JACQUES LEFÈVRE D’ÉTAPLES: A HUMANIST OR A REFORMIST VIEW OF PAUL AND HIS THEOLOGY?

Irena Backus

In his by now classic study *Jacques Lefèvre d’Étapes et l’intelligence des Écritures*, Guy Bedouelle does not devote much attention either to Lefèvre’s portrayal of the apostle or to his understanding of Pauline theology. Both these questions deserve some attention, however, if we are to understand correctly the nature of Lefèvre’s spirituality and the role that philology plays in his exegesis. Even more important is the issue of situating Lefèvre in relation to humanism, on the one hand and to the Reformation on the other. Lefèvre so far has been regarded as a polyvalent, ambiguous figure. Scholars at various times have found him to be the harbinger of Luther, the man who first initiated his readers into the philological approach to Scripture via the annotations of Lorenzo Valla, the exegete who, despite himself, opened up the major

---

debates on the status of the Bible that characterised the next generation, whilst his own approach and method fell quickly into oblivion as “not critical enough” in comparison with Erasmus.

Much attention has been paid to his work as translator of the Bible into French and his efforts at Evangelisation within the Meaux circle which numbered in its ranks future reformers such as Guillaume Farel. He has also been examined as monastic reformer, who owed as much to mysticism as he did to philology, and as commentator of Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, Raymond Lull and Nicholas of Cusa. More recently, some have noted his interest and respect for New Testament apocryphal texts which he integrated into his commentaries on St. Paul’s Epistles published in 1512. As regards Lefèvre’s theology scholars agree that to him Christ occupies the central place in the Bible and that he sees Christiformitas as the key concept of Christianity, a view heavily influenced by his reading of Nicholas of Cusa and the latter’s conviction that Christ is the Meaning of Scripture. However, as Bedouelle notes, Lefèvre, while influenced by Cusanus, is not totally dependent on him in that, unlike Cusanus who distinguishes between the Word of creation and the Word of the Scripture, he identifies the Word by which God created the world with the word of God expressed in the Scripture. In other words, to Lefèvre, Christ is both God the Creator and the Scripture. It follows therefore that to him the true interpreter of Scripture is a man who “is transformed by the spirit of Christ, the end-all of intellectual desire.”

Given this hermeneutic, which we do not propose to challenge, how does Lefèvre conceive of the apostle Paul? Is he, as Bedouelle would have it, transformed by the spirit of Christ, a simple instrument of God, a prophet, who, like the other apostles, does not know what the Holy Spirit knows through him, called by God as he is to write down his

---

5 Cf. articles by Roussel and Wanegfelen as in note 1 supra.
8 See Bedouelle (1976), 65–70.
9 Bedouelle (1976), 69.