

Theological hermeneutics after meaning

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The Word of God comes, whenever it comes, in a form that is contrary to our own thinking. Unless one becomes acquainted with it through practical experience, he will never understand it. And certainly, if practical experience is necessary in law which teaches a shadowy righteousness, how much more necessary it is in theology. Every Christian, therefore, should rejoice most, precisely when something is done against his will and intention, and he should be very apprehensive when he has his own way. I say this not only with respect to the desires of our flesh, but also with respect to our greatest achievements of righteousness.

So Luther's *Lectures on Romans* (327,28), glossing Romans 12:2: 'that by testing you may discern what is the will of God'. Luther, taking his cues from the Apostle, had discerned that the Word of God, and the Spirit working through that Word, is the ultimate Deconstructionist. The Spirit takes our best thinking, our carefully arranged patterns of thought, our precise formulations, our careful exegesis, and exposes all of it for what it is: self-referential. Try as we might, the Word is never under our control.

And so we turn to the text so that we do that which is good and acceptable and perfect before God. We wrestle with this written word to wring from it solutions to our questions. We are chasing 'after meaning'. And come up with meaning we do—in theological treatises, in convention resolutions, in sermons, and in personal reading of the written Word. Inevitably, the answers that I discern will be different from the answers that you discern. And so we need an arbiter to decide which reading is the correct one. All of us appeal to the Scriptures; all of us are convinced that ours is the most faithful hearing. And so we seek a mooring point—one even beyond the Scriptures themselves, be it a method, a principle or a philosophical framework, to norm our hearing.

How does the church, then, hear the Scriptures? Consider this program:

I determine to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumption concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines which I do not find clearly therein set down. With these precautions I constructed a method of Scriptural interpretation.

Much here sounds appealing to our *sola scriptura*-shaped thinking. No assumptions! Only that which is clearly set down! As appealing as that sounds, this program was laid out by Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century father of the Enlightenment and, in many ways, pioneer of modern biblical criticism. His 'careful, impartial' method led him to conclude, among other things, that the biblical miracles are not possible and that 'the [epistles] originated not from revelation but from their own natural faculty or judgment' (Baird: 6). Meta-critiques have been performed on

Spinoza and the biblical criticism that followed.¹ For our purposes, what must be noted in Spinoza, and indeed the same is true of almost all criticism since the Enlightenment, whether ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’, is the assumption that it is desirable, indeed necessary, to read the Scriptures as a rational creature without any ‘presuppositions’ (Webster: 314,15). Or, to put it in an ecclesial framework, to read the Bible historically, without theology. The fact that we find Spinoza’s program, upon initial hearing, as promising and positive should alarm us to the fact that we have fallen into this pit on occasion as well.

We in the Lutheran tradition share a common theological heritage regarding the source, nature, and authority of the Scriptures. Furthermore, in this setting, the Lutheran Church of Australia’s ‘Theses on Scripture and Interpretation’ provide a helpful foundation upon which to base hermeneutical reflection.² No doubt, differences will remain among interpreters regarding the extent to which the human in Scripture impacts its divine authority—to what extent the historical contingency of the Scriptures impinges upon their role and authority in our own historical settings. Nonetheless, my goal in this essay is not to resolve these underlying differences but to consider ways that the scriptural text—all of the text—might have its way with us in our day. To develop a framework in which the words of J A Bengel can be put into practice: ‘Non timide, non temere ... Te totum applica ad textum, rem totam applica ad te’.³

Humans living after meaning

Hermeneutics is the study of how humans appropriate meaning. Many in the church fear that hermeneutics, rather than helping us understand, destroys meaning—that there is no ‘meaning’ left in texts, only interpretation. They fear that we are living now, one might say, ‘after meaning’ or in a ‘post-meaning’ world. However, ‘theological hermeneutics’ considers how our theology forms us to hear the Scriptures in a certain way, thereby producing valid meaning. It attempts to make clear and expose what we do ‘naturally’ in order to evaluate whether our hearing is appropriate to the text. For we bring ‘presuppositions’ to the hearing of the Word. We have been formed both within the church by Word and sacrament, and we have been formed by the myriad voices and images that impose themselves upon us constantly. Our task is to hear the voice of the Shepherd where we are now and to follow him where he leads. Especially—recalling Luther—against our will.

Such examination of our role in the act of creating meaning is in contrast to a strictly historical approach, whether ‘historical-critical’ or ‘historical-grammatical’. Hans-Georg Gadamer, to whom we will refer regularly in this essay, describes a key difference between what he calls a ‘theological hermeneutic’ and a traditional historical approach. A theological approach will consider not only the ‘meaning’ of the Scriptures, but also their (divine) purpose:

¹ For example Newbigin 1995: ‘The practice of the historical-critical method, in spite of the useful results it has produced in our understanding of the ways in which the biblical material was formed, is nevertheless full of self-contradictions. . . [t]he historical critical method is itself the product of a particular culture, and we have discussed the ways in which this culture was formed and the forces which now threaten it with collapse. The historical-critical method must therefore be applied to itself’ (84).

² Of particular relevance for this discussion are thesis 3, ‘that Holy Scripture does not only contain the Word of God, but that it is God’s Word as a whole and in all its parts’; thesis 5: ‘that Holy Scripture can be rightly understood only by those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners’; and thesis 9: ‘Thus the Bible has a truly human side. We therefore teach and confess that it pleased God to give us His Word under, or in the garb of, the human word of the biblical writers’. Similar observations are found in Franzmann: 246, an essay adopted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

³ ‘Neither timidly nor rashly ... apply yourself entirely to the text, and apply the entire text to yourself’.

Preaching too is concerned with interpreting a valid truth, but this truth is proclamation; and whether it is successful or not is not decided by the ideas of the preacher, but by the power of the word itself, which can call men to repentance even though the sermon is a bad one. The proclamation cannot be detached from the fulfillment. ... Understanding it, therefore, cannot simply be a scientific or scholarly exploration of its meaning (326,27).

Even apart from the skill of the preacher (interpreter), the Word of God has power and does his work. This is in contrast to a classic historical approach to the text (whether, as Gadamer notes, an Enlightenment or Romantic approach) which seeks to ground meaning outside the act of reading (hearing) itself. Gadamer advocates a historical approach beyond that of Spinoza, one that removes the false notion of a neutral reading:

The approach ... of the historian should be oriented not so much to the methodological ideal of the natural sciences as to the model offered us by legal and theological hermeneutics... It may be that the historian tries to get behind the texts in order to force them to yield information that they do not intend, and are unable of themselves to give... The historian approaches his texts the way an investigating magistrate approaches his witnesses. But simply establishing facts, elicited from possibly prejudiced witnesses, does not make the historian. What makes the historian is the significance of what he finds... We have already shown that traditional hermeneutics artificially limited the dimensions of the phenomenon, and perhaps the same is true of the historical approach. Is it not the case that the really important things precede any application of historical methods? A historical hermeneutics that does not make the nature of the historical question the central thing, and does not inquire into a historian's motives in examining historical material, lacks its most important element (334).

A 'historical critical' or 'historical grammatical' method cannot, in and of themselves, produce theologically appropriate hearings of the Word, for they impose the interpreter and his or her historical reconstructions between the text and its 'meaning'. But it is the text itself, not the method, not the interpretation, which must have its way. For our interpretations, no matter how historically precise, are not neutral, dispassionate apprehensions of meaning, but themselves the result of our impositions on the text. In the very act of reconstructing a historical setting for interpretation for the interpretation of a biblical text, we have moved outside the text to ourselves.

Theological hermeneutics, then, must account for the hearer. This is necessary, for since Kant, the unresolved philosophical question has been the nature of and extent to which our humanness mediates all perception, including reading and interpretation. How does the eye, with its cornea, rods, neurons, etc, shape not only how but also what is perceived? How does the ear drum, indeed the mind itself, determine what is heard? We do not 'see' ultraviolet light, but ultraviolet light certainly exists. It is not a defect in my ears that prevents me from hearing very high frequencies; it means simply that I am not a dog.

Students of the Scriptures have had to deal with these questions of how and to what extent our humanness shapes our reading and hearing, even if in an unhelpful, reactionary way by denying

that ‘being human’ is involved in interpretation at all. In order to limit the problems of mediated knowledge, some, such as Spinoza, developed various methods in order to remove, as much as possible, the contingencies of the observer from interpretation. ‘Historical criticism’ was a massively practised and long-used method to extract the ‘real’ meaning from text. Over and against these methods some 19th and 20th century Lutheran theologians affirmed an objective, unmediated appropriation of divine knowledge through the Scriptures. This was done to preserve divine truth and authority.

Too often in these well-intentioned approaches, however, the necessary relationship between the Word of God and the church with its tradition as the locus and manifestation of the hearing of the Word of God was obscured. When the Scriptures were removed from the community into which they were given, it became possible for any person, whether academician or small-group Bible study leader, to read the Scriptures and produce an interpretation that could not be disputed. As a result, methods were multiplied: ‘there is now a bewildering plurality of methods in biblical scholarship as compared with the early 1960s. That these methods have contributed many insights cannot be denied. What future they have is more difficult to determine. The bell is already tolling for the demise of post-modernism, while there are limits to what can be achieved by feminist and ideological criticism’ (Rogerson: 286). Gadamer seeks to move beyond method by taking seriously the problem of our situatedness. He advocates a hermeneutic that ‘must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’ (269)—in a theological hermeneutic, away from ‘method’ and onto the Scriptures themselves.

Readings of the Scriptures differ because the contingencies and locations of individual readers differ. Disconcertingly for theologians, Gadamer (277,78) argues that hearers are shaped by our environment (‘family, society, and state’) and, we might add, ecclesial context, before we even approach the text. In other words, before we can even decide *what* something means, we have already been pre-conditioned to answer the question—even which questions to ask—prior to and independent of our judgments about them. There is no ‘neutral’ hearing; we can only hear what we are formed to hear.

Powell (14–22) relates an example of this which he encountered when teaching the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). He noticed that his students’ 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, squandering of 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 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 suffered mass starvation. What concerns Americans is money, how one spends it, and

making sure one has enough. This is what Americans then hear in the parable; famine, which is outside the experience of almost all educated Americans, scarcely registers.

I could offer dozens of similar examples from my own teaching experience. For example, the remarkable ability of students to make the goal of every passage ‘tell others about Jesus’, even, as in the exegetical papers I read from my summer course this year, the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof in Mark 2. Another example is 1 Timothy 2. When I go over this text in class, students jump immediately to sort out what phrases like *en hēsuchia* and *en pasē hupotagē* might possibly mean, while not even noticing that the command (the imperative verb) in the passage is in fact *gunē manthanetō* (let a wife/woman learn). This would have been astounding to someone steeped in the traditions of Judaism, as were Paul and, likely, many of the hearers of that letter. That wives/women be ‘quiet’ and ‘entirely submissive’ would not be shocking at all; the original hearers would have taken that for granted. Our context, however, is entirely different, so that we do not even notice the command to teach women and focus, laser-like, on what to us are the problematic words.

It is at this point where many would claim that we must return to the author. If we could just enter the mind of the author, would we not understand perfectly? This ‘psychologic’ approach, which traces back to Schleiermacher, assumes that interpretation is simply the reverse of the process of writing: we simply ‘decode’ the communication, and thereby arrive at ‘meaning’ (Westphal: 29–34). This is insufficient, however, for the author cannot control either ‘meaning’ or the effect of the discourse. There is no one-to-one correlation between speaking and result. Unlike God, who speaks creation into being and Jesus who declares forgiveness and makes it so, human utterances are not under the control of the speaker. Partly this is a limitation of our ability to communicate clearly and partly because I cannot control, ultimately, who hears or reads this discourse and account for their assumptions, world-views, experiences, etc.

Another move might be to claim ‘divine inspiration’ and the infallibility of God’s Word, assert that God is author and it is his Word, and assert that our hearing is always correct. But we still have the problem of multiple interpretations, even by those who share the same convictions about inspiration, infallibility, and perhaps even inerrancy. For example, it is common in both Lutheran and Evangelical circles to urge a ‘historical grammatical method’. This method seeks to discern the author’s intention within the historical setting of the original audience and on the basis of the basic rules of grammar, syntax, and meaning. That this method does not produce unanimity among its practitioners is obvious; Lutheran readers find the Real Presence in the words of Jesus in the gospels and in Paul; Evangelical readers do not. A recent textbook, *Evangelical hermeneutics: the new versus the old*, outlines the ‘historical-grammatical’ (the ‘old’) over and against, well, everything else (the ‘new’). The author claims that by following this method one will come up with readings where the ‘meaning is perfectly obvious’ (Thomas: 309). Yet this book, with its ‘perfectly obvious’ meanings, argues vociferously for a dispensational view of the Scriptures. Not many Lutherans would agree. Despite sharing inspiration and the same ‘method’, differences in interpretation remain, because the author is not the sole creator of meaning.

This is so in spite of the tremendous advances in our understanding of the ancient world, its genres, cultural settings, advances in lexicography, parallel literature, and the availability of

ever-improving grammar resources. We ‘know more’ history and grammar than ever. And yet we still disagree. Why? Because, ever again the reader is inevitably and inextricably involved in the process of both reading the text and reconstructing the historical background, which is itself a construct shaped by our own situatedness. A solely historical approach, be it ‘grammatical’ or ‘critical’, is incapable of producing a comprehensive method that will produce unanimously agreed-upon readings of the Scriptures.

We now turn to four approaches that, in spite of our locatedness, allow the scriptural text to work on us: Narrative theology, Speech-Act theory [this section has been deleted for the same of space], translation, and performance.

Narrative theology

With appeals to the ‘author’ shown to be what they are—a shorthand and uninformed way of making truth claims—‘narrative theology’ seeks to ground proper hearing of the Word in God’s working in history to accomplish his purposes. The Scriptural texts find coherence and meaning only in so far as they are read as reflecting and participating in God’s narrative. Narrative theology, therefore, tends to focus on living ‘life in the presence of God’, on the working of God in his people, which often results in less emphasis, or even rejection, of theology as ‘propositional’ and rooted in ahistorical, non-contextual statements. That is to say, God makes himself known as he works in history, not as a set of attributes or statements that may be said about him. One might say that narrative theology focuses on the verbs—what is God doing? over and against previous theological approaches that focuses on the nouns—what can be said about God, the world, humanity, etc?

The figure most associated with narrative theology is Lindbeck, who labels his work as ‘post-liberal’, a call for classic liberal humanism to return to its Western roots. However, Evangelical theologians have also adopted a narrative framework. Wright’s *The New Testament and the people of God* argues for an approach rooted ‘in the creator god [*sic*] himself, and this god’s story with the world, seen as focused on the story of Israel and thence on the story of Jesus, as told and retold in the Old and New Testaments, and as still requiring completion’ (143). Vanhoozer sees his work as connected with Lindbeck in that both focus on lived theology rather than propositional statements. Vanhoozer describes his program, however, as a ‘postconservative, canonical-linguistic theology and a directive theory of doctrine that roots theology more firmly in Scripture while preserving Lindbeck’s emphasis on practice’ (xiii).

Narrative theology has touched upon a key problem for Lutherans: We have rightly heard the efficacious Word delivering ‘life and salvation’ through the ‘forgiveness of sins’, as the Small Catechism reminds us. However, we Lutherans have too often understood this only using a second article model: Jesus died for me, so now I can ‘go to heaven’, without any reference to the new life in Christ. The danger for Lutherans is that we minimise or even ignore texts which produce a new kind of life, especially those texts which urge a kind of life that we, in our contexts, find challenging.

Hearing as translation

Viewing the creation of meaning as ‘translation’ is another approach that helps keep our moorings in the text. Turning again to Gadamer, ‘translation’ is the act of bringing the meaning

(including the illocution) into another context. In the church, we are long familiar with the issue of Bible translation. And, in spite of marketing by various Bible publishers and claims of ‘accuracy’ and ‘faithfulness’, there is no ‘perfect’ translation. Translators ‘in the field’, however, who are working in completely different contexts and are not driven by market share, focus more on the receptor. Who is the translation for? How will they hear the text?⁴ Translation is a moving target—starting from the text and moving into new contexts continuously. For Gadamer, ‘translation’ is not a single event that produces the best/perfect/only rendering, but an ongoing process in which the readers of the text ‘translate’ as they read. Gadamer notes that ‘every translation is at the same time an interpretation’:

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way... The real meaning of the text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter... Not just occasionally, but always, the text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.

As all ‘translators’ recognise, Gadamer notes that ‘[t]his does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the [text] says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity in a new way’ (386). Here is where the tools of an ‘historical’ approach come to bear: some ‘translations’ create an entirely different hearer. For example, *The Message* renders the problematic references to same-sex activities in 1 Corinthians 6 (*malakoi, arsenokoitai*) with the vague phrase, ‘use and abuse sex’. The meaning created by that ‘translation’ in the ‘language world’ of 21st century America corresponds neither to the vocables nor to the sense of the text. Even though we may debate the best renderings of those terms, they simply do not mean what *The Message* renders them as, and as a result they will create an entirely different hearer.

What pastors and teachers do when we ‘translate’ a text into our context is to create a setting where the meaning of the text can be seen to be true.⁵ For example, it is extremely difficult for 21st century Americans to hear the words ‘obey’ or ‘submit’ without immediately thinking in terms of post-Foucault notions of power and political notions of being endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, of life, liberty, and the pursuit of whatever I want. For an American to ‘obey’ or ‘submit’ to anyone is to deny how Americans view themselves as human. In a recent political debate, a female candidate for a party nomination to the presidency was asked how she understood the biblical command that a wife ‘submit’ to her husband, and, if she were elected president, would she have to ‘submit’ to her husband in her decision-making. The candidate, who presented herself as a Christian, claimed that she understood the passage to mean, not ‘submit’, but ‘respect’. Whatever one thinks of the candidate, it is her act of ‘translation’ that interests us here. How did she move from *hupotassō*, the Greek word in the text, away from the ‘submit’ of translations from the KJV to the NIV and use instead ‘respect’? What in our American context would make uttering the words ‘wives, submit to your husbands’

⁴ The basis of this method is ‘relevance theory’; see Wilson and Sperber 1995. For its application in Bible translation see Wendland 2004.

⁵ Voelz 1997 (324,25) appropriates a similar model from Ricoeur: that of the world behind the text and the world in front of the text (our world), with the text as the medium through which our world becomes that of the world behind the text.

so unbearable? We might note also that this word is used of Christ ‘being submitted’ or ‘subjected’ to the Father (1 Cor 15). Seeing reading as ‘translation’ helps expose our inability to hear the text properly; the hearer’s role is to ‘translate’ the text so that hearers can envision a world where both the Son can submit to the Father, a wife can submit to their husband, and have it *not* be a problem. Similarly, we do not hear the command that husbands ‘love’ their wives (Eph 5) as problematic, but every Roman male in the first century would have. Husbands did not ‘love’ their wives (*caritas*), they ‘got along with’ them (*concordia*). Our society, influenced as it has been by the Scriptures, has indeed moved to a point where we hear the command to ‘love’ as normal. Just as we have moved away from hearing as normal the command to ‘submit’.

Performance

Viewing the process of hearing as ‘translation’ forces us to struggle with the details of the text itself, yet viewing the process of creating meaning solely as ‘translation’ gives the false impression that only cognitive processes are involved. Therefore another way of viewing the process of creating meaning is necessary, one that focuses on the *doing* more on the *thinking*. To take up the truism that ‘every translation is also an interpretation’ and transpose it, we might say that ‘every interpretation is also a performance’. Seeing the creation of meaning as ‘performance’, wherein we are the ‘performers’ of the text, has become a very common way to describe how texts shape readers.⁶

In a ‘performance’ model the text controls all things, not the interpreter. Music is one helpful analogy. The performer is, in Gadamer’s language, ‘bound’ to the score, the notes are ‘obligatory’. Or, in the analogy of a play, the words of the playwright: ‘All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players’ cannot be changed to ‘All the world’s a computer / And all the men and women are merely chips’ and still be *As you like it*. The role of the actor is to perform, not rewrite, the script. This analogy has several strengths. First, this allows room for multiple performances over time. Shakespeare can be performed in Elizabethan England and in postwar Japan. It is the same script, but the performances will be inevitably different. The actors will embody the characters in different ways. They will interpret the non-verbal cues differently each time. This allows us to recognise that, say, Chrysostom, in his ‘performing’ the Scriptures, is doing the same thing that we are. His performance and the performances to which he urged his hearers differ from ours. This makes neither Chrysostom nor us wrong, it makes him and us performers.

A second strength of viewing interpretation as performance is that the same performer may grow in his or her ability to perform. As the parent of budding musicians, I can testify that practice may not make perfect, but practice does make the music, well, music, and not mere notes popping out of an instrument. There is growth, tremendous growth, as a musician matures, masters scales, takes guidance from an instructor, hears other musicians play the same piece. She learns from all that, yet still makes it her own performance—and then, she gets up on stage and performs—in concert with the orchestra (to put it theologically, with the church), perhaps even a solo heard above the orchestra. And despite the initial crush of nerves, which dissipate over the years, she performs.

⁶ See especially Vanhoozer 2005a; There is a hint of this in Voelz 1997 (225, n 21).

A third strength of the performance model is that allows for both multiple ‘correct’ performances and for those multiple performances to be evaluated. At a recent conference, I was chatting with fellow participants about the long drive that brought me there. When asked how I passed the time, I mentioned that I listened to ‘happy music’, in this case, Mahler. My conversation partner was surprised, ‘unless you mean the Resurrection Symphony’. This was the exact piece I had just heard. He asked which performance I had listened to, and when we checked our iPhones it turned out that I had listened to Klemperer’s, he Bernstein’s. Klemperer’s, he said, was probably the best, but perhaps a little slow. But both performances were indeed Mahler’s 2nd Symphony—just performed differently because of the innumerable factors that will make one performance of the same piece differ from others.⁷ Some performances, no doubt, will be ‘incorrect’. The wrong notes will be played; perhaps passages will be omitted or added. Indeed, an entire system of ranking individual instrumental performances of American high school students exists, resulting in better performances being recognised with higher marks and being invited to ever-more competitive festivals and orchestras.

Key in all this is that a performance cannot be evaluated until it is seen and heard, and that hearing and its evaluation occurs in groups. While one can be self-critical, of course, it is the feedback of others that is most helpful in determining whether or not our performances are valid. The same is true for our hearing and living of the Word of God. I can fool myself into thinking that I am hearing or living it properly. But more often it is the observation of others—my wife, my children, my friends, my pastor, my church who will be able to tell me whether or not I am hearing and performing the Word faithfully.

Still, questions will arise, especially when the world of the text does not match the world of the performer. A classic example is Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. At the end of that play, Kate, the ‘shrew’, is ‘tamed’ and professes undying love, obedience, and service to Petruchio. This depiction of male-female relationships is problematic to both original and present-day sensibilities. One critic has noted that reaction to the play ‘is dominated by feelings of unease and embarrassment, accompanied by the desire to prove that Shakespeare cannot have meant what he seems to be saying; and that therefore he cannot really be saying it’ (Davies: 26). A production of the play was nevertheless held in Forest Park in St Louis this past June. The set was 1950s America, a sort of ‘Barbie and Ken’ playhouse theme. By giving the play that staging, with what are now regarded as outdated forms of female-male relationships, the entire performance had an ironic twist to it. Should we want Kate and Petruchio to get together? Should we agree with Petruchio’s obvious chauvinism? Given the set, one would think not. But Kate’s infamous long soliloquy at the very end of the play was delivered completely monotone, as she stood on a sort of balcony, speaking to no one in particular: ‘Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper/Thy head, thy sovereign’. The stunned American audience did not know what to think. Okay, Kate falls for Petruchio, they live happily ever after, this is a comedy, after all. But to have Kate cave in, completely? Call him ‘Lord’ and ‘Sovereign’ and ‘Head’, straight out of 1 Corinthians 11? How could any 21st century actress perform that play, and have it be anything but ironic?

⁷ Gadamer 2004: ‘Essential to dramatic or musical works, then, is that their performance at different times and on different occasions is, and must be different... The viewer of today not only sees things in a different way, he sees different things’ (141,42).

However, it is not we who perform the text: ‘it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20). The Scriptural texts, it must be remembered, are not written to be performed by the unbaptised, but the ‘saints’, as Paul addresses his hearers again and again. Saints still human, still contingent, still sinner. Yet the Word continues to come to us, and we return, again and again, to hear, to read, to perform the text, ‘until Christ is formed in [us]’ (Gal 4:19). How all this occurs is beyond our ability to tame, or effect. But Christ through this Spirit speaks in this Word, which he himself performs in us and through us, before the Father, that which is pleasing to him. So, in Christ, ‘it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Phil 2:13).

Concluding observations: hearing after meaning

How, then, does the text move into us? We are baptised; we do all the difficult work necessary to ‘settle *hoti*’s business’ (Franzmann: 246); but how do we take the crucial next step of allowing that Word to work in and among us? How do we hear this Word in order to ‘work out our (plural) salvation with fear and trembling’ (Phil 2:12)?

First, the model of the individual, rational, impartial interpreter must be abandoned. Not only is such not possible, it is undesirable. We hear only what we have been formed to hear, and that formation happens both as we hear the Word and as we hear other words—words spoken over the airwaves and in classrooms, some within the church but most without. The question we must ask is this: What shapes me to hear what I hear in the Word? We must operate with a hermeneutics of humility. It is necessary to recognise that we are bound by our own times, places, locations. We cannot flee our prejudices, which inevitably shape our hearing of the Scriptures. We must recognise them, evaluate them, and then either embrace or reject them as we turn again to the Word, via those ever-again newly reconstituted prejudices. Many of these prejudices have already been highlighted. How does our self-referential, consumer-driven society shape us so that we cannot hear the call to be church properly, so that we neglect others, especially those marginalised in our society? How does our tendency to view relationships through the filter of power struggle shape the way that we view the descriptions and commands in the Scriptures regarding relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, clergy and laity? How does our society’s developmental, evolutionary model of existence cause us to doubt God’s care, provision and goals for his creation? And how do they shape our notions of what it means to be human? When the Scriptures sound antiquated or unequipped to deal with our questions, are we willing to acknowledge that our hearing has been shaped not only by the Word but also by our cultural context? And when we think that we have the Scriptures sorted out, under our control, and that we have no need of being changed or moving in new directions, are we willing to acknowledge that we may be resisting the Holy Spirit? We may need to repent, to actually, unbelievably, change our minds about what we have said or taught or done.

Second, we must evaluate (and be evaluated). ‘By their fruit you will know them’—and we all know of preaching that has resulted in ‘churches’ full of people who do not confess Christ crucified, who boast in themselves, who are puffed up in their thinking. And we all know of churches where the sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd and follow faithfully where he leads. The Word of the Lord grows there. Sometimes, even, in spite of the preacher. In some ways, however, the right teaching will not be known until after the church has lived with that teaching for a while. Is fruit evident or not? Is Jesus Christ indeed Lord among this people? Is sin reigning

in their mortal bodies? If it is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them (Acts 5:39). Unfortunately, when we have preached what is not Word we have harmed our hearers. Are we then willing to repent, to change, to try again, even go back? This requires patience, both with one another and with God, who works all things according to his purposes in Christ.

Third, be church. As the Augustana reminds us, where the Word and sacraments are, there is church. And where there is church, there is hearing, that is, interpretation. So interpretation happens first not in our book-laden studies, not at the breakfast table as we begin the day. But it happens in the gathering, among the gathered. It happens in excited conversation (Acts 10) and in argument (Acts 15). The church is not only my congregation, my district, my synod, my confessional circle; it is east and west, north and south; it encompasses every tribe and nation and language and tongue; it is past, it is even future. There is one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. I need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, because I am a part of that church. Perhaps we need to hear most from those parts of the church that are least like me, so that my own situatedness might be revealed. Perhaps we need to hear from those who have the greatest disagreements with us—just as in Acts 15—so that the Spirit can be heard again.

I understand that many of us will be disappointed by this approach. I am disappointed, too. For what we crave is certainty, a clear word that solves all problems, definitively, so that we can put this behind us, and get on to whatever we think ‘really matters’. However, all of God’s speaking is historical, to humans, who are inevitably contingent. We can only speak the Word that came through them, hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it in our contingent situations, and let the Spirit do his work. My speaking is always contingent. Only the Word of the Lord endures forever; what we say about that Word will inevitably be recognised by others as possible only in my setting and circumstances. That does not make what I say wrong or incorrect, but it does cause me to acknowledge my creatureliness and the Lordship of Christ. We live ‘after meaning’. that is, after meaning himself came into the flesh, died, and rose. In his work is certainty, for salvation; our lives, filled with uncertainty, are lived by faith, hearing ever again the voice of the Shepherd and following where he leads.

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