

The trap of authenticating Biblical facts

In the 1950s Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998) and Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979) debated the nature of authority. Jeremias, in his famous book, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, had claimed that we can authenticate the actual words of Jesus. In a nutshell the debate went like this:

Jeremias: On some Bible texts, like 1 Cor 11:23 ff, we can find the precise words (*ipsissima verba*) of Jesus, just as if his disciples had used a tape recorder. These are literal truths, the actual words that we can authenticate. This is revelation.

Käsemann: No, the texts are not audio-video tapes of Jesus' words and deeds. Even if we had such audio/video tapes, these tapes would not be revelation.

Jeremias: Even If we don't have the actual words (*ipsissima verba*), we are "close enough" to what actually happened. The text gives us an authentic echo of Jesus' voice (*ipsissima vox*).

Käsemann: No, the attempt to nail down Biblical "facts" is a kind of idolatry of the text.

As a result of this debate hundreds of students left Göttingen (Jeremias) for Tübingen (Käsemann).

The gospel is the message of the salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We trust in the promises – not in some kind of factual realness we think we can establish for biblical texts.

The gospel is a scandal to the human desire for evidence and proof, as Paul reminds us in 1 Cor 1:17-23. Like Jews and Greeks, we, too, want signs, wisdom, evidence and proof. Our sinful minds want to prove or deny particular biblical words and events as historical "facts." Then we're caught in the trap of authenticating – and not being those who live by faith in Jesus Christ, who redeemed us from sin.

Even if we could establish "proof" of the resurrection, no such "proof," could lead to faith. Faith comes through hearing the gospel not through attempts to authenticate Biblical facts.

Moreover, resurrections were reported elsewhere in those times. The modern Jewish theologian Pinchas Lapide (1922-1997), said: "Sure, Jesus rose from the dead. So what?" Lapide did not thereby become Christian.

The Lord creates faith, when and where he wills, in those who hear the gospel. And the gospel is the message of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.

Attempts to bolster the gospel by appeals to inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility are slips into the ditch – no less sinful than mitered claims to authority.