PART FOUR

HERMENEUTICS AND CONTEXT
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CAN THE CHURCH FATHERS HELP US TO DEVELOP A BETTER APPROACH TO THE ACTUALISATION OF SCRIPTURE?

PAUL B. DECOCK

Introduction

The turn to critical biblical studies reflects a knowledge system which, while offering new insights, radically affected our relationship to the biblical text. A new approach to the biblical text was constructed which was very different from the approach developed during the first centuries of Christianity and which was the common approach for more than 1500 years. Examining how Scripture was read by the Church Fathers and exploring the change brought about in our relationship to the text since the Aufklärung may help shed light on the question we want to understand: Why is the Western approach to the actualisation of Scripture so hesitant, so uneasy and so life-less? It may also enable us to find ways forward for our time and for our purpose.

The Aufklärung spirit developed out of a deep distrust of the mediaeval tradition and wanted to reach back to Greek and Latin Antiquity. This stimulated the development of historical research (e.g., the Donatio Constantini) and of textual criticism. Voices against allegorical interpretation grew stronger. Somewhat later, from the time of Descartes and Spinoza (the seventeenth century), an approach to the bible developed which removed the authority for interpretation away from the traditional sources (Church authority and/or testimonium Spiritus Sancti) and entrusted this authority to reason, mathematical reason to be more precise. The experience of the religious wars and the resulting chaos and destruction, which finally came to an end in 1648, had discredited these traditional authorities and mathematical reason appeared to many as the obvious way out of this dead end.

In the development which followed the idea of the actualisation of Scripture was replaced by means of another model, universalisation.