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Hermeneutics for Preachers

Steve Motyer

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In this essay the author relates the hermeneutical issues of our time to preaching. He responds to the question 'how does the Bible teach us the truth?' He shows the role of the preacher's heart and imagination, his knowledge, fellowship and culture in good expository preaching.
Editor

This essay gives some idea of the scope and complexity of the issues raised by that innocent question, 'How does the Bible teach us the truth?' Of course we must not complicate what is essentially simple, or obscure the truth behind clouds of incomprehensibility—God forbid! But even the simplest craft can float over unfathomable depths. If leading a church is compared to driving a car, then (crudely) preaching is like filling up with petrol, and keeping the oil and air pressures right for smooth movement forward. Preaching—feeding on the word of God—keeps church life empowered. On this analogy, hermeneutics is the study of *how* petrol, oil and air empower and sustain the inner working of the engine—in fact, how the engine works.

You can drive a car without knowing how it works! In the same way you can lead a church and engage in a preaching ministry without ever asking 'hermeneutical' questions. But deeper understanding makes better drivers. You can cope better in a roadside emergency if you know what goes on under the bonnet. Similarly a pastoral and preaching ministry will have an extra depth and confidence, if you have worked through at least some of the hermeneutical issues and questions.

How *does* the Bible teach us the truth? This question simply refuses to go away and lie down. Wherever we look, whatever we do, it pops up. We answer it implicitly—and either consciously or unconsciously—every time we use the Bible in pastoral ministry. Every use of the p. 216 Bible rests upon a theory about its effectiveness (2 Tim. 3:16) and upon a view about *how* the Bible will actually *function* with people, or 'teach, rebuke, correct and train' them.

In this essay I focus on preaching—one of the most widely-held answers to the question (although what I write is relevant to all forms of Bible ministry). A visitor from Mars, observing the prominence we give to preaching in our services, would conclude that we regard it as crucial within the whole hermeneutical process. But it is not the only way in which the Bible teaches the truth to the church, quite patently. At the time of writing I have just returned from Spring Harvest at Minehead, where one of my tasks was to lead a seminar on the doctrine of the Trinity. One of the basic questions I had to tackle was, How did the Bible teach this doctrine to the church, when it does not specifically appear in its pages? Not through expository preaching, that is for sure. The long process of debate and conflict which finally led to the universal adoption of this doctrine at the council of Constantinople in 381 AD teaches us some vital things about hermeneutics—things which are not irrelevant for preaching, as we shall see.

Firstly, we see the church grappling for the right *words* to express what God must be like, if he has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, as the gospel says. Secondly, we see the church (especially its leading theologians) exercising powerful *imagination* in order to conceive of the reality which the words were meant to express—even if, in the long run, they had to say that words were inadequate (I love Augustine's comment that

the word 'person' was used, not to express the truth about God, but so that the truth might not be left wholly unexpressed).

Thirdly, we see the whole discussion take place within the context of *Scriptural worship, faith and fellowship*—in fact this became a touchstone of orthodoxy. Those who separated themselves from the church of the apostles by self-definition could not hold apostolic faith. And fourthly, we see the church being motivated by a powerful desire, not just to understand but also to *explain* the truth of God in language and thought-forms appropriate to the dominant Greek culture of the day.

All four things go together—language, imagination, fellowship and communication. Hermeneutically, we can say that the Scriptures taught the truth to the church as, in a context of shared worship, Christians sought to understand the God who had revealed himself to express their worship and understanding in contemporary language. It took 350 years to reach formal agreement.

The hermeneutics of preaching has much in common with this story of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, as I shall now try to explain. Inevitably, what follows is a personal statement. I am a great lover of preaching, and have been thinking about hermeneutics for many years, and the two come together as I seek to put into a nutshell *what I believe we preachers may learn from the ongoing* p. 217 *debate about hermeneutics in the church*.

I TRUTH AND PERSONALITY—THE PREACHER'S HEART

We owe to Jim Packer, I believe, the definition of preaching as 'truth mediated through personality'. Some preachers, missing the point of this excellent definition, seek to exclude themselves as people from the preaching activity, as though they were only a disembodied 'voice crying in the wilderness'. So they avoid personal allusions or illustrations, fearing that these will distract attention from the Lord.

This is a misunderstanding! In fact John the Baptist was far more that just 'a voice'. His whole character and personality had been shaped by God to fit the prophetic ministry he undertook—and everything about him, including his dress, formed part of the message he communicated.

Hermeneutical theory underlines the significance of this. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1832), justly called the father of modern hermeneutics, was the first to emphasize the *role of the reader* in the hermeneutical process. Our goal as readers, he said, is actually to understand the biblical authors better than they understood themselves. How can this remarkable claim be justified? Schleiermacher gave two reasons: (a) We have the benefit of historical distance, so that we can set the biblical authors into the wider context of which they were unaware when they wrote. But this understanding of the *language* of the biblical authors is only the preliminary to something much more important, for (b) understanding is essentially *personal*, and we need to seek an instinctive, intuitive grasp of what is really going on, a person-to-person leap across the centuries which collapses the historical distance and indeed jumps behind the language of the biblical text to the heart, mind and experience which it expresses.

This jump of intuitive 'understanding' is made *by us*, said Schleiermacher, on the basis of the common language and humanity we share with the biblical authors, so that we turn out to be vital participants in the discovery of the 'meaning' of the Bible. Schleiermacher has been criticized for a certain romanticism in his emphasis on the role of intuition in interpretation, but in different ways this insight has remained to the present day. For instance, the so-called 'New Hermeneutic', associated with the names of theologians Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, picks up his emphasis and tells us that we need to be *grasped*

by the Word if the meaning of the Bible is to be real for us. What exactly Fuchs and Ebeling mean by this is not entirely clear, but they are very keen to underline that we do not sit *over* the Scriptures as critics and analysts (and expositors), but *under* them, to be ourselves not the *subjects* of Bible study (*we* study *it*), but the *objects* of it (*it* studies *us*)!

This is another way of saying that Bible study involves us in a personal relationship from which we cannot distance ourselves. A relationship in which one person does all the disclosing, and the other never reveals anything about themselves, is no relationship at all. It is doomed to p. 218 failure. We need to beware of forming such a relationship with the Scriptures—thinking of the process of interpretation as a purely technical one in which we employ the right 'methods' in order to hear the message of the text. This would turn us into preachers who are just heads repeating the words of the Bible. But in reality we are heads and hearts together, *whole people* who have fallen in love with a friend and been transformed by him and by his words to us.

Another way of saying the same thing puts it like this: as preachers we need to *model a response* to the message in the way we proclaim it (and in our lives subsequently!). Just as the discussions about the Trinity could not be separated from the *experience* of the gospel, and thus from the worship of God in Christ, so preachers need to be ready to display their own experiences to the Lord, their vulnerability and humanity and repentance and saved-ness and faith, in order to model for their hearers the *relationship* with Christ, and with the Scriptures, which they want their hearers to develop.

Richard Brigg's essay on 'The Role of the Reader' in this issue of *Evangel* delves into some of the complexity surrounding this topic in contemporary discussion. Clearly we need to define exactly what our role is, in the dialogue-relationship we enjoy with Holy Scripture, and our role has been wrongly understood by many. But Richard is surely right when he suggests that 'reader-response criticism' serves a good and positive purpose if it underlines for us that 'meaning' may actually be located in the response of the hearers in terms of what it makes them do'.

I think I would simply want to expand Richard's last word a little: 'the meaning' of the Scriptures is located not just in what we do, but also in what we think, feel, decide and say within that dialogue relationship with them.

'Meaning' is a function of persons, a personal quality, experience or process, and not some objective dictionary definition! And that's where the preacher's personality comes in (actually, it can't be pushed out). Few things in the church are more tragic than a boring sermon in which the preacher's head is engaged but not his or her heart. Probably not even the heads of hearers will be penetrated. But few things, correspondingly, are more exciting than a sermon which glows with personal engagement, and which admits the hearers to the heart of a speaker gripped by the truth, as well as to the heart of the passage which it tells.

I want to be that kind of preacher.

II TRUTH AND HISTORY—THE PREACHER'S IMAGINATION

The last point drew upon Schleiermacher's notion of *intuition* as the basis of interpretation. But for him this was inseparable from a careful analysis of the language used by the biblical authors. Just as we need to listen carefully to each other in conversation, as the essential basis of mutual understanding, so we need to listen very carefully to the exact P. 219 language used by the biblical authors. Otherwise understanding will fail.

Schleiermacher had, as the goal of interpretation, the rediscovery of the mind and intention of the human authors, to which first a study of their language and then personal

intuition would give us access. Some of those who have followed in his train have not laid emphasis on rediscovery of authorial intention. For instance, the renowned French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a contemporary giant in the field of hermeneutical theory, makes a distinction between 'explanation' and 'understanding' which runs parallel to Schleiermacher's distinction between *language* and *intuition*. But for Ricoeur, 'understanding does not mean *rediscovering what was*, but uncovering the potential of the text to evoke responses, particularly through responding to its symbols and metaphors. We might well ask, what kind of control can be set over responses to the biblical text, if the intervention of the biblical authors has vanished from view?

Different modern readers will respond to the same symbols and metaphors in radically different ways, but on Ricoeur's theory their responses would be equally valid. For instance, readers of a homosexual orientation and practice could feel themselves affirmed by the powerful picture of 'the disciple who Jesus loved' lying in physical contact with him in John 13:23–25. Others would react strongly against such an interpretation. But if the *function* of the text is reduced to the *effect* of its symbols and metaphors, to its evocative power, then both contradictory reactions are equally valid.

The trouble with Ricoeur's hermeneutic is that it does not *allow the text to be itself*—that is, specifically it ignores the *historical rootedness* of our biblical texts. As a matter of fact, John's Gospel (to continue the example above) is not a series of disembodied symbols looking for incarnation in our responses. It comes to us from a very specific set of historical claims on all who approach it. We cannot therefore interpret 13:23–25 until we have equipped ourselves with knowledge about seating arrangements at Passover meals, and more specifically about Jesus's relationships with his disciples, and about John's presentation of the beloved disciple—not to mention background knowledge about homosexuality in the ancient world and among Jews.

We have moved back from the pulpit to the study! That's where what Tom Wright calls 'the hermeneutic of love' needs to be exercised: the hermeneutic which applies 'love your neighbour as yourself' to the relationship between us and the biblical text. It's essential. Unless we preachers are motivated by an altruistic desire to let the text shine in all its true colours, then we will be employing Ricoeur's hermeneutic, willy-nilly. We will find ourselves simply corresponding at the level of our imagination to an exciting symbol, picture or idea. One recent writer comments that, generally speaking, that is as far as preachers go in their work on the text. They will study it just until p. 220 something 'sparks', and then they are off—away from the text down the line of imagination. Ricoeur would be pleased.

But I am not saying that the use of imagination is wrong. In all love-relationships imagination is vital. It is that faculty which enables us to stand sympathetically in someone else's shoes. Trained, it is the capacity which enables counsellors to read their clients from the inside. In the realm of theology, it is the capacity which leads us to find the doctrine of the Trinity in the diverse and fascinating statements of Scripture about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And it is crucial in the 'hermeneutic of love' we seek to employ with the scriptures.

'Critical realism' is the name given to it by the American New Testament scholar Ben Meyer. It involves two things: distance and engagement. Both are vital in any intimate relationship. *Distance* means conceiving the other as an object to which we devote our total interest and attention, seeking only to discover what is really there. This is what Meyer means by 'critical'. So we employ all the technical tools we can—Greek grammars, encyclopedias, commentaries, and all the forms of 'criticism' which will enable us to hear the authentic voice of the text.

But running through all this activity will be our personal *engagement* with the text as an object of our love, and we will be hearing it within the context of the relationship we already have with it. This is what Meyer means by 'realism'. Realism is the opposite of *idealism*. We are not seeking some ideal, perfect or final interpretation, but that interpretation which (alone) is possible for me, granted the capacities of my intellect, heart and imagination. I know that I do not know, and that I cannot know fully—and this is true of my relationship with my wife, as well as the Scriptures. But I want to know *truly*, and to know as *fully* as possible, and the key to growth in all relationships is *questioning*. So I question the text, allowing the questions to be shaped by the text itself. Why is there a 'beloved disciple' in John? Why does John record the incident in 13:21–30 in such detail, underlining the *private* exchange between the disciple and Jesus? Why does John mention that the question came from Peter?

Please note that all these questions begin with 'Why'! That is the vital three-letter word which upsets the *status quo*, reveals the unexpected, stimulates the imagination, and tumbles self-confidence. It is the question which, on a macro-scale, underlay the whole process whereby the church argued its way through to the doctrine of the Trinity. Why do the Scriptures not present Jesus as an angelic messenger and deliverer? Why is the Spirit called 'the Life-Giver' (Jn. 6:63) only a few verses after Jesus has been cast in this role (6:57)? Why is the Spirit *of God* dramatically called the Spirit *of Christ* (Rom. 8:9, 1 Pet. 1:11)?—etc, etc! The church wrestled with these questions, using all the capabilities of imagination at their disposal.

I want to be that kind of preacher. p. 221

III TRUTH AND UNTRUTH—THE PREACHER'S KNOWLEDGE

In his essay in this *Evangel*, Peter Cotterell takes the example of the story of Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel to illustrate the point that we, the readers, are involved in the construction of 'meaning'. We can give answers to all the questions Peter asks about the story—but we cannot be certain that any of them is correct. The technical name given to such uncertainties is 'narrative gap': the story leaves us, its readers, to fill in these gaps, and we are faced with the challenge of them *as soon as we try to re-tell the story in our own words*.

Retelling the story in our own words … That is what preaching is all about. This idea of the 'narrative gap' applies not just to stories, but in principle to all biblical literature. For biblical texts constantly face us with questions about their meaning. If this were not so, the commentary-industry would not have been born. Commentators, like preachers, seek to answer the questions and to reexpress the text, achieving if possible even greater clarity than the biblical authors themselves.

But the sheer variety of attempts induces humility (or should do!). That *final* re-statement of biblical truth eludes the church. Even Paul felt that his grasp of the truth was imperfect. 'We know in part' he wrote, urging the Corinthians to see that the only *full* knowledge we experience is the knowledge of *which we are the objects, not the subjects*—God's knowledge of us. A day is coming when our limited *subjective* knowledge will be transformed: 'then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known!' (1 Cor. 13:9–12). If Paul's knowledge was imperfect, then how much more ours?

Yet his awareness of the imperfection of his knowledge did not make Paul hesitant or tentative in his preaching. Why? Because his confidence was not in himself, but in God. 'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power …' (1 Cor. 2:4, NIV). In other words, he preached not out of the conviction that he *knew* (fully, finally), but out of the conviction that he *was known* and owned by God.

Here's a remarkable piece of Christian theology, underlined by what hermeneutics tells us about the relation between language, culture and truth: as soon as a form of words acquires quasi-canonical status as a statement of truth, *it becomes untruth*. And conversely, only insofar as our words arise out of the glad awareness that we have been *grasped and known* by God in Christ, do they express the truth.

This is a great comfort to incompetent preachers like me. I can never know for sure whether I have rightly interpreted the passage. Sometimes it will be right to share my uncertainty with the congregation, sometimes not. But always I can be certain that God will take my 'own' words when I express the *partial* truth I have understood out of total loyalty to Christ (1 Cor. 2:2), with 'weakness and fear' (1 Cor. 2:3) and in total dependence upon the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:4).

I want to be that kind of preacher. p. 222

IV TRUTH AND COMMUNITY—THE PREACHER'S FELLOWSHIP

Some scholars writing in the area of hermeneutics have been particularly interested in the *community dimensions* of interpretation. As a fact to be observed, it is undeniable. We are all influenced in our reading of the Scriptures by the 'fellowship'; to which we belong, and in this context 'fellowship' can refer to a local church, a communion (e.g. Anglicanism), a cause (evangelicalism), a coterie (biblical scholarship), a confession (Protestantism, the charismatic movement), or a constituency (Western Christianity, as opposed to Eastern). We will have our individualist. Of course, we need to be as clear and conscious as we can about the influences that continue to shape us, or else we will simply be driven and will not 'own' the ideas we reproduce. Hermeneutics is the discipline which reflects on *the role of presuppositions* in interpretation, which is another way of referring to *the fellowship* within which we operate.

But what about a Martin Luther? Church history seems to hinge around crucial individuals who have stood against the flow, and rejected the presuppositions of the church around them. To be sure, their lasting influence in the church depends upon the fact that others, discerning the hand of God, responded to their leadership and formed a fellowship around them. Church history also tells the story of many powerful individuals who stood against the flow but failed to convince—and have been forgotten.

What is the role of private judgement in preaching and in theology? The Catholic answer to this is, officially, 'no role at all': teachers must toe the party line. But actually, of the three points made so far at all are true, private judgement plays a crucial role, both in theology and in preaching. We seek the truth, we engage with it, and then passionately touched, we proclaim it. Simply passing on conventional truth will produce sterility and death. And the Catholic church is discovering painfully that private judgement is here to stay. Protestantism testifies dramatically to its power, presenting a bewildering variety of churches and doctrines, often associated with the charismatic ministry of certain individuals—and shading off, of course, both into the liberalism of David Strauss and Wilheim Wrede, and into the sectarianism of Joseph Smith and Charles Taze Russell.

Theology asks after the legitimacy within all this diversity. Where are the lines to be drawn? To the aid of theology comes hermeneutics, which can provide the raw material to enable this judgement to be made. For, like the word of God itself, hermeneutics probes 'the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Heb. 4:12). It reveals the *pride* at the heart of all the above-named—situational, if not felt: that is, the effect and thrust of their teaching was deliberately to undermine and to reject the fellowship of the church at large, and to do so openly and apparently without concern. Yes, of course there may be new insights, even revolutionary new interpretations of the Scriptures. Please God! But hermeneutics

notices the difference between a Luther on the one p. 223 hand, who argued for his position using the tools of common discourse, and never renounced his commitment to the church of Christ both past and present, and a Wrede on the other hand, who planted himself firmly in the soil of intellectual anti-supernaturalism and expected the church to join him there.

What is the fellowship within which biblical teaching is set? It is wiser than the local church which listens. Potentially, it is as wide as biblical preaching. For when we rise to preach, we join in the company of *all* who, like us, have sought to hear, to absorb and to communicate the word of God. Potentially therefore, we may learn from them in the task, and they from us. This fellowship is signalled by the bookshelves in the preacher's office, where (hopefully!) a great cloud of witnesses from every generation and denomination surround the desk, sharing the fruits of their wisdom and experience, and urging him or her on to even deeper insight, with eyes fixed on Jesus.

Preaching crosses denominational boundaries, because the Book on which it focuses belongs to the whole church. What a tragedy, then, when denominational teaching forms an interpretative *grid* through which the text of Scripture is sieved. God's word is greater than all poor attempts to explain it in our own words, and the magnificent calling of the preacher is to let it speak with its own authentic voice, even if (especially if) it challenges our presuppositions.

I want to be that kind of preacher!

V TRUTH AND PEOPLE: THE PREACHER'S CULTURE

But preachers are not just members of the church. They are members of a human society which needs to be reconciled to God. The Puritan pastor Richard Baxter is famous for his comment that pastors need to know the book of the human heart as well as they know the book of the Lord God. We could put this another way and say that preachers need to understand their own cultures deeply, from the inside, so as to be able to relate the gospel appropriately to the needs of the world they serve.

And this is not just a matter of knowing what to say when it comes to 'the application' at the end of the sermon. It is more complex. To formulate the doctrine of the trinity, the church had to discover language to express the thoughts after which the imagination grasped. It was Tertullian who first used the expression 'Trinity', and who conjured up the words 'person' and 'substance' as *metaphors* to help us understand what kind of God we worship, if he really has acted in Christ as the gospel describes. Tertullian's use of these words (in Latin) was then refined and developed as Greek equivalents were explored and discussed by others.

Words were being drawn from the contemporary language-stock, already laden with meaning, and brought into new usage in connection with God. Many have already commented on the process involved here, which affected not just the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, but the whole re-expression of the biblical gospel in terms appropriate p. 224 to Greek culture and thought-forms. Christians *needed* the doctrine of the Trinity for themselves, simply because they needed to know whom they were worshipping; but its development was part of a broad *missionary* movement out into Greek (and Latin) culture.

The church has been doing the same, ever since. Particularly in the modern period, with its great missionary movements, we have become familiar with the challenges and problems of *contextualisation*. This is a subject right at the heart of *hermeneutics*, based as it is on the Greek work *hermeneuo*, to 'interpret'. Hermeneutical discussion in this area centres on the question of *the relation of substance to expression*: we can glibly say that we

are in the business of expressing the unchanging gospel in ever-new language related to the changing needs of the world, but what is that 'unchanging gospel'? Is it possible to put it into words? Or will it not be true that *every* set of words used to express it will be *less* than the truth it seeks to convey, and in fact chosen to express the truth for a particular time and culture?

This is an uncomfortable thought, but its truth is illustrated by the great attempts of the past to distill the essence of the gospel into succinct statements. They seem so dated now! and are so obviously in need of *expansion*, at least, to bring them into connection with the needs of our age.

Karl Barth, of course, applied this same thought to the Bible, also. It too, he maintained, is a culturally relative expression of God's Word, a *witness to it* rather than an *expression of it*. Evangelical preachers will want to resist downgrading the status of the Scriptures in the church, but even so it is clear that God in his providence has given us words from himself deeply rooted in time and place. The preacher stands at the heart of the hermeneutical process, bridging the gap between then and now, and seeking the words which will re-express for people *now* the word that was so crucially spoken *then*.

This is challenging! And difficult. It is east to fall back on accepted patterns, language tried and true, the clichés of Zion which reassure the faithful but puzzle outsiders. The challenge is to *understand so deeply* (point 1 above), and to *study so carefully* (point 2), and to *depend so humbly* (point 3), and to *reflect so widely* (point 4), and to *know so intimately* (this point), that new words will come freshly to express the grace and love of God with power for today.

'Exposition' is a great word. It speaks of *exposure* of the revelation of something that would otherwise be hidden. We preachers need to make sure that the *methods* we choose match the *goal* we seek—that of enabling the church and the world in our generation really to see the Christ who has gripped and won our hearts.

Thinking about hermeneutics has been a great help to me in my own preaching ministry, and it is my prayer that this essay will serve a similar purpose for brothers and sisters with the same great calling.

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Four Horizons in Preaching

Paul Windsor

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The author argues that relating the text to the people through the Preacher calls for the merging of four horizons, a task dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He follows up this brief article with his own course outline for expository preaching which he uses in his classes.
Editor