkve in veroizpovedje izpovedujejo isto apostolsko vero, lahko isto metodo vzamemo kot hermenevtilčno načelo v današnji eksegezi; s tem bi ojačali dialog med veroizpovedni ugotovili, kako bi načelo danes uporabili pri literarnih vrstah, itd. To je namen mojega predavanja in upam, da bo izzvalo plodno razpravo.

⁶¹ *Truth and Method* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 274.