

# *Was ist Das?*

## The Nature and Basis of Theological Hermeneutics

Jeffrey Kloha

**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores the nature and task of theological hermeneutics by shifting the focus from abstract “rules” of interpretation to the process by which readers encounter Scripture and generate meaning within particular contexts. The catechism’s question *was ist das?*—What does this mean?—cannot be reduced to the discovery of a method or an abstract idea but must be understood as a question about how God’s Word forms believers for life in Christ. The essay challenges the common assumption that hermeneutics consists of a set of technical rules that, if properly applied, yield the correct meaning of a biblical text. Such a view misunderstands the nature of hermeneutics and the process of interpretation. Theological hermeneutics, therefore, must attend to both the formation of the reader and the purposes of God revealed in Scripture. The goal is not merely to identify correct interpretations but to cultivate readers who hear the Word with the proper theological orientation—shaped by the gospel and attentive to God’s purposes in Christ. In this way, the task of hermeneutics is ultimately pastoral and formative: to help the church hear Scripture in such a way that God’s Word continues to accomplish its work of killing and making alive, creating faithful hearers who dwell within the new life given in Christ.\*

**As I expound [the Psalter], I do not want anyone to suppose that I shall accomplish what none of the most holy and learned theologians have ever accomplished before, namely, to understand and teach the correct meaning of the Psalter in all particulars. It is enough to have understood some of the psalms, and those only in part. The Spirit reserves much for Himself, so**

---

\*This article is an updated version of an essay originally published in *Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets: Sola Scriptura in Context. The Second International Symposium on Lutheran Theology, Westfield House, Cambridge, 15-18 Aug, 2012*, ed. Tapani Simojoki (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of England / North European Luther Academy, 2013).

that we may always remain His pupils. There is much that He reveals only to lure us on, much that He gives only to stir us up. And, as Augustine has put it surely if no human being has ever spoken in such a way that everyone understood him in all particulars, how much more is it true that the Holy Spirit alone has an understanding of all His own words! Therefore I must openly admit that I do not know whether I have the accurate interpretation of the psalms or not, though I do not doubt that the one I set forth is an orthodox one.<sup>1</sup>

By 1519, when Luther began his lectures on the Psalms in Wittenberg, he had abandoned the fourfold-sense approach to the Scriptures. Here, he expounds the “literal sense” (p. 285), yet he admits that he cannot claim to have “completely understood even a single psalm” (p. 285). Perhaps even less confidently, he continues:

I have now come to the conclusion that as long as someone else’s interpretation is pious, one should not reject it unless he wants his own to be rejected in turn, according to “the law of the fang.” One falls short in some ways, another in more ways. I see some things that blessed Augustine did not see; on the other hand, I know that others will see many things that I do not see. What recourse do we have but to be of mutual help to one another and to forgive those who fall, since we ourselves have already fallen or are about to fall?<sup>2</sup>

Although Luther is writing prior to the Enlightenment, Modernism, and Post-Modernism, he recognizes his limitations and the tentativeness of his interpretation, indeed the inability to do anything except express what he is able at that moment. Similar thoughts are expressed in his preface to the 1519 Galatians commentary, wherein he says:

A slight thing it is indeed. It is not so much a commentary as a testimony of my faith in Christ, lest perhaps I have run in vain and have not adequately grasped Paul’s meaning (Gal 2:2). For here, because it is God’s affair and surely of the utmost importance, I am eager to be instructed by any child. I, too, would certainly have preferred to wait for the commentaries promised long ago by Erasmus, a man preeminent in theology and impervious to envy. But since he is postponing this (God grant it may not be for long), the situation which you see forces me to come before the public. I know that I am a child and unlearned, but in spite of this (so bold I may be) I am devoted to Christian piety and instruction.<sup>3</sup>

1. Martin Luther, Preface to *Operationes in Psalmos* [1519] in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 14 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot; Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 284–85.

2. Luther, Preface to *Operationes in Psalmos*, 285.

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, trans. Richard Jungkuntz, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hanson; Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 159–60.

For Luther, his exposition will have value not because it is *the* correct interpretation—for others will surpass his—but because he is “devoted to Christian piety and instruction.” If he, the reader, is properly formed, then he will be able to read faithfully if not perfectly.

## Definition of Theological Hermeneutics

Was ist das? The phrase is almost untranslatable into English. I wonder if its traditional rendering, “What does this mean,” is no longer satisfactory. When most people hear this phrase, I fear that they hear “meaning” and think of some kind of abstract, cognitive truth that is floating around somewhere. In Luther’s catechism, though, “meaning” is not abstract and cognitive. When I first glanced at the title I was assigned for this paper, I thought that I was to discuss “*Was ist dasein?*”—and I wondered about the narrow focus on Heidegger.<sup>4</sup> However, Luther’s catechisms do not encourage speculation on existence or awareness. Rather, when given a creedal, biblical statement, the “meaning” is that we *do* something and *do not do* other things. “Thou shalt not kill” does not invite speculation as to the meaning of the word “kill” and then decide how to “apply” the abstract notion of killing. What this means is to simply have a “fear and love of God so that we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.”

Notice that there is a “theology” inherent in these explanations. Luther’s “theology” does not begin with an assertion that the Bible is God’s Word and as such must simply be obeyed as a divine command that reveals inscrutable, divine will. Rather, he explains the Scriptures as part of a narrative: Christ has come, Christ has risen, Christ will come again, and by Christ’s Word in which he continues to speak and the sacraments in which he works, his Spirit has laid claim on me and given me new life. The new life is imperfect in this age but is nevertheless anticipatory of and, in some ways, participatory in the age to come. The scriptures, including the commandments (such as “Thou shalt not kill”), form us to live in a certain way. There is a goal, a *telos*, to the scriptures. It is God’s goal. “Theological Hermeneutics” seeks to frame our hearing of the scriptures within God’s work in the world, in and among us.

If God is at work, though, why do different “meanings” result from the same text? Individualized interpretation is a relatively new phenomenon in the life of the church. Prior to the Reformation, there was no “Bible”—66 books under one cover, easily (or at all) accessible to the average person. Before Wycliffe and Luther and Tyndale and dozens of other individuals whose names are not so well known put their lives at risk, the Scriptures were unavailable to the vast majority of the Baptized. This was partly the result of economics and technology—a hand-copied biblical manuscript

---

4. See Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* (trans. Alistair McEwen; Harcourt, 1997), 11, 28–30.

was fabulously expensive, and even Gutenberg's Bible (in Latin, remember) cost about the same as a house in the nice part of town. As great a hindrance was that most people could not read at all. There was no public education system and the church did not have schools for the laity. To hear from God, one had to trust what his representative, be it pope, council, bishop, priest, or friar, said on his behalf. This could be good, or it could be very bad, depending on how faithful all those popes and councils were. By the early 16th century, the teaching far too often did not match up with the Scriptures' message. There was more preaching of indulgences than of Gospel; in fact, Gutenberg himself made far more money printing indulgences than he did printing Bibles—in fact, printing Bibles caused his bankruptcy.

The great flow of history that came together in the early 16th century led to the rise of technologies that could cheaply produce printed books, a middle-class that could afford Bibles and education, and a desire to make God's Word available, as Erasmus described it, to every ploughboy and weaver at her loom. Luther took up his lexica and grammar books and translated into German; Tyndale, inspired by Luther, produced the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament in English before he was tracked down and murdered. What we take for granted today—the ability to read the Bible for ourselves, individually and privately, sitting at our tables or in our studies—has been a part of the life of the church for only about 20% of the church's history since the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Now, everyone can read the Bible, but is this good? Our instinctive answer is, of course, yes! Print Bibles by the millions. Put them in hotel rooms. Give them away to visitors to a worship service. Pass them out at county fairs. Get the word out as far and as wide as possible—on brochures, coffee mugs, web pages, billboards, everywhere.

Or, perhaps not. Consider this billboard, which appeared along American highways in the Spring of 2012:



You cannot *not* respond viscerally, revoltingly, or automatically to that billboard.\*

One writer offered this explanation for the problem:

The problem with this is that the sign shows what is lacking in the complaints by village atheists. First, there is something we call “biblical hermeneutics,” which is the art and science of biblical interpretation. Do atheists really want to take the time to understand and learn about how to interpret the Bible? Probably not. If atheists truly care about understanding biblical passages, they should take the time to learn some of the basics of hermeneutics. Otherwise, signs like these make them look like they just want to present a distortion of the Christian faith which is not backed up by proper research.

I think I understand how this writer is attempting resolve the “problem”—learn the “rules,” and you won’t make these kinds of mistakes. Such “solutions,” however, leave several problems unresolved. First, the Bible doesn’t come with any “rules.” There is no book called “Hermeneutics” standing after Malachi or Revelation from which we can cite chapter and verse to find the “rules” for reading properly. Consequently, all the “rules” are made up. We made them up; we inherited them from people like Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Tychonius, Flacius, and Voelz. Many are helpful, of course, and have stood the test of time, but others are not. They are all the result of the trial-and-error (at times it seems, mostly error) of thousands upon thousands of readers over thousands of years.

Second, I’d like us to use more care when we use terms like “hermeneutics.” “Hermeneutics” is not “advanced rules” for interpretation. Hermeneutics is not accomplished by asking the latest AI tools to compile all the rules and then spit out a “meaning” of a text, thereby producing the “right interpretation” on one’s screen. A standard resource in biblical studies provides a helpful definition of “hermeneutics”:

“Hermeneutics” denotes critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding, especially the interpretation of biblical texts or texts that originate from within other cultures. However, this may include all kinds of communicative processes, from signs and visual art to institutions and literary phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Voelz maintains this distinction between “exegesis” and “hermeneutics”: “The actual interpretation of the Scriptures is called exegesis. The study of the principles of interpretation, the theory which stands behind the actual performance of exegesis, is hermeneutics.” The reason that study of hermeneutics is necessary, he notes, is because the diversity of interpretations are caused by the conscious or unconscious decisions made by the *interpreter* about how to approach the text. This includes assumptions about matters that will be widely agreed upon (such as

---

\*The image on the facing page here represents an example of the necessary negative evidence for the point being made; we at *Promissio* recognize and disdain its offensiveness. —PRH

5. “Hermeneutics” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer; SPCK/Baker Academic, 2005), 283.

grammatical matters). Others will be less widely shared, such as linguistic theory, understanding of the historical nature and setting of a text, the view of revelation, the person and work of Jesus Christ, one's own relationship to the text, and "view of the world at large, including the possibility of understanding."<sup>6</sup> The problem of understanding, specifically how we come to "understand" what a text "means," is the focus of this essay.

Key in all this is that all readers/hearers of a text have a hermeneutic, whether they acknowledge it or not. In fact, I've found that those who presume that they operate without hermeneutics produce more mischief with the text than those who are forthright about their approaches and agendas. The last item listed by Voelz is the most significant: what is our view of the "possibility of understanding?" How do we come to know something to be true and not merely the construct of our own situatedness? The basic hermeneutical task is to account for the relationship between the author, text, and reader—especially the question of why does the reader come up with the meaning that he or she does, and is it a faithful meaning? Exegesis is studying the text while hermeneutics is studying the processes of interpretation. Both are necessary, but given the multiplicity of interpretation and the fact that most readers of the scriptures, frankly, seem rather poor readers of the text, it is essential that we look at readers and how they create meaning, not merely learn "rules." For the "rules," after all, are only that which the reader—back to the reader again—chooses to apply in his act of reading.

Let's return to this billboard and ask some hermeneutical questions—what does this mean? Why did we respond the way that we did when we saw that billboard?

First, we live in the 21st century, and the intended audience of the billboard is an American. We have had, collectively, horrific experiences with the word "slave." When we hear the word "slave," we think of the American experience, the war fought 150 years ago, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, whips, abuse, and chains. Slavery is a blight on our national history. The billboard, of course, primes us to think of exactly that when it places a troubling image of this conception of "slave" next to the passage. When the average American drives by this billboard and sees "Slaves, obey your masters," we cannot help but read the passage as antiquated at best and at worst as an agent of oppression and evil. Of course, this is exactly what the purchasers of the billboard want viewers to think about "the Bible." However, the problem is not the text; it is the reader who has been shaped and formed to react in this visceral, automatic way to that image and that word. In other words, slapping four words and that image on a billboard—which is viewed at highway speed, no less—does not allow for the kind of reflection that would lead to the obvious conclusion that 19th century American chattel slavery cannot be the same thing as slavery in a first-century, Greco-Roman context.

---

6. James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 13–15.

The same goes for “obey.” If you were told by a police officer to “obey the speed limit” or by your parents that you had to obey their curfew rules, you probably would not react in revulsion or horror (granted, teenagers might), but put the word “obey” next to our American notion of “slave” and, again, next to that image, and our automatic reaction will be negative. It becomes an intolerable word.

“Master” also applies. “Master” as a noun has for the most part fallen out of common American usage, probably because of its connection to slavery. Our immediate reaction to that word, as with “slaves” and “obey,” is to think of the American form of slavery, and again we respond negatively to the passage on the billboard.

Notice, I have not yet discussed what the text “means” or the “rules,” only how most Americans will read the text. This is hermeneutics, and such practices enable us to understand that our reading may not be consistent with God’s purposes in giving the text. Hermeneutics exposes the problem that you and I are reading the text, and you and I have been shaped and formed to read it in a certain way because of our education, our cultural environment, the kinds of books we read, the kinds of movies and TV shows we watch, our political leanings, our friends, and our experiences. All of these make us very poor readers of the biblical text and make billboards like this very effective.

To this point, I have not proposed a solution to the “problem” of this billboard’s interpretation of the scriptural text. I raise this as a hermeneutical problem, one that will help us address “theological hermeneutics.” Why are there multiple readings of the same text? What shapes us to produce those readings? How do we hear the scriptures faithfully? My goal in this essay is modest. It is not to provide “the” hermeneutic for coming up with the right “answers” but to lay out a model of how the creation of meaning happens so that we can begin to assess our own and others’ readings.<sup>7</sup>

## Multiple Readings of the Biblical Text

Rather than discussing interpretation in the abstract, let’s turn to one specific passage as an example of the challenge of multiple interpretations and readers’ goals. A classic problem passage is the account in Gal 2:11-14 of the “confrontation” between Cephas and Paul in Antioch. There, Cephas had been eating with the Gentiles, but after pressure came from Jerusalem, he withdrew and separated himself. Paul would have none of this, so he publicly rebuked Cephas. Thereby, at least to many

---

7. I should state at the outset that I taught a “Biblical Hermeneutics” course at Concordia Seminary and recently also at Christ School of Theology, a total of some two dozen times. I have used as a core text *What Does This Mean?* by James Voelz. It is impossible to summarize and defend all the issues raised in that book which influence my approach here; but I thought it important to note my influences and the student questions and discussions that shape the directions that I go in this essay.

in the early church, a problem arises: is it possible that an apostle—indeed even the first apostle, who would one day be considered the first Pope—be wrong and in need of public correction?

Clement of Alexandria solved the problem by positing that “Cephas” and “Peter” were two different individuals (as reported in Eusebius’ *Church History* 1,12,2): “This is the account of Clement in the fifth book of his *Hypotyposes*, in which he also says that Cephas was one of the seventy disciples, a man who bore the same name as the apostle Peter, and the one concerning whom Paul says, ‘When Cephas came to Antioch I withstood him to his face.’” This resolution to the problem may be reflected in the various readings in the manuscript tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Jerome’s concern was likewise to protect apostolic authority: “Thus they give Porphyry an opportunity to blaspheme, if one believes either that Peter had gone astray or that Paul had impudently rebuked the chief of the apostles.” He knows, but rejects, Clement’s line of rescue, for another “Cephas” is not known from Luke’s writings, but he cannot brook disharmony among the apostles, so he posits a gap in both Paul’s and Luke’s narrations and argues that Peter and Paul had cooked up, in advance and unknown to the others, a “feigned dispute.” This, according to Jerome, is common practice among lawyers (which I do not dispute) without occasioning outcry, so why should the apostles not make use of this rhetorical device? When Paul publicly rebukes Peter, who is in on the charade, the other Jews are actually rebuked and thereby both the teaching of the text is preserved—that is the Gentiles are fully church—and, apparently at least as importantly, apostolic authority is preserved.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine’s *Letter 28* to Jerome explicitly questions the great exegete’s explanation. If it would be admitted that the apostles carried out falsehood, that Cephas’ (Peter’s) actions were hidden and that he was acting deceitfully, then Paul would not be “speaking the truth” when he rebukes Peter. This would call into question, according to Augustine, whether any passage of Scripture was to be considered reliable. He states his concern quite clearly: “For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false.” Rather than call the text into question, Augustine is quite willing to sacrifice Peter, which is somewhat surprising, perhaps, given that Augustine himself is a bishop. Were he Bishop of Rome, would he have found that same argument so appealing?

Luther is not concerned about the authority of bishops. Rather, his concern is with the teaching of Justification by Faith: “Paul had no small matter in hand, but

8. Clement read Κηφᾶς in his text; Latin, Syriac, and bilingual Greco-Latin manuscripts as well as the “Majority Text” witnesses read a form of Πέτρος at 2:11 and 14.

9. Text of Jerome’s commentary available in T. P. Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome’s Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 100-102.

the chief article of the Christian religion. When this article is endangered, we must not hesitate to resist Peter, or an angel from heaven.” A different concern leads to a different reading: the passage is about the gospel, and any thing or any person who stands in the way of the gospel must be silenced.

Further, a fifth line of interpretation using a “socio-scientific” approach asks how the actions of those involved are affected by their social setting. An influential article by Philip Esler<sup>10</sup> argues that in the social context of Paul’s letter, an “honor-shame” culture is operative. The agreement won by the “anti-circumcision party” at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) would require, by nature of the unspoken social contracts of the day, that the “shamed” group restore their honor. As such, Peter is convinced by the Jerusalem church to be inconsistent in the application of the agreement by now withdrawing socially but not theologically from the Gentiles in Antioch. Esler argues that Peter had gone so far as compelling the gentiles in Antioch to be circumcised. Note that this reconstruction requires, just as in Jerome’s, some kind of machination behind the scenes that is unspoken in the text, as indeed is any mention of circumcision in Gal 2:11-14.<sup>11</sup> Peter is not exonerated in this reconstruction, but that is not Esler’s goal. His purpose is scientific: devising an explanation of the setting that is “rooted in ancient Mediterranean rather than modern North Atlantic values.”<sup>12</sup> One might wonder, though, despite Esler’s zeal in “deliberately trying to clear [his] mind of modern presuppositions” (p. 311),<sup>13</sup> if he has quite succeeded, for is it not

---

10. P. F. Esler, “Making and Breaking a Agreement Mediterranean Style: A New Reading of Galatians 2:1-14,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 285–314.

11. As Esler, 304 acknowledges: “Since Paul himself supplies no information whatever on this question (except as to the fact that certain people were sent to Antioch by James, leading to Peter’s suspension of table-fellowship with the Gentile members of the community, Gal. 2:12), it is necessary to generate scenarios and then to test them against the evidence in the text.”

12. Esler, 305.

13. Esler claims Ambrosiaster as an ally for his view that Peter was demanding circumcision, quoting his comments (in Latin) at the conclusion of the article. I am not certain that Ambrosiaster can adduced as support, however: “tale est {hoc}, quale et illud dictum ad apostolum Petrum: si tu cum sis Iudaeus, gentiliter vivis, quomodo compellis gentes Iudaizare? ita et hi cum ipsi legem non custodirent conversantes et conviventes cum gentilibus Galatas, circumcidere semetipsos cogebant, ut placèrent Iudaeis. per hoc enim mollebant sibi animos Iudaeorum, ut etiam de ipsis non crederent, quod gentiliter viverent.” The comment is found not at Gal 2:14, but at 6:13. My translation is: “This [referring to Gal 6:13] is the substance of what had been said to the Apostle Peter: If you, since you are a Jew, live like the gentiles, how do you compel the gentiles to Judaize? [Gal 2:14] So also these themselves [“those who are circumcised”; Gal 6:13], who did not to keep the law while living and eating with the gentiles at Galatia, compelled them to circumcise themselves in order to please the Jews. For through this they softened the attitude of the Jews to themselves, so that they [that is, the gentiles] lived on the basis of the very thing that they did not believe.” It seems clear that Ambrosiaster is describing the situation in Galatia, not in Antioch.

convenient to modern, non-ecclesial biblical scholarship that the founders of the church operate by brute force and backroom machinations, which were the very things that Clement and Augustine were most eager to avoid?

The point of this brief review of eighteen centuries of discussion on a few sentences in Galatians highlights several of the hermeneutical problems that we raised earlier. All of these ask questions about why different readers create different “meanings.” It is evident that the goals of the reader affect the reading of the text. This happens in several ways. First, a reader’s goals determine which methods that the reader chooses to apply, such as textual criticism (Clement) or socio-rhetorical criticism (Esler). Second, one’s situational concern produces the “meaning” that the reader draws from the text. Jerome, concerned about the authority of the bishop, created one meaning. Augustine, concerned to uphold the veracity of Scripture, created a different meaning. Each “meaning” derived from the (theological) goals that they brought to the text. Third, although we have used the word “meaning” up to this point, it should be now clear that what we call “meaning” and what we call “application” are inseparable. The text does not “mean” that bishops or apostles are either right or wrong, to be respected or ignored. Rather, the scriptures become *meaningful*, that is, they take on meaning and significance as they shape our thinking and behavior. This was both Jerome’s and Augustine’s concern. How does the way we read the text shape the way that we look at bishops or the scriptures? Fourth, there are multiple possible faithful ways to hear a text. None of the readings outlined here are necessarily “wrong,” but they are all different appropriations in different settings for different purposes. They operate with different theological goals, desiring to shape a specific response on the part of a specific hearer in a specific situation.

It is not “post-modern theory” that argues that different readers are likely to produce different “meanings” from a text. At the level of “words,” Augustine tried to deal with the ambiguity inherent in signs or words. In his *De doctrina christiana*, he uses virtually all of books II and III, nearly half of the treatise, to attempt to unravel the ambiguities inherent in “signs.” He opens book II with this introduction: “Now that I am discussing signs, I must say, conversely, that attention should not be paid to the fact that they exist, but to the fact that they are signs, or, in other words, that they signify” (2:1, 1; Green, 58). He goes on to discuss two problems in determining what words signify: that some signs/words are “obscure” (the topic of book II) and that others are ambiguous (the topic of book III). He cannot offer a comprehensive procedure that would allow one to decipher all the signs unambiguously, however. In fact, in book III he picks up the “Rules” of Tychonius—a Donatist opponent of Augustine’s catholic church—and comments on them to find guidance. However, even here he is not entirely successful, concluding that a single, perfect “meaning” is not attainable.<sup>14</sup>

---

14. See David L. Jeffrey, *Houses of the Interpreter. Reading Scripture, Reading Culture* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2003), 39–53.

In fact, Augustine has already heard the so-called “post-modern” claim that cultural diversity requires moral relativism:

Some people have been struck by the enormous diversity of social practices and in a state of drowsiness, as I would put it ... have concluded that justice has no absolute existence but that each race views its own as just. So, since the practices of all races are diverse, whereas justice ought to remain unchangeable, there clearly is no such thing as justice anywhere. (3:14, 22; Green, 155)

What is Augustine’s solution to this claim? It is not the inerrancy of Scripture, or the revealed will of God, but an articulation of his primary hermeneutical principle:

To say no more, they have not realized that the injunction “do not to do to another what you would not wish to be done to yourself” can in no way be modified by racial differences (*gentili diversitate*). When this injunction is related to the love of God, all wickedness dies; and when it is related to the love of one’s neighbor, all wrongdoing dies. (3:14,22; Green, 155)

Nearly two centuries earlier, Origen had noted the multiplicity of interpretation, in particular of the Old Testament. He attributes this to the interpreter beginning with a wrong theology, that is, the “Jews” look only to a “literal meaning.” As an example, the fact that the wolf does not feed with the lamb is taken to be literal only, and as in the coming of Jesus this did not happen, then Jesus is not the Christ. (*De principiis* 4:2,8). Likewise, the “simple” believe that the Demiurge is the sole God and identify it with the Creator God of the Old Testament (4:2,8). In 4:2,14, Origen lays out a positive approach to reading, one that argues that the first goal (*skopos*) of the Spirit is “to reveal those doctrines necessary for the perfection of the soul”; the second goal (*skopos*) is to conceal “these primary teachings in the secondary story of visible creation and the Biblical account of human history.”<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus likewise places the scriptures into the economy of God, noting that “If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling (*vocationis*)” (*Adversus haereses* 4:26,1).<sup>16</sup>

The earliest fathers knew that multiple interpretations were possible, even likely<sup>17</sup> and that some readings could be ruled out. When they sought to hear the

15. Cf. Ronald Heine, “Reading the Bible with Origen,” in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 131–48.

16. Cf. Maurice Jourjon, “Irenaeus’ Reading of the Bible,” in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 105–11.

17. In this context, it is appropriate to note that in many cases where textual variants were known, patristic commentators would comment on and interpret both variants without deciding which of the two was “original”; see Bruce M. Metzger, “Explicit References in the Works of Origen to Variant Readings in New Testament Manuscripts,” *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey* (ed. J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson; Herder, 1963), 78–95.

scriptures faithfully, they did not find refuge, primarily, in “rules” but in refocusing on the hearer and shaping him to read with the right eyes, to hear with the right ears, and to have to right goal (viz., God’s goal) in mind as he reads. Once again, we return to the problem of—or, more accurately, the role of—the reader. For it is the reader’s goals, purposes, and skills that produce “meaning.” Hermeneutics must assess the ways in which a reader interacts with a text and incorporates his or her goals into the reading of the text. Theological hermeneutics seeks to hear the text with faithful goals, agendas, and methods and expose those goals, agendas, and methods that do not produce the kind of hearer who has ears to hear.

### God Speaks: The Communications Model

Before proceeding to describe these hermeneutical processes, it would be helpful to articulate a communications model. This allows us to understand more the complications and questions that arise in differences in interpretation. At its most fundamental, the basic communications model recognizes that all communication, including written texts, involves three elements: 1) an author/speaker; 2) a text/verbal utterance; 3) a reader/hearer. By focusing on one or more of these elements of communication, different interpreters ask different questions which then result in different “meanings.”

Historically, the first to articulate a distinction of these elements is Friederich Schleiermacher, widely regarded as the father of Enlightenment hermeneutical theory and modern Protestant biblical interpretation. Schleiermacher distinguished the author’s *intention*—what he termed “psychological interpretation”—from the *text* itself, or what he termed “grammatical interpretation.” Schleiermacher does acknowledge that the reader is involved in the process, especially the modern reader who has limitations of knowledge of the ancient languages and culture. Instead, Schleiermacher’s focus was on the author; he saw the process of interpretation as reversing the process of communication: reader to text to understand the intention of the author.

Put simply, in Schleiermacher’s view, a text means what an author intended it to mean, as opposed to what is explicitly preserved on the grammatical surface of a text. By implication, the true meaning of a text is not to be found in its sentences and paragraphs but rather *behind* the text, ‘in the reconstructed viewpoint of the author,’ which lay beyond the text itself.<sup>18</sup>

With its focus on the intention of the author, Schleiermacher’s approach laid the groundwork for subsequent interpreters to focus on the authors’ processes of composition. Methods such as Form Criticism, Source Criticism,

---

18. B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42-43.

and Redaction Criticism arose as attempts to understand the author(s)' efforts to create meaning.

Historically, "New Criticism" arose next with its focus on the text itself rather than on the author. As Anthony Thiselton notes,

Probably the most influential text-book which reflect the movement was Rene Wellek's and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949)...[who] urged that the whole idea of the author's intention, at least as a criterion of meaning in literature, "seems quite mistaken." "The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for the author and his contemporaries." ... To use the intention of an author as a criterion for judging the "success" of a work of literary art, they claimed, rested on a fallacy. For the author's intention represented a private state of mind, which was virtually inaccessible except through the text itself.<sup>19</sup>

The New Criticism's shortcoming, however, was to presuppose a neutrality on the part of the reader who could, it was assumed, approach the text without presuppositions. Not only did this become quite quickly obvious to literary theorists, the fact of numerous different—and at times quite different—interpretations showed that the reader must be accounted for in the hermeneutical process.

Reader-centered approaches then arose, with Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Wayne Booth among the most prominent advocates. As Fish describes,

I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I has "seen" to a text and an intention. What my principles direct me to "see" are readers performing acts. The points at which I find (or, more precisely, declare) these acts to have been performed become (by sleight of hand) demarcations in the text.<sup>20</sup>

Reader-centered approaches—in isolation—have limitations as well. Focusing solely on the author only discloses the text itself and does not account for the reader, and New Criticism, which focuses on the text itself, unmoored from its historical context as well as naively assuming that the reader, can be neutral. Reader-centered approaches bring weaknesses as well as strengths. As Thiselton summarizes,

The positive gain in the shift in focus to the reader is potentially significant for biblical interpretation. The reader is no longer seen merely as a passive recipient of the message, but as actively engaged in a process of reading-transactions and responses. However, the losses remain serious ones. Without the constraints imposed on meaning by the text's context or

---

19. Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Zondervan, 1992), 58-59.

20. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 12-13.

situation and the directedness of the author's utterance, meaning becomes almost infinitely variable and polyvalent.<sup>21</sup>

Is there a way to hold all three elements—author, text, and reader—together in an interpretive model? A recent student text for biblical hermeneutics, Jeanine K. Brown's *Scripture as Communication*, summarizes how to proceed. She notes that focusing solely on one element will produce distorted readings: focusing solely on the author treats the text as a window, something that one looks *through* to get *behind* the text, but the text gets left behind. Focusing solely on the text itself treats the text as a work of art, but that work may now be understood apart from any historical setting or context. Focusing solely on the reader produces a mirror reading, one where the author sees oneself only and not the text. She offers six helpful "affirmations" that result from a wholistic understanding of the communication process, which acknowledge complexities but also account for the importance of all three elements:

1. Meaning is author-derived but textually communicated. Meaning can be helpfully understood as communicative intention.
2. Meaning is complex yet determinate.
3. Meaning is imperfectly accessed by both individual readers and readers in community.
4. Ambiguity can and often does attend meaning.
5. Contextualization involves readers attending to the original biblical context and to their own contemporary contexts so that meaning can be appropriated in ways that acknowledge Scripture as both culturally located and powerfully relevant.
6. The entire communicative event cannot be completed without a reader or hearer.<sup>22</sup>

With this communication model in mind, we will move toward approaches to seeking "meaningfulness" as we hear the Scriptures.

---

21. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 50. As an aside, it is common in conservative circles to equate all reader-centered approaches (and indeed, any approach which acknowledges the role of the reader) with "Deconstruction." This fallacy must be rejected. Deconstruction works from a radically different philosophical framework from what we are describing in this essay. A helpful summary may be found in Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory for Today* (Garland, 1999), 251-52: "For Deconstruction, (1) language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings; (2) existence has no center, no stable meaning, no fixed ground; and (3) human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only "identity" is the one we invent and choose to believe. As you may have noticed, the key word here is *unstable*. It should come as no surprise that, for deconstruction, literature is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable as the language of which it is composed."

22. Jeanine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication. Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 2021). Her discussion of the communications model is found on pp.47-89, with the "affirmations found on p. 89.

## Hermeneutical Models

Earlier, we defined “Hermeneutics” as “critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding.” Here, we will critique several models of the process of interpretation and understanding, especially as these processes occur in the hearing of the Scriptures. I do not find many previous discussions of “Lutheran Hermeneutics” to be sufficient for the issues that face the church in the early 21st century, especially issues involving the new life in Christ (traditionally called “sanctification”) such as marriage, life and death, and health care. However, reflections on “Lutheran hermeneutics” produced in the late 20th century do offer much of value. For example, Martin Franzmann’s “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics” offers an articulate and laser-like focus on the work of Christ, which is embedded as the *cantus firmus* throughout the biblical narrative. Franzmann summarizes this “radical Gospel”<sup>23</sup> in this way: “God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.”<sup>24</sup> This essay is required reading in my Biblical Hermeneutics courses. Similarly, Edward Schroeder provides a helpful essay, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutic?” which lists many of the same Lutheran assumptions as Franzmann did, such as *sola scriptura*, “Scripture is its own interpreter,” “Christ the Lord of the Scriptures,” and the unitary meaning of Scripture. Indeed, he emphasizes a key Lutheran goal: “But any hermeneutics, however critical or simple or orthodox, if it commits the fallacy which Melancthon saw committed by the Confutation of his day, will have to be rejected, not because Luther says so nor even because the Confessions say so, but because it buries Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Keeping Christ and his work central must be at the heart of any hermeneutic that reads the scriptures as God’s Word. Similar *foci* were articulated centuries before by Matthias Flacius,<sup>26</sup> but as students of Lutheran history are all too aware, articulating and coming to agreement with Lutheran presuppositions does not result in consensus on all issues to which the scriptural text is brought to bear, in particular the social and practical issues which are so controverted today. These essays on hermeneutics have not sufficiently recognized that in addition to *presuppositions*, one’s self-selected *goals* shape and determine that meaning that the reader creates from the text.

This section will use four models, laid out as diagrams, to understand the process of creating meaning from a biblical text. Each of them work with the author-text-reader framework, which was described above.

---

23. “Radical” in the Latin sense of the root from which all things radiate, not in the American sense of iconoclastic, extremist, or even “rad.”

24. Martin H. Franzmann, “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics,” Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, 1969, p. 4.

25. E. H. Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?” in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, ed. R. W. Bertram (Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 81–97.

26. Now available in a recent translation, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, trans. Wade R. Johnston (Magdeburg Press, 2011).

*Diagram A*  
*Traditional Model of*  
*Interpretation*

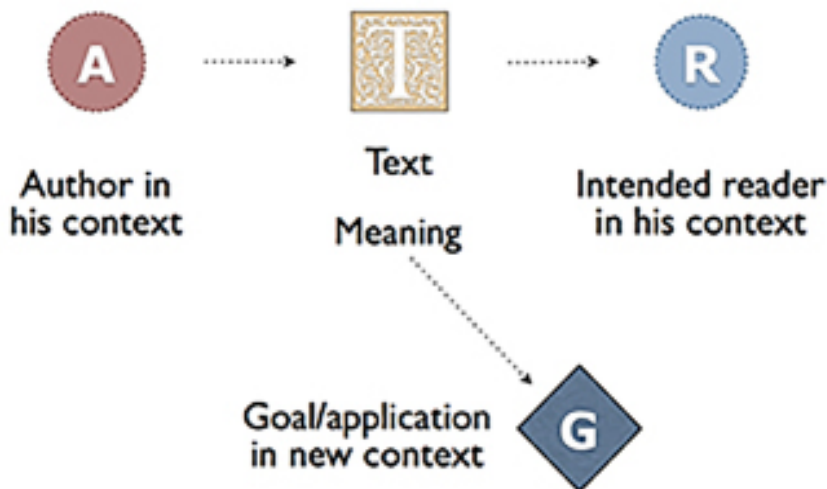


Diagram A: Traditional Model of Interpretation

This diagram represents what might be called a traditional view of the hermeneutical process in the production of meaningfulness via a text. First, the author in his context produces a text for an intended audience, such as, for the sake of an example, Paul writing to the churches of Galatia in the mid-first century.<sup>27</sup> This text conveys a “meaning” that Paul desires the Galatians to apprehend and, presumably, accept. The intended audience then hears (or perhaps reads) the text and from the words then constructs a “meaning.” The process of interpretation for present day readers using this model, then, is essentially the reverse of this process. One becomes as much as possible the original reader (by learning Greek and understanding the Hellenistic world and diaspora Judaism). By adopting the situation of the original audience and their perspectives, one becomes able to apprehend “the correct meaning” of the text and thereby gains insight into the thinking of the original author—indeed even the mind of the divine author himself, the Holy Spirit. Often, those using this model focus upon grasping *the meaning* of the text, which is viewed primarily as *revealing* a single “truth” (usually propositional) that is unknowable apart from this act of interpretation. Once this single “meaning” or “truth” is determined, “application” of that meaning can be made in new contexts. A clear distinction is made between “meaning” and “application.” The “application” might change, but the “meaning,” however, does not.

27. Complications arise immediately, such as the precise location of “Galatia” and conclusions then made from the conclusions made about location such as ethnic background of the audience and date. All of these are debated in the case of Galatians, though the point I am making here does not depend on one’s answer to these issues.

I'm not trying to set up a straw man in this description. Based on my interactions with pastors and teachers, this model fairly describes the way that many readers view the process of discovering the "original meaning" of a text and then "applying" it to hearers. A published example is the recent *Lutheran Study Bible* from Concordia Publishing House, which provides "interpretive notes" and "application notes" as if they are two different things. The former offers the one "interpretation," which readers then "apply" in their situations. This model does help to deal with some aspects of the problem of multiple interpretations. First, it acknowledges a distance between the original audience (in the case of the NT, some two thousand years distance) and our context. We are limited by our lack of familiarity with things like the languages and settings of the NT. Second, it seeks to bridge that gap by various means. Augustine's "application" of Galatians 2 clearly differs from Esler's. Nevertheless, far more fundamental questions cannot be resolved using this model. Furthermore, readers cannot duplicate the "moves" toward application; they remain somewhat arbitrary and unique to each interpreter. The difficulty remains that we raised earlier, which is the problem concerning multiple interpretations: not all readers will come up with the same "meaning" let alone "application." Interestingly, though, several of these multiple interpretations may, in fact, be "correct."

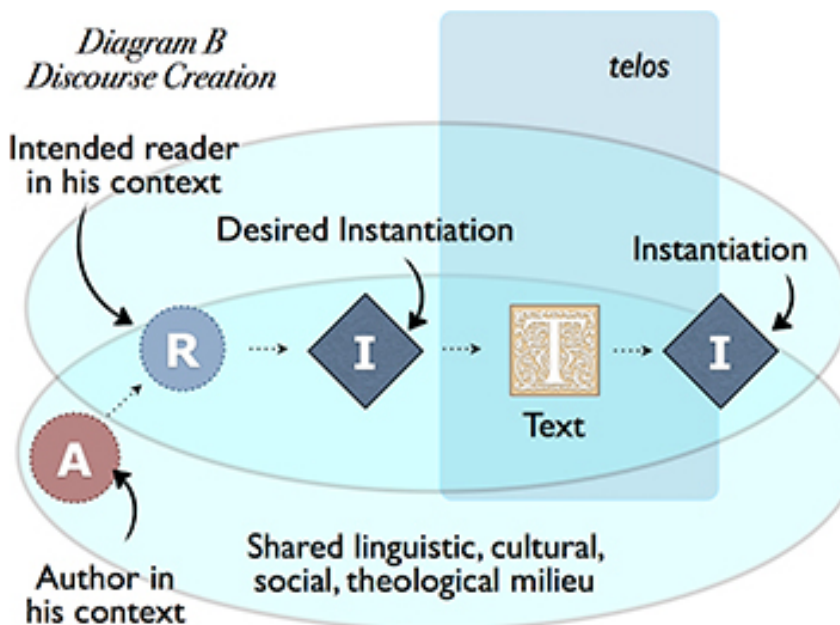


Diagram B: Discourse Creation

This model describes more accurately, I believe, what takes place in the production of a text, in particular of the texts of the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> The author

28. I see no reason why this model would not work for the production of any text. Since many of the contentious issues in our day involve the Pauline Letters, most of my discussion will focus on that portion of the canon.

begins with the reader: what needs do they have? What instruction are they lacking? What correction or encouragement do they need? For example, in the extant letters Paul discusses the Lord's Supper only in I Corinthians 10 and 11. Presumably, this is not because he did not think that the church in Rome or Philippi would not benefit from the Lord's Supper but because the church in Corinth was experiencing conflict in its celebrations. The author does not write in a vacuum, into the sky. He writes for specific people to accomplish specific things. This is labeled on the diagram as a "desired instantiation"—the author's desired outcome. That is, what does it look like, in specific actions, words, or thoughts when the reader/hearer comes to embody the effects of the text? At times this desired instantiation is more or less explicitly expressed by the author: "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (I Cor 11:33). At others the desired effect is less clearly signaled. In Romans, for example, Paul contrasts the "wrath of God" that is revealed to Jew and Gentile apart from Christ (Rom 1:18–3:20) with the "righteousness of God" that is revealed to all in Christ through faith (Rom 3:21–8:39). The goal of the contrast is that the church in Rome find its hope in Christ alone rather than the law. What is the desired result that follows from that? Is it limited to the sphere of salvation (vertical righteousness), or is it an additional goal that Jew and Gentile in Rome be reconciled to one another, as is argued in Romans 9–11, and that they end their disputes over what to eat (Rom 14)? Whether made explicit in the flow of the argument or less clearly signaled by the rhetoric, the desired result for the hearer is in the author's mind before pen is put to paper (or, in the case of Paul's letters, dictation begins). This goal then shapes the selection of words and the argumentation of the passage to impact the hearers. The "meaning of the text," therefore, cannot be limited to the sum of the definitions of the words but is, from the beginning, conceived of as producing a result in the hearer—there is more than *meaning*; the text is to be *meaningful*.

Two ovals in the diagram encompass, respectively, the author and the hearer. These two ovals represent the "Shared linguistic, cultural, social, and theological milieu." An example occurs when Paul writes to the church in Corinth in Greek, referring to specific situations ("A man has his father's wife..." (I Cor 5:1); "brother goes to law against brother" (6:6); etc., in a specific social context (for example, one in which "long hair" is "glory" for the woman, but "disgrace" to the man; I Cor 11:14–15) in a given theological milieu. Of course, at times the "theological milieu" of the hearers is itself the problem that needs to be corrected—for example, in I Cor 15 where the hearers have rejected the bodily resurrection. A problem to which we must return, in due time, is that these settings are distinct and unique—Corinth in the mid-50s of the first century is a different place than Rome, with different people, issues, and circumstances. Not only is there distance between our context and that of the first century church, there were differences (geographic, cultural, etc.) among the contexts of the New Testament church. Perhaps remarkably, Paul forbids circumcision in Galatia (Gal 5:2, etc.) but himself circumcises Timothy in

Lystra (Acts 16:1-3) while refusing to allow Titus to be circumcised in Jerusalem (Gal 2:3-5). Different contexts, even among the churches of the mid-first century, meant that the same action meant different things, and “contradictory” instruction is given. Later we must consider what we do with such texts—do we circumcise, or do we forbid it? As we draw *meaningfulness* from the texts, we must recognize that not even within the NT is the same *meaningfulness* drawn from the same passage—in this case Genesis 19 and the Abrahamic covenant’s requirement of circumcision. There were multiple, faithful interpretations within the NT itself.

At this point, we are ready to speak about the text, for it contains the “signs” (to use Augustine’s term) that are written to provoke the author’s desired response in the hearer. It is produced, again, within the shared milieu of the author and the hearers, so in the diagram the “text” is placed within the ovals representing both the author’s and the hearers’ milieu. However, the text does not inevitably produce the desired instantiation in the hearer. The church in Thessalonica, for example, took the eschatology of I Thessalonians and over-realized it, necessitating a second letter from the apostle. We do not know if some of the baptized in the churches of Galatia underwent circumcision, despite Paul’s words.

There is one final consideration in the process of textual creation that must be considered. On what source did Paul base his desired instantiations? Here is where theological hermeneutics comes into focus. Paul (we believe) is not inventing his “desired instantiations” capriciously, and the resultant text is not considered, from a Lutheran perspective, the mere whims of a human author but revealing and making known of God’s purposes in Christ. The Spirit is at work in the word, so that God’s purposes and intentions are carried out through that word. That is to say, because the apostolic and prophetic word is at the same time God’s word, these scriptures are an effective word, bringing about the Kingdom of God and the new creation through the church in the killing and making alive of the sinner, now made saint in Christ. God is not only *saying* something in the scriptures, he is doing something through them. What they are doing, this scriptural *telos*, or goal, will be considered below.

The strength of this model is that it incorporates pragmatics into the description.<sup>29</sup> The author is not merely providing information, but he is attempting to persuade his hearers to a new situation, perspective, action, or belief. Theologically speaking, it allows us to incorporate the efficacy and infallibility of the scriptures into the hermeneutical process. They functioned, for the original hearers, as the living and active Word of God. As such, they continue to function as the living and active Word of God in our day, continuing to be the means by which the Spirit kills and makes alive. Although this model does not yet account for the present-day hearer, building from this model will better situate us to understand the hermeneutical processes of the creation of meaning in our settings.

---

29. On pragmatics, see Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 275–88.

To this point we have only touched briefly on the present-day hearer's interaction with the text. The process of creating *meaning*, or better, *meaningfulness*, from the text is a separate process altogether from the creation of the text. This is illustrated in the next diagram.

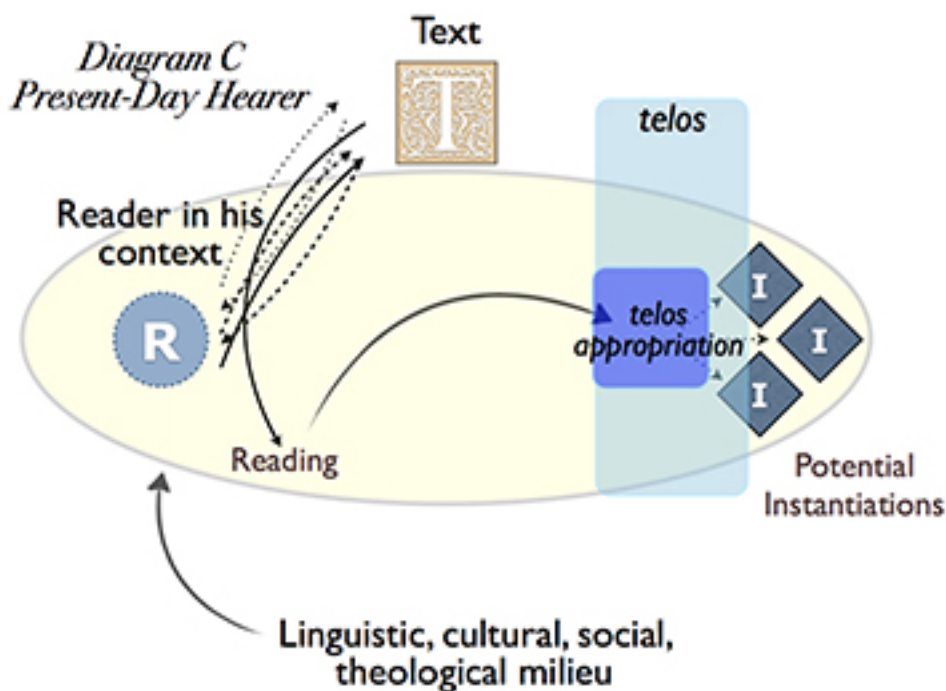


Diagram C: Present-Day Hearer

The reader is situated in his or her own context, which includes again linguistic, cultural, social, and theological perspectives that shape the reader. These perspectives allow some meanings to arise and others to not be considered by the reader. The text, however, is not located in the linguistic, cultural, social, or, even theological milieu of the reader (though the latter might be debated). Most obvious is the fact that most readers of the New Testament are not native readers of Koine Greek, so their competencies are limited, often severely. Cultural and other issues also come into play. An example that I used in a previous essay illustrates this well:

Powell (14-22) relates an example ... which he encountered when teaching the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). He noticed that students, in their work, did not include all the elements of the story. So he conducted an “experiment” to figure out why. He asked 100 students, after reading the parable, to retell the story to another student. Most of the familiar elements were present in these retellings: The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, the distant country, the squandering of all the money, feeding pigs, and “coming to his senses.” However, of the 100 students, all Americans, only six mentioned the famine. Neither Powell, nor the students,

could explain why this was so. During a sabbatical in St. Petersburg, he tried the same experiment to compare the results. Of 50 participants in Russia, 42 mentioned the famine, but only 17 mentioned the squandering of his money. Powell describes a possible reason for this: a “collective memory” of the 1941 siege of Leningrad (as the city was then called) which resulted in the deaths of 670,000 people from starvation, one-fourth of the population. The fear of this event continued to grip those who survived and their descendants even 50 years later. Americans, by contrast, have never, in collective memory, suffered such mass starvation. What concerns Americans is money, how one spends it, and making sure one has enough. This is what is then heard in the parable; the famine, which is outside the experience of almost all educated Americans, scarcely registers.<sup>30</sup>

Examples from the Pauline Epistles could be multiplied; the billboard that cites the passage “slaves, obey your masters” is only one. Hurtado notes that this is true of all readers of Scripture:

I would acknowledge gratefully the critique of naïve epistemological assumptions and the hubristic claims of some historical critics past and present. To be sure, all knowledge claims are limited and shaped by the “knower” as well as by the object of knowledge. The efforts of every interpreter are affected by his or her historicity, in time, geographical, and cultural setting, language, life-experiences, gender, values, biases, beliefs, vices and virtues. All human knowledge is “perspectival,” partial, and corrigible. All inquiry is motivated and, to some degree, shaped by the acknowledged and unacknowledged interests of the inquirer. To apply words from St. Paul, “We know only in part, and prophesy only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). Only in eschatological hope can we envision knowing “even as I have been fully known” (by God).<sup>31</sup>

This “partial knowing” and the inescapability of our own biases and contexts may seem to hinder “the meaning of the text.” However, it must be remembered that “meaning” only happens as the text is read and heard; meaning only exists as the reader—in his context—makes sense of the marks on the page or the sounds in the air.

The creation of “meaning” in the mind is never the sole result of interaction with any text, let alone the scriptural text. Some kind of *meaningfulness* occurs. That is to say, some kind of response is produced as a result. In hearing the scriptural text, an individual must find that *meaningfulness* in his own linguistic, cultural, social, and theological milieu. As we noted earlier, most present-day readers will not hear the injunctions against circumcision in Galatians to be meaningful in the same way that they were to the original hearers; a faithful hearer will desire to live out the

30. Kloha, “Theological Hermeneutics After Meaning,” 8, citing Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Abingdon, 2007), 14-22.

31. Larry W. Hurtado, “New Testament Studies at the Turn of the Millenium: Questions for the Discipline,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 173.

text in such a way that “Christ benefits” us (Gal 5:2). Circumcision, though, in a different setting, may indeed allow Christ’s work to have its way. In the process of moving from text to possible instantiations, various possibilities will come to mind while others will not. Some will suggest themselves, and others will be rejected as the hearer considers the text in his own setting. As a result, there are multiple potential instantiations (as we saw in the example of Galatians 2).

A specific example might be helpful. In 1 Cor 6, Paul rebukes the church, the “plaintiff,” and the “defendant”—everyone involved—for the presence of a wrong between brothers and then having that wrong settled by unbelievers and not by the church. Particularly in our American context, such texts are very difficult to find meaningful. Are all lawsuits forbidden? What about when one is involved in an automobile accident and both parties happen to be Christian? Should the insurance company be left out of it, and all expenses paid out-of-pocket by the person at fault? Insurance is fundamental to social interactions in America; indeed, most states require liability insurance. Does this mean, therefore, that in an automobile accident, 1 Cor 6 is irrelevant? I would suggest that such a move is inappropriate, both because it rejects the authority of the text and because the text is shaping hearers to relate to one another at a more fundamental level than simply setting up “rules” that “apply” only in some situations. Paul’s questions “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (6:7) therefore shape the hearer, as in the Sermon on the Mount, to “turn the other cheek” (5:39), even at the risk of having that one slapped also. Paul’s rebuke, “But you wrong and defraud, and this to brothers” (6:8), shapes the hearer to not wrong or defraud in the first place. This coheres with the Seventh Commandment. Finally, the rebuke of the entire church, that there is “no one wise among you” (6:5), corresponds to instruction elsewhere regarding the role of the church in restoring the lost brother (Matt 18; Gal 6:1; James 5:19–20). As such, while there are specifics in this text, in particular the problem of having the ways of thinking presently in those who do not have the Spirit be allowed to shape and define relationships in the church with respect to disputes, there are multiple potential instantiations of this text in a present-day setting. In some cases (I would hope, rather rare cases), a lawsuit between brothers might be deemed appropriate. In others, some mechanism for resolving disputes *within* the church may be appropriate—and there may be many different ways that such “dispute resolution” might occur. That is to say, there is not only one, single outcome generated by a text as it is heard in new contexts.

The final element in the process of the hearer creating meaningfulness is that there is a prior goal, or *telos*, that shapes and defines the possible instantiations of the text as it is appropriated in its new context. This will have a profound impact on the hearing of the text and decisively influence the result. For example, many present-day readers of the biblical text have a *telos* that is derived from their milieu that then determines their hearing. In the example of the billboard that I used earlier, “Slaves, obey your masters” sounds like a “bronze-age ethic” to our modern, enlightened society. Within a *telos* of inclusivity and egalitarianism, notions

of submission and vocation are foreign. It then becomes impossible to hear that phrase as anything other than something to reject.

Examples in biblical scholarship and ecclesiastical life abound and are not limited to either “conservative” or “liberal” ecclesiastical perspectives. For example, a recent set of essays, *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, lays out the many different goals which readers bring to the text, thereby shaping their reading. The essays are clear about these goals. For example, in an essay on “Feminist Approaches,” the goal is to:

[P]rovide a more involved demonstration of a feminist kind of ideological criticism in the section to follow. By making visible the ideology of gender and slavery in the biblical text, the biblical interpreter is able to analyze how it operates in the text and its interpretations, raise critical questions about it, and envision ways to resist or transform it.<sup>32</sup>

The “resisting and transforming” of the biblical text inevitably has in mind its own ideology before it approaches the text and becomes a lens through which the text is viewed and possible instantiations are envisioned. In the case of the author cited here, it is not possible to have any instantiation result from reading Paul other than to “resist and transform” toward a *different goal*. Here is an example where incorporating a *theological hermeneutics*, one that includes *not privileging* one’s own preferences, cultural contexts, or agendas, becomes important.

Other approaches outlined in the book have a different *telos*, but the results are similar. An essay on “Queer Approaches” argues that “The exercise of queer reading can become an efficacious exercise, not solely for how it produces meaning but for how it generates effects, how it is involved in the production of new concepts of self and society.”<sup>33</sup> Notice that the goals are to generate “new concepts of self and society” as generated by this approach. With a different goal, a different result ensues.

Other ideological approaches may be cautiously considered, however. For example, a “Postcolonial approach interprets with suspicion but also toward retrieval or restoration. Interacting with colonial history and its aftermath a postcolonial optic focuses on histories of repression and repudiation, but through exposé engages also in restoration and transformation.”<sup>34</sup> In some respects, this approach is more helpful than a feminist approach, for it seeks a similar goal to that of the scriptures: the hearers “love their neighbor as themselves,” and the apostolic message, in many ways, was a message of God tearing down the powers and principalities of this

32. Cynthia Briggs Mittredge, “Feminist Approaches: Rethinking Histories and Resisting Ideologies,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Fortress, 2012), 127.

33. Marchal, “Queer Approaches: Improper Relations with Pauline Letters,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters*, 224.

34. Jeremy Punt, “Postcolonial Approaches: Negotiating Empires, Then and Now,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters*, 195.

age.<sup>35</sup> What must be considered, however, is the extent to which a postcolonial *telos* coheres with a biblical *telos*. This is the goal of theological hermeneutics: to consider the divine goal of reading/hearing and then test our readings to see if they cohere with the divine goal.

Self-referential readings are also produced in “traditional” interpretive moves, even if they are not methodologically or hermeneutically self-aware. For example, it is quite common in preaching to produce (to use Luther’s phrase) an “orthodox” reading but not an accurate one. I will use, anonymously, a sermon preached recently on Mark 6:45-56 (I do not know the author, nor his ecclesiastical affiliation, but his sermons are regularly posted on a web site frequented by Lutherans). The text is a challenging one; it is the second time in Mark that Jesus calms a storm. The disciples are alone on the lake in a storm, again fearful. The oddest part of the text is in verses 48–50: “And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified.” Leaving aside the problem that a modernist would have with the depiction of Jesus walking on water, other questions arise, such as, why is he about to pass by? Why would he leave them abandoned to the storm? Why did they think he was a ghost? Why were they terrified this second time that they were in a storm? Most importantly, what *meaningfulness* should we draw from the text? Is it that we not have fear of our (allegorical) “storms”? The sermon, unfortunately, ignores every one of these aspects of the text. Here is the “application” that the sermon makes:

He makes His way to the Boat that the boat may make its way to the other side. Without Jesus there is no way. With Jesus, He is the Way. He is the only way. And His Way is to be carried along by the Wood. The Wood on the Water bearing Jesus to the other side—to safe ground—to a promised Land—to paradise. There is no way to cross over unless you are carried by the Wood. There is no way to heaven, unless you cling to the cross of Christ by faith, receive His baptism in your baptism, hold His Word dear to your hearts. The cross is your bridge. The Body of Jesus is your nourishment. The blood of Jesus is your drink. The passion is your hope. His Church is your ARK.

The sermon, titled “No Crossing Except by Water and the Wood,” is “orthodox” in that it focuses on the cross, encourages participation in the sacrament in the church, and that it has selected one aspect of the Kingdom *telos* and forced the text to urge that aspect. In this example, the preacher knows that in the Kingdom of God salvation happens only by Christ, the Lord’s Supper sustains one in salvation, and the church is the place where Christ and his Supper are found. In the mind of the

---

35. An excellent study that highlights this theme in Acts is C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

preacher—the locus of meaning, as we discussed earlier—“boats” evoke wood, from which the cross is made, and the “water” that Jesus walks upon evokes baptism. Body and Blood are absent from the text, but the preacher chooses to insert that from within his understanding of the Kingdom.

Is any of that actually found in the text? The fact that the preacher fails to mention that Jesus is about to pass by the struggling boat while offering neither a word of encouragement nor a finger of assistance, which seems to be a significant element, suggests that the scriptural text is merely a pre-text for the preacher. Is it textually defensible to label the “boat” as the cross or the church (I am not sure which metaphor he is working with; it seems to be both)? This allegorical move, which rejects some textual features into order to fit, Procrustean-like, into his *telos*, is orthodox but not textual. It distorts and ignores key elements of the text. To return to my diagram, the preacher is operating on the right side of the diagram but not on the left. Theological hermeneutics exposes this kind of reading as shaped, unhelpfully, by ideology in the same way (though not with the same result) as a feminist or queer reading.

The problem with such readings is that they abandon and leave behind the text. The text has no normative function even though an “orthodox” sermon has been preached. The pragmatics of the biblical text have been ignored; as a result, the goals of the preacher have replaced the goals of the text and its divine author. The preacher runs several risks here. First, how will his own reading be normed? How does he know, ultimately, that he is preaching with a Kingdom *telos*? If all his readings of the text are this influenced in this way by his own agenda, can any reading of the text actually penetrate his thinking? Second, he runs the risk of neglecting sections of the Scripture that do not suit his self-selected goals. The result will, over time, be congregations who have not heard much of the biblical account of the good news of the Kingdom. A more self-critical approach is needed.

Readers of this essay may have “cheered on” my critique of either the queer reading or the “orthodox” reading, but I hope the reader sees the actual point: privileging human autonomy—whether one is aware of it or not (as I suspect is the case with the preacher of the “boat” sermon)—results in readings that may not faithfully be normed by the actual text. Some discussions of hermeneutics distinguish “general hermeneutics” from “special hermeneutics.” The former includes general principles of interpretation that apply to any text, such as philology, syntax, semantics, historical context, and literary forms. The latter includes assumptions about the biblical writings specifically, such as divine inspiration, the unity of Scripture, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This distinction was first articulated by J. C. Dannhauer, a Lutheran, in his, *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum* (1654). While one may place certain principles into different categories, I am working here with the assumption that both are indispensable and indeed interdependent. As Thiselton summarizes, “Biblical hermeneutics cannot ignore general hermeneu-

tics.”<sup>36</sup> To return to the failed examples cited above, if a “queer hermeneutic” fails to incorporate “special hermeneutics,” a “conservative hermeneutic”<sup>37</sup> fails to incorporate “general hermeneutics.”

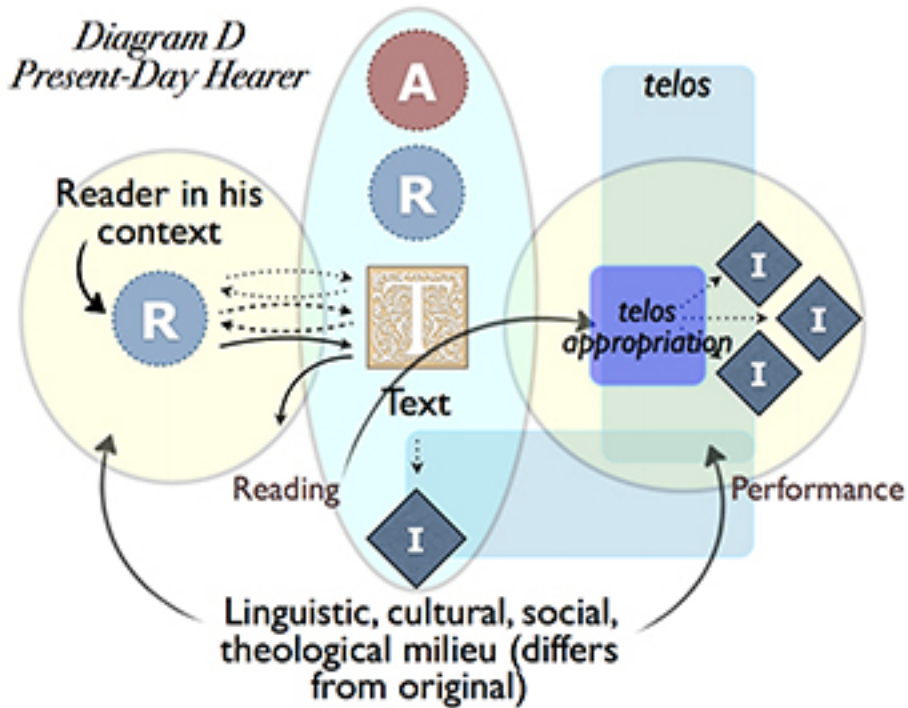


Diagram D: Present-Day Hearer in New Settings

A fourth model incorporates the theological nature of Scripture in accordance with the Spirit’s purposes for the Word and is able to account for new hearings of the word. In this diagram, it is made evident that our setting is different from the setting of the original hearers of the scriptures. This is obvious and is the basic hermeneutical problem, but we continue to hear the Word because in them the Spirit continues to shape and form us in our setting. Nevertheless, faithful hearing occurs in every generation of the church, even if, as the multiplicity of interpretation and the history of the church demonstrate, faithful hearing may look different in different times and places.

In this diagram, the previous diagram (C) is rotated to the vertical axis. This is done to make clear that while we, the present-day readers, have the text in common with the original hearers, we nevertheless have different contexts and therefore different instantiations of the goal (*telos*) of the text.

36. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics. An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2009), 614.

37. I have invented this label for the approach, since this method itself is self-unaware and critically unreflective.

Unfaithful hearing may occur for any number of reasons. On the left side of the diagram, it might occur because of my context, my social setting, or my lack of ability with the Greek and Hebrew. On the right side of the diagram, unfaithful hearing might occur because I cannot conceive of a way that the text might shape my thinking and life, either because it is too foreign and “antiquated” or because I do not agree with the results that the text will produce in me. My ideology, my prejudice, my theology, and my ideology might prevent the Word from having its way with me. At the same time, this model is helpful in explaining why I regularly use profitable commentaries and studies on the biblical text by authors who do not share my theological foundations. They might illuminate issues that focus on the left side of my diagram, and they help reshape my thinking to understand the language, structure and setting of the text. For example, it is fair to say that feminist approaches have made clear that women were more involved in the early churches than had been considered before. When these studies move toward what they believe the instantiations should be as a result, this is where theological hermeneutics becomes critical: do they produce a faithful hearing, consistent with the *telos* of the divine author and his Word?

In the diagram, notice that while the setting of the original hearers is different from our setting, the Kingdom *telos* is the same. That is to say, the Spirit’s work is to keep the hearers of the Word faithful until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether that hearer lives in the first century or the twenty-first. The Scriptures are a means by which faithful hearers of every generation are taught, reproved, corrected, and trained in righteousness through that God-breathed word, “so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The instantiation of life in the Kingdom formed by the word in every new context will, inevitably, be both different from and, in some respects, identical to the instantiation that the word forms in the original (and subsequent) hearers.

### Toward a Theological Hermeneutic

In conclusion, I will focus on what I believe is most critical for the present-day situation of the church: what theological hermeneutic provides the correct *telos*, or goal, that generates faithful hearing? This is not to say that presuppositions such as infallibility, the Christo-centric nature of Scripture, and the unity of Scripture are not important; indeed, they are essential. However, even agreeing upon these foundational matters has not always resulted in faithful hearing.

Moreover, interpreting the Scriptures as a Lutheran *requires* accounting for the Holy Spirit’s work in making Christ known through His Word, within the Christian community. As the Large Catechism points out:

“I believe that the Holy Spirit makes me holy, as his name states.” How does he do this, or what are his ways and means? Answer: “Through the Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.” In the first place, he has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims, through which he illuminates and inflames hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. Where he does not cause it to be preached and does not awaken the understanding of it in the heart, all is lost.<sup>38</sup>

However, what is the proper *telos* of the scriptures? “Christ” is the answer, but simply stating that is not sufficient. For which Christ do you have—Christ as lawgiver, Christ as one who frees, completely, from any law, or Christ as model? This is a precise question asked in the New Testament itself (Mark 4:41; 8:31)—and the question could well be answered incorrectly (Mark 13:21-22; Gal 1:6-7; I John 4:1-6).

The Small Catechism in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed provides a simple summary of both “which Christ” and “which *telos*.” Christ’s work is for a purpose “that I may be his own, and live under him in his Kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” In order that we might be his own, the Spirit was sent “who spoke by the prophets” and who “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies,” and “keeps.” The Catechism, like the creeds, embeds Christ in a narrative, a creedal narrative, in which God creates and preserves, Christ redeems, and the Spirit calls and sanctifies until the last day when the dead are raised and the resurrection bodies are bestowed on those who believe in Christ. The apostolic and prophetic word is a part of this creedal narrative; its *telos* is the Triune God’s *telos*, to bring us, righteous, to the last day. Therefore, a Christocentric hermeneutic that eliminates the new life in Christ cannot produce a reading that will “keep me in the one true faith,” for with such a hermeneutic I will be free to design my own *telos*. This is the shortcoming of too many feminist approaches, queer approaches, and “traditional” approaches.<sup>39</sup>

The scriptures must be understood within the economy of salvation. God can only be partially and hiddenly known through His creation. He dwells in “unapproachable light (I Tim 6:16). Apart from God’s initiative, we cannot know God, know how we stand before Him, fear Him, or love Him. God is a speaking God. “The gods are mute, but the Lord speaks” are the opening lines of Sasse’s

---

38. Large Catechism, Apostle’s Creed, Article III, 42-43. Cited from Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, editors. *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress, 2000), 436.

39. To return to the sermon on Mark 6 cited above, the author’s self-chosen goal is, essentially, to attend a Lutheran worship service. That is a fine goal, but the text is asking different questions which would produce different results: Why did the disciples respond in fear? Why did they not ask Jesus why he was about to walk past them? Why is Jesus’ solution to the disciples’ fear “do not be afraid”? And what does that teach us about faith in this Christ?

unfinished work *Sacra Scriptura*.<sup>40</sup> In the economy of God, this speaking occurs by the Spirit who makes known Jesus Christ. Jesus does not begin His public ministry until the pouring out of the Spirit in his baptism (Mark 1:10-11 par.). His authority, to forgive and to heal, is the same authority that belongs to the one God (Mark 2:1-12). In the wisdom of God, the world could not know Him, but He makes Himself known through the foolishness of what was preached, the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1:20-25). This Jesus and His authority were rejected and crucified by the world, but through the Spirit of holiness, He was declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection (Rom 1:2-4). God makes Himself known and He speaks in power, only in Jesus Christ to make for Himself a holy and righteous people.

The Spirit, then, continues to call to Christ. The Spirit is the active agent throughout the life and ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:14, 18-21; etc.), and the Spirit speaks the Word about Christ through his Apostles (Acts 1:8) as the narrative of Acts unfolds through the church. “Deacons” such as Stephen (7:55) and Philip (Acts 8:29), “prophets” like Agabus (11:28), and even individuals without title such as Priscilla and Aquila “explain the way of God more accurately” (18:26). This speaking of the Spirit always occurs through people to people who all have their own backgrounds, beliefs, and questions. Therefore, Peter’s speaking to those in Jerusalem will sound different than Paul’s speaking to those in Athens, which will sound different from Paul’s letters addressed to the baptized.

A Trinitarian credal framework also allows us to recognize that God works among us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The work of the Father, the creator, in the words of the first article of the Small Catechism, is to “still preserve” us and His creation. As His creatures, we live within and are blessed through the created realm even in its groaning condition (Rom 8). His reign in his left-hand kingdom is through rulers who mete out justice as agents of God (Rom 13). Therefore, we will find in Christ that the world as we experience it may be in accord with His revealed will. The biblical texts frequently appeal to “the way things are” as genuine expressions of God’s will. For example, in 1 Cor 11 Paul notes that “in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman.” God’s creation shapes and defines relationships between woman and man (or, perhaps in this passage more narrowly, “husband” and “wife”). Furthermore, in the same passage, “nature itself,” that is, the “way things are,” still “teaches” within the church. Of course, teaching drawn from creation alone is insufficient to know Christ, who is revealed only in the “word of the cross” (1 Cor 1) or “in Christ” (Rom 3). Nevertheless, God’s work as Father reminds us that God’s will is not always in conflict with, and in fact is at times worked out through, His creation and left-hand rule.

---

40. Hermann Sasse, *Sacra Scriptura. Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift von Hermann Sasse*, hrsg. F. Hopf (Verlag “Lutherische Blätter,” 1981), 11.

The work of the Son, the redeemer, is usually in a more antagonistic relationship to the fallen creation. Jesus describes His activity using imagery of someone robbing a strong man's house—in His casting out of demons, He is stealthily stealing people away from the dominion of Satan (Mark 4). Christ's work is described in like manner in the epistles: by Jesus Christ giving Himself up for our sins, He has rescued us from the "present evil age" (Gal 1). Christ's work as redeemer presupposes a "Christ against culture" orientation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. We are called to radically battle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 5). This is the language of the second article of the Small Catechism: "Who has *redeemed* me ... *purchased* and *won* me..." Notice that God's First Article work might seem to contradict His Second Article work—is the ruler one who is to be "obeyed," as in Rom 13, or is the ruler to be regarded as an agent opposed to Christ's Lordship, as in Acts 4? Because scriptural passages that use different creedal discourses may seem to contradict each other, we must account for the ways that we choose which direction to follow and why we choose not to follow the other.

The work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is to make all things "new" and to "transform." He "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies," that is, takes me from where I am now to a new place, thought, and life. This transformative work of the Spirit, however, remains incomplete both in the individual and in the church until the Last Day, so that some part of the old remains. When the Scriptures focus on the work of the Spirit, the discourse will focus on what God is doing in the individual and in the church to achieve His purposes. We are "straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3), living in the present in light of the future. As the great chapter on the resurrection concludes, because Christ has risen and we will be raised, "our labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15). When the Scriptures urge sanctification and the Christian life, the teaching and preaching will necessarily adopt third article rhetoric since it is only by the working of the Spirit that such living in the present happens, whether in the individual or in the church.

These three perspectives are not, of course, contradictory or mutually exclusive, any more than are the persons of the Trinity. All three describe ways that God works in the world still today; in our teaching and preaching, however, we often find ourselves gravitating toward one or the other of the articles. In particular, Lutheran preachers tend toward a Second Article framework. If one were to err, better to err on preaching Christ, but such a focus runs the risk of failing to preach "sanctification" or to neglect creation within which we have been placed as stewards. Others will tend toward a Third Article framework. The reign of Christ over creation is highlighted with its emphasis on renewal and eschatological hope. This, of course, is entirely consistent with the New Testament, but even in the apostolic age the danger of "over-realized eschatology" plagued the church (1 Cor 4; 2 Thes).

Above all, the scriptures, because they are Word of God, are performative. That is, they accomplish God's purposes. Although the scriptures convey information,

the information provided is never solely for the purpose of filing away in a dogmatics text that is placed on a shelf. For this reason, remarkably, we keep hearing the Scriptures day upon day and week upon week. The revelation of the Word of God is like no other. How many of us go back and read Plato and Aristotle weekly or daily, even though virtually all the epistemological and ontological questions still discussed in Western thought were raised and addressed by them? We do not go back to those texts to find new insight or new modes of being. If we read them at all, it is for historical purposes; moreover, I could more easily read someone else's expert summary of them to get what I need. Again, it is very unlikely that any of us have read Foucault in the original, yet to a person our thought patterns are shaped by his work and even assume, without realizing it, that all language and relationships are, as he described it, negotiations of power. Unlike these seminal texts, we keep going back to the Word of God. We do not read other people's summary of scriptures. We keep hearing the Scriptures because something happens: God works, again and again, when we hear His word.

When I hear the gospel reading appointed for the Second Sunday in Advent, for probably the thirteenth or fourteenth time during a gathering of God's people in worship, I will hear it differently than I did the twelfth or eleventh time that I heard that same reading because I am different and my circumstances have changed. My struggles have been resolved, and new ones press to the fore. However, in my changing circumstances, God's Word speaks again, and I run to hear it again and again because I know that the hearing will be different this time. Like no other writing, God speaks in this Word. I am addressed. Even against my will, I am made into His faithful child that I may live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. As Wingren describes it:

To speak of the last day, of the final victory and the full redemption, is to speak of something that is being accomplished by the Word and mediated by the preaching that is now going on throughout the world, which is the link between Christ's resurrection and our own. Redemption is not just something of which we hear in the Word. It is something which is even now happening to us, when we encounter the Word; the Word is the creative Word which brings its work to birth in us.<sup>41</sup>

Our struggle, then, is to determine when our hearing of the Word of God is indeed proper hearing. When is the life that we live and urge upon others indeed formed by the Word? When, in fact, is it merely the sinful imposition of my will upon others?

Turning again to our predecessors in the study of the scriptures, I would like to draw upon Augustine, Flacius, Luther, and Bayer to help define an appropriate *telos* toward which the Spirit through the scriptures is working. Augustine summarizes the *telos* in this way:

---

41. Gustav Wingren, *The Living Word. A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church* (Fortress Press, 1960), 94.

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, he states,

So when someone has learnt that the aim of the commandment is “love from a pure heart, and a good conscience and genuine faith [1 Tim 1:5], he will be ready to relate every interpretation of the holy scriptures to these three things and may approach the task of handling these books with confidence. For when the apostle said “love” he added “from a pure heart,” so that nothing is loved except that which should be loved (*De doctrina Christiana* 1:40,44; Green, 53; cf. 3:14,22; Green, 155, cited above).

This “double-love” is the *sine qua non* of faithful hearing of the scriptures. Several authors have pointed this out in Augustine. Francis Watson, in his summary of Augustine’s hermeneutics, places at the top of the list “a firm grasp of the *telos* of Holy Scripture and its interpretation, which is to engender the love of the Triune God and of the neighbor and nothing else.”<sup>43</sup>

Seeing “double-love” as the *telos* of God’s work in scripture is not unique to Augustine. Flacius’ essay *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures* likewise recognizes that unless one understands the overall purpose or goal of the scriptures, one cannot hear properly:

It is useful right in the beginning to understand what one ought to get out of the proposed work, not only so that he might be more clear with respect to the work, but also so that he might recognize what to pluck from it and deposit securely in his heart. All that is written, therefore, is written for us, so that Scripture first binds us under sin and condemns us; then, testifies to us about Christ; third, consoles us so that we might have patience and hope; and finally teaches, rebukes, corrects, and instructs, so that the man of God may be perfected, equipped for all things (2 Timothy 3:16,17).<sup>44</sup>

The purpose of scripture is, for Flacius, summarized in a four-fold goal: Law, Gospel, comfort, and, based on 1 Tim 3:16–17, teaching, thus rebuking correcting and instructing “so that the man of God may be perfected, equipped for all things.” These would correspond to Augustine’s “double-love” in that “Law, Gospel, comfort” accomplish the love of God while “teaching, rebuking, correcting and instructing” accomplish love of neighbor. The necessity of recognizing that a goal of Scripture is to produce a “perfect” life—love both God and neighbor—is reflected in the summary “Guidelines,” which he provides at the conclusion of his treatise: “[I]t

42. *De doctrina christiana* 1:36,49; translation from Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* (ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green; Clarendon Press, 1995), 49.

43. Francis W. Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church. Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2006), 122.

44. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, trans. Wade R. Johnston (Magdeburg Press, 2011), 70.

is therefore especially necessary in this regard for one to consider and keep in view the attainment of the true and genuine meaning of the Sacred Scriptures, with the desire to use it with the best faith for the glory of God, for your benefit, and for the benefit of others, especially the spiritual and eternal benefit.”<sup>45</sup> This comes tantalizingly close to Augustine’s *telos* of double-love of God and neighbor. However, in his treatise, Flacius does not develop or emphasize in any significant way that hearing of the Word results in love of neighbor. The nearest he comes is in section 51 where he teaches that our speaking “should always be salted by the Word of God, so that we and others are edified” and that we are “to be prepared always to give a reason for our faith,” which is “above all the end product to be sought and derived from this study [of the Scriptures].”<sup>46</sup>

Though not laid out as a treatise on hermeneutics, Luther’s catechism works with the same double-love *telos* in his “meanings” of the commandments in the second table of the law: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor”; “We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor’s money or property.” This double-love, of God and neighbor, serves as the key to hearing the word faithfully.

Finally, Jesus operates with this double-love in His teaching of the scriptures. When asked of the “greatest law,” His response was love of God and love of neighbor; “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:34-40; cf. Mark 12:28-34). When asked by the “lawyer” in Luke 10 what he must do, Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The man cited the correct passage from Leviticus, and Jesus replies, “Do this and you will live.” The man did not know how to read the law, even though he could read the law, because he had only love for himself; he could not show mercy. Jesus tells a parable, ending with the instruction: “You go, and do likewise.” Perhaps even more striking is the rich young man of Matthew 19 to whom Jesus gives a list of commandments, all from the second table. The man, foolishly, declares that he has kept all of them, but in Jesus’s command to sell all and give to the poor, he walks away from Jesus. This demonstrates that the man loved neither God nor his neighbor. Likewise, the apostle held up this double-love as “summary” (Rom 13:9) and “fulfilling” (Gal 5:14) of the entire law (Torah?), and James calls it the “royal law” (2:8). The proper confession of Jesus Christ, noted above in 1 John 4:1-6, is followed *immediately* by the command to love: “every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God ... Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (4:8).

How does this double-law function hermeneutically? How does the text shape our lives toward the love of God and love of neighbor, even in situations which are so vastly different from those of the Apostles? Here, we refer again to Diagram D.

45. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 105.

46. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 98–99.

Notice that our context or milieu does not correspond to the milieu of the text, but what does overlap, what does correspond, is the same *telos*. That is to say, the same God is working to bring about the same kingdom in and among us through the same text. What is produced in us by the Spirit through the scriptures is the same life in the kingdom. What is shared between us and the original hearers is the text and the *telos*, the Spirit's text that produces the Spirit's goal. Therefore, any hearing of the scriptures that does not produce love of God (faith, worship, obedience) and love of neighbor does not reflect the purpose of the scriptures nor produce the faithful response that the Spirit is working through that Word. In a sense, this double-law is eschatological. Through the scriptures, the Spirit produces for God a people of faith who live faithfully in this age and will be proven faithful on the last day. It is a hermeneutic that allows the scriptures to function according to the Spirit's purposes, even if in this age only in a tentative, provisional way with multiple faithful interpretations of the same text. This may not lead to exactly the same instantiations of the text in every time and place, but this has always been the case. Augustine has a faithful reading of Galatians 2, as did Jerome, as did Luther. They produced a different instantiation of the text, but they were all faithful instantiations because they resulted in love of God and of neighbor. We might demand circumcision in accordance with the covenant or forbid it. Either one may obscure Christ; either one may result in not loving neighbor, as it did in Galatia ("It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ"; Gal 6:12). The goal, though, the kingdom goal of the text, is to love God and love neighbor.

We may crave singularity, the one perfect reading so that, once captured, we might put the scriptures aside, but we are called to hear ever again the Word so that the Spirit might shape us in our ever-changing situations and circumstances. Such is the nature of faith that it is always struggling, always seeking, and always trusting. God's Kingdom comes without our prayer, but we pray in the Lord's Prayer that it comes to us also. It comes by the power of God, by His Word, and toward His goal. As Kolb and Arand describe God's *telos*:

Luther's reminder that God calls Christians in the midst of a sinful world to turn from their mistakes, failures, and disobedience each day of their lives reminds theologians of their need to return to Scripture continually to check out whether they are faithfully reproducing God's message. This is true not only because students of God's Word can make false formulations but also because Satan's deceptions take so many forms and God's gift of humanity has so many facets. In different situations and in confrontation with various forms of evil, God's message for a fallen world takes on new and different expressions. The unchangeable truths of Scripture must be proclaimed to specific human beings in their specific environments as the gospel addresses their realities and brings its power to change those realities through forgiveness and the

---

promise of new life in Christ. God's Word not only describes reality but also creates it.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Oswald Bayer (summarizing Luther) urges a focus on the biblical *telos* in the teaching and preaching activity of the church that de-centers the self and creates space for the word of God to have its effect:

And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we depend not on our own strength, conscience, mind, person, or works but on what is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive... when we address people with the Gospel, we should not tie them down to themselves and their relationships, we should not demand anything of them, but we should promise them something unexpected, undeserved, something that they are not and do not have, something impossible, at least not possible for them. Through such a promise, they belong to Jesus through the faith it creates. And we can appeal to this same Jesus because he is the Lord, the one who has the first and last word.<sup>48</sup>

The Scriptures are generative and creative. They open new possibilities and create a new, righteous person in the place of a sinner. They create faithful people who "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4) and who have "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). The Spirit by this word is at work bringing about new life that loves God, does His will, and loves the neighbor imperfectly in this age but perfectly in Christ in the coming age.

---

Jeffrey Kloha is Dean of the Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership at the Christ School of Theology of the Institute of Lutheran Theology and Associate Pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Arlington, VA.

---

47. Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

48. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Eerdmans, 2008), 52-53.

# Promissio

*A Journal of Confessing Theology*



## A Call for Papers

*Promissio* seeks submissions for the upcoming issues:

Volume 1, No. 3 (Summer 2026):

Why is Scripture the base language of faith?

Volume 1, No. 4 (Autumn 2026):

How do creeds and confessions provide  
the grammar of the scriptural language of faith?

Volume 2, No. 1 (Winter 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Fatherhood of God

Volume 2, No. 2 (Spring 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus

Volume 2, No. 3 (Summer 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2, No. 4 (Autumn 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Holy Trinity

All submissions should be emailed to the General Editor

All accepted authors will need an account at [promissio.ilt.edu](http://promissio.ilt.edu)

Please see the Submissions Guidelines there for important information!

All questions can be directed to:

Paul R. Hinlicky, General Editor

[hinlicky@roanoke.edu](mailto:hinlicky@roanoke.edu)