

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 35 • Number 2 • April 2011

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Theology in the 21st Century

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KEYWORDS: *Reality, interpretation, understanding, perspective, revelation, culture, history, gospels, faith, authority, hermeneutic circle*

I Reality and Interpretation

Today we have come to a point in our history where we realize that what we have traditionally dubbed *reality* is an interpretation of the data of our experience. Furthermore, we now know that the understanding through which we create our interpretation is not God-given, but comes to us at our mother's knee and is largely the product of human judgments passed onto us through our history, culture, and language communities. Thus, if we are serious about following Jesus, we must rethink much of our inherited understanding in the light of what Jesus said and did. In order to get a more transparent interpretation of the gospel, we need to be suspicious of the prejudices that make up our understanding, and allow the things that Jesus said and did to change that understanding.

Jesus' disciples constantly had to rethink the understanding through which they were interpreting Jesus' radical teachings. Their misinterpretation was always a result of the fact that their understanding was inadequate to interpret what Jesus was saying and doing. The same is true concerning the history of Jesus' followers down to our present day. Over the last two thousand years, people who were serious about following Jesus have allowed his teachings and life to change their understanding. The purpose of all such changes to our understanding was to bring us to a more transparent interpretation of the gospel, but the religious establishment meets all such changes with opposition. The opposition is always rooted in the same erroneous belief that the understanding or perspective of the religious establishment is sacred.

In fact, however, it is God that is sacred, and not our understanding or perspective. Sadly, we all too easily make an idol of our understanding and our theology becomes the thing in which we place our faith and trust. We

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believe that it rather than God will save us, and faith becomes simply a matter of having what we consider the right understanding.

In the past, such idolatrous faith in our own understanding had murderous effects. People killed one another in the name of Jesus because they thought they were defending the gospel rather than a historically and culturally relative perspective of the gospel. Fortunately, we now know that our understanding of everything, including the gospel, is perspectival and what we most often defend is our ego's attachment to that perspective rather than the gospel itself. Our egos and their attachment to what we claim to know are what so often fuel our religious fervour, and is what so often keeps us from the fullness of life to which God calls us as well.

The fullness of life God has for us in Christ Jesus requires that we renew our minds¹ and take on the mind of Christ.² In other words, we need to take on the Jesus perspective. Only as our understanding comes closer to replicating Jesus' understanding do we begin to get a more transparent interpretation of Jesus and the gospel. Unfortunately, there is a great obstacle: we tend to believe that our theological understanding represents who God is, and we therefore treat that understanding as if it were some absolute truth rather than simply our understanding or perspective.

In other areas, apart from theology, we are better at adapting new perspec-

tives. Most of us do not have much trouble understanding that Albert Einstein offers a better perspective of the physical universe than did Isaac Newton. Likewise, we find it easy to understand that a psychologist at the beginning of the 21st century does not have the same perspective on the human psyche that Freud had at the beginning of the 20th century. We accept the idea that historically our perspective and understanding of the world and our place in it changes. With new discoveries and insights, our understanding changes and opens new vistas not available in the past. Philosophy and science are generally open to such new perspectives, although usually not without some resistance.

Theology, on the other hand, confronts such new perspectives with more than a little resistance. Many people who can accept Einstein's perspective in physics or a 21st century perspective concerning the human psyche insist upon retaining an unaltered 16th century theology in spite of the better understanding that last five hundred years has produced. Their defence is that God has not changed, but the physical universe and human psyche have not changed either. What has changed is our understanding of them. The change is the result of discoveries and insights that give us a better perspective.

Luther and Calvin, as well as those of the Counter-Reformation, believed that the sun went around the earth rather than the earth going around the sun. They thought that was what they saw. We now know, however, that it was the result of their biased perspective, which imagined that the sun was moving and not the earth. We have a

1 Rom. 12:2.

2 Phil. 2:5.

better perspective today. Why then should we not equally be open to a better perspective of the gospel than what was available previously?

We no longer believe that the sun goes around the earth because that is what we see, nor do we believe that when we read a text our interpretation is a result of what we see in that text. The theologians of the Reformation did believe such things. They believed that their interpretation of the gospel was no interpretation at all but the result of what they saw in the text. Today we know that what we think we see is not simply the result of what is there but largely determined by what we bring to the experience. The world that we experience is phenomenal or hermeneutic; that is, a composite of both the raw data of experience and what we bring to that data. What we bring in terms of the understanding that forms our interpretation of the data are concepts that are the product of human judgments passed onto us by our history, culture, and language communities.

Thus, we all possess a very *human* perspective, and none of us has a God's-eye-view. We may have some God-given concepts but most of what makes up the understanding through which we interpret the world is of a human origin. Thus, we are interpretative beings, and our interpretive nature is what separates us from the rest of nature. Without history, culture, or language other creatures may interpret the data of their experience largely through a God-given understanding, but human beings certainly do not. With what we now know concerning the nature of the understanding through which we interpret our

experience, we should be more suspicious of that understanding and the way that it prejudices all of our experiences.

In the past, when we imagined that the mind was a *tabula rasa* and that we simply recorded data as given, hermeneutics or the study of interpretation had little place in our lives. It was the province of scholars seeking to interpret obscure texts. Unlike past generations who naively supposed that the way we conceptualized the world was the way the world was, we now understand the hermeneutic nature of our human condition. Today, we know that our human experience is a text that we must read and interpret.

Many see this perspectival and interpretive nature of our human condition as a threat to their faith and wish for an earlier time. The reason this is so threatening to so many is that they conceive of faith as a matter of believing certain propositions they held to be true. Historically, the reformers' idea of faith eventually came to mean that one believed doctrines different from those of Catholics, just as Catholic faith came to mean believing in doctrines and creeds different from what Protestants believed. Of course, the propositions that form our theological doctrines and creeds depend upon words, which we now know are not God-given. Human language has its content determined by forces at work within history, culture, and language communities. Hence, the words that constituted the propositional doctrines in which our modern ancestors put their faith reflected more our historical, cultural, and linguistic perspective rather than divine truths.

Thus, faith became a matter of

believing in one's own understanding, which was naively taken for truths concerning God. Consequently, Protestants killed Catholics and Catholics killed Protestants all in the name of God, because they imagined that their understanding represented objective truths about God. In the past, it was much easier for human beings to imagine that their understanding somehow reflected objective, sacred truths. Thankfully, we now know that the understanding through which we interpret God's communion with us is human rather than divine.

II The Nature of Faith

Faith is certainly essential to most religious traditions, and we read that, 'without faith, it is impossible to please God'.³ For many people, however, a Christian faith means that they believe that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, rose from the dead, and is the second person of the trinity. Of course, biblical faith, and especially the faith that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels is very different from that. On the two occasions where Jesus praises people for having great faith, neither involves individuals who believed the right sacred facts, held the appropriate doctrines, or were members of the right religious group.

Rather, they were people who had discovered some deep truth concerning the nature of God through the circumstances of their lives. The Roman centurion knew something about divine authority. As a Roman commander, he

was in a position of authority in Palestine, and a Jew like Jesus was under his authority, but this Roman centurion had come to know what real authority was. He knew that he had authority only because he was under the authority of Rome and he recognized that Jesus was under an even greater authority than that of Rome.⁴

Regarding the Syrophenician woman who, Jesus tells us, had great faith, we know that she is not of the right religious group, and all we know about what she believed was that she had come to discover that God took care of even the dogs that eat from the table.⁵ That was enough for Jesus to tell us that she was a woman of great faith. Both these people had beliefs that shaped their understanding in ways that were conducive to their coming to know God, and who they were in relationship to God.

What we believe is certainly important, but what is important is that our beliefs bring us to a better understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a religious faith that did just the opposite. They had a pride and confidence in their own understanding that closed them to the great understanding Jesus was offering.

By contrast, in the two instances above which Jesus calls great faith, both people had a humility that opened them to the possibility of God bringing them to an ever-greater understanding through which to interpret their God

3 Heb. 11:6.

4 Luke 7:2-10.

5 Mt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30.

experiences. The Roman Centurion was in a place of authority, but rather than that creating a pride and confidence within him, it humbled him because he understood that his authority came from being under the greater authority of Rome. When he saw an even greater humility in Jesus, he knew that Jesus was under a greater authority than Rome.

Likewise, the Syrophenician woman was also humble enough to receive the revelation of God's mercy through dogs eating from the scraps of the table. Both were open to receiving God's revelation through the circumstances of their lives in ways that the Pharisees were not. The only authority the Pharisees were under was their own understanding, and they were certainly too proud to be taught by dogs.

With their own understanding as their only authority, the Pharisees lacked the humility that comes from being under authority and therefore were unable to recognize Jesus being under God's authority. Today, we should be in a better place than the Pharisees were, since we now know that there is nothing sacred about our understanding. Perhaps past generations of Christians, like the Pharisees, found it easy to believe that their beliefs and understanding represented some objective, sacred truth, but we are not so naïve today. Because of what we now know concerning the phenomenal or hermeneutical nature of our human experience, we should no longer be in a place of treating our own understanding with such reverence. This should open us to having our understanding changed by the things that Jesus said and did. We dub the process by which we come to that bet-

ter understanding, 'the hermeneutic circle'.

III The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle is the means to a more transparent interpretation. It begins with a suspicion concerning the understanding we bring to our experience. Without such a suspicion, we take the interpretation that our understanding creates as synonymous with the data of our experience. By doing so, our interpretation becomes irredeemable and it rather than God becomes the thing in which we place our faith and trust. Without a healthy suspicion of our own understanding, there is no spiritual journey into the great mystery of God's mercy. Without a suspicion of our own understanding, we, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, suffered no self-doubt.

The Pharisees were convinced that their understanding was adequate and they knew all they needed to know concerning God and their relationship to him. By contrast, the people who did come to follow Jesus did not believe they understood all there was to know about God and therefore were open to Jesus' radical revelation. If faith is to produce an ever-greater understanding of God and ourselves, we must be like those followers of Jesus who had enough humility to suppose that their understanding was insufficient. It is only through a general suspicion or distrust concerning our understanding that we become open to having God change our understanding in order to bring us to an ever more fruitful interpretation.

By supposing that our understanding is always insufficient or that a 'non-

understanding is never eliminated,⁶ we open ourselves to future readings, which are always worthwhile if we bring an openness to those readings. By allowing the Gospel text to change our understanding, future readings are readings with a new understanding, which can produce more transparent and fruitful interpretations. Without openness to having our understanding corrected, future readings simply further confirm the prejudices that constitute our understanding, and their worth is only to reassure our egos of their rightness.

Of course, such openness could at times produce an understanding that yields a less transparent interpretation, but God can work with that and correct that misunderstanding as long as we stay open to having our understanding corrected. The point is not to be right and not make mistakes, but to stay on the journey and allow God to continue to draw us into an ever more fruitful understanding through which to interpret our God experiences.

This is the nature of the hermeneutic circle. It is a dialogue, in which we allow the text to correct our understanding and thereby provide new ways to conceptualize what we experience in the text. This should be our means of reading any worthwhile text or experience but it is especially appropriate for some ultimately worthwhile text like the Gospels. Unfortunately, this is not a very common practice.

The way most people read a text like the Sermon on the Mount is with very little suspicion concerning the understanding they bring to that text. They think their understanding is adequate and they have no great expectation of the text changing that understanding. They simply read it in a way that confirms all the prejudices they bring to the reading. If, however, they allow the radical teachings of Jesus to change their understanding, then the next reading will be with a new understanding, which, in turn, can produce a new and more transparent interpretation.

The spiritual journey into a more transparent interpretation of the gospel requires a great faith in the gospel and an equally great distrust toward our own understanding. Only then do we allow the text to do its job of changing our understanding in order to provide that deeper interpretation. This is what made the disciples or followers of Jesus different from the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew what they knew and nothing could change their understanding, which they mistook for sacred. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, were constantly having their understanding challenged and changed by the things Jesus said and did.

If this was the kind of open faith to which Jesus called his disciples, then the very thing that keeps us from such a faith is the idea that faith is a matter of tenaciously clinging to a fixed and certain understanding. If we are truly to be followers of Jesus, the spiritual journey he calls us to will always challenge our understanding rather than reassure it. This is the nature of a spiritual journey and the nature of the

6 F. Schleiermacher, *Über den Begriff der Hermeneutik*, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1977), 328.

hermeneutic circle as well. Both require that we hold our understanding loosely in order that our ongoing God experiences provide us with an understanding that better replicates the Jesus perspective. The religious establishment of Jesus' day failed to realize the nature of the spiritual journey to which Jesus was calling them, and likewise, much of today's religious establishment fails to realize it as well.

All this is not to say that the initial understanding we bring to the data of our experience is unimportant. Without our initial understanding, wrong as it may be, we would have no orientation to the data at all. Without some kind of understanding, it would be difficult to extract any meaning from the Gospel text. Our initial understanding gives us an orientation and tells us what is important and what is not important.

When we were children, our parents and others oriented us by explaining what was important to focus on and what was not so important. When crossing a street some lights were important to focus on and some were not important. The red light that controlled the flow of traffic was important, and the street light that illumined the area was not something that we had to focus upon. We learned to focus on and highlight certain parts of our experience and ignore other parts.

If we were to take in everything without some orientation that allowed us to sort and prioritize things, life would be very difficult. As useful as this orientation is, however, we all too quickly come to imagine that the interpretation it provides represents an objective reality rather than a specific interpretation.

One of the great problems with fol-

lowing Jesus is that we all too easily come to take our initial orientation of the gospel as synonymous with the gospel itself. Therefore, we end up worshipping and trusting our initial understanding rather than allowing the gospel to draw us into the journey that brings us to know the great mystery that is God. Idolatry or worshipping something other than God has always been the great sin, perhaps it is the only sin, but it assumes many disguises that often make it hard to recognize as sin. The most deceptive disguise has always been that of religion, whereby religious doctrines masquerade as God. Thankfully, today this particular idolatry has been unmasked. We now know that we are interpretive beings, and that our historical, cultural, and linguistic perspective limits that interpretation. None of us can claim a God's-eye-view. We perceive things from within our particular journey and not from the perspective of eternity, as does God. Thus, the words of our religious doctrines may create metaphors that point toward God, but they can never adequately express the nature of an infinite and eternal God.

The best that true Christian religion can offer is an orientation or initial understanding that sets us on our spiritual journey. As we spend time in God's presence, our understanding is changed and we come to a better interpretation of the things that Jesus said and did. The journey brings us into a more transparent understanding; that is, one that reflects less our history, culture, and linguistic tradition, and is more reflective of Jesus' own perspective. Furthermore, the more we take on the Jesus' perspective, the better we are equipped to follow him and thereby

become ever more like him.

Of course, it is difficult to stay on such a journey. We all too easily fall prey to Gnosticism and after God changes our understanding a bit, we imagine that we now know all there is to know. We find great security in the sense that *we know*, and we choose to rest there rather than to continue on the journey. In order to remain on the journey into an ever-greater perspective from which to better interpret the gospel and the fullness of life God has for us, we constantly need to seek that place of deep prayer.

The reason prayer is so essential to staying on the journey is because there is a security that comes from sensing God's presence in prayer that allows us to let go of the false security that our understanding provides. Any deeper understanding requires that we see our present understanding as insufficient, but if people find security only in being certain about what they know, they will never let go of that understanding. In order to abandon the security we have in our understanding we must find a security apart from our understanding. The awareness of God's presence that we experience in deep prayer provides that security. It provides that peace that passes all understanding,⁷ and provides a security that our understanding never can.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.⁸

IV Our Hermeneutic Nature And The Biblical Revelation

We now know that we are interpretive beings and an objective understanding of anything, least of all an infinite and eternal God, is beyond us. Although we have only recently become aware of our hermeneutical nature, our human condition has always been hermeneutical and our history has always progressed through a hermeneutic circle. Unlike other creatures, we human beings have a history because our understanding changes over time and produces different interpretations of our experience.

Copernicus came to conceptualize his experience of the heavens differently from Ptolemy and he passed his understanding and interpretation on to us. Likewise, Albert Einstein had a different understanding of the physical universe from that of Isaac Newton and we are the heirs of Einstein's understanding and interpretation. In the same way, Jesus offers a better understanding through which to interpret our God experience than any understanding that had come before him.

Since we are hermeneutic creatures and we have a history because of our hermeneutic nature, it seems obvious that the biblical revelation would depict this hermeneutic and historical nature of our human condition. The Bible may be God's infallible revelation, but what God is revealing is how human beings experience God through their all too human understanding. As such, the biblical revelation is a progressive revelation because it begins in great misunderstanding, since our finite and temporal human understanding is ill equipped to interpret experiences with an infinite and eternal God.

7 Phil. 4:7.

8 Phil 4:7.

This infinite and eternal God, however, patiently works amid our misunderstanding in order to bring us to a better understanding, and eventually to the ultimate perspective, which is the Jesus revelation.

Sadly, such a view meets with great opposition from Gnosticism. As we said earlier, Gnosticism is the great heresy that has always plagued religion. In its modern form, Gnosticism insists that our knowledge of God be objective, certain, and precise, but that is part of an unholy desire to know as God knows. The eternal temptation that takes us out of a right place of humility before God is to believe the lie that we can know as God knows. We first believed that lie in *The Garden*,⁹ but we are finally in a place where we can see it for the lie it is. Our knowing will forever be an interpretation from our limited perspective, but as we stay humble and open, God can change our understanding in order to give us a more transparent interpretation of our God experiences.

The greatest opposition to this openness has always come from a religious establishment that claims to know all it needs to know. The religious leaders of Galileo's day insisted that they knew with objective certainty that the sun revolves around the earth. Objective certainty has always attracted religious types but it is antithetical to any genuine spiritual journey.

A genuine spiritual journey always requires openness to the better understanding God has for us. The religious

establishment is always opposed to such openness, so God usually works through the religious outsider. The founders of most religious orders, like the protestant reformers, and the desert fathers, were all initially either heretics or outsiders to the religious establishment. God has to work through the religious outsider because the religious establishment is always trying to protect the false security that comes from the understanding they set forth as sacred, while God is always trying to bring us to a better understanding.

The Jewish prophets all the way down to John the Baptist and Jesus are all killed because they tell the religious or political establishment that their understanding is wrong. The reason the Scripture is a progressive revelation is because the prophets defy the established understanding and present a better understanding through which to interpret our God experiences. Just as we in our intellectual history eventually yield to better ways to conceptualize and interpret our experience of the world, the Bible reveals a similar reluctant progression to an ever-better understanding through which to interpret our God experiences. As such, the Bible is God's revelation of the hermeneutical nature of our spiritual history. It is God's revelation of how human beings have interpreted their relationship with God, and how God patiently works within the development of human consciousness to bring us to a better understanding through which to realize an ever-greater intimacy with him.

People who are on a genuine spiritual journey should have little problem accepting such a view of Scripture

9 Gen. 3:1-5.

since it mirrors what they have experienced in their own personal relationship with God. With our first God experiences, like those first experiences depicted in the biblical revelation, we almost all begin with an understanding of a wrathful and punishing God who must be appeased. God's desire, however, is that we would eventually come to interpret our God experiences through an understanding of God as a loving father who desires mutual indwelling. Of course, such a different interpretation of our God experience can happen only if we are open to having our understanding changed.

Most of us are open to having our understanding changed, at least to some degree. We are able to adapt to the new understandings that Copernicus and Einstein offer. As long as the changes are not too drastic, we can accommodate them and reinterpret the world through such a new understanding. When we encounter an understanding too drastic, however, we simply reject it as radical and too far from the norm to be something we can use in order to create a viable interpretation for ourselves.

Sadly, the understanding that the Jesus revelation offers is just such an understanding. The Jesus perspective does not offer a modification to our understanding the way that Copernicus or Einstein had, but it threatens to obliterate it and replace it with something so divinely alien that we baulk—it is simply too much for us.

V The Jesus Revelation

The Jesus revelation is so radical that rather than accept it as the ultimate perspectival understanding from

which to interpret our experiences with God, we fall back upon theories that suppress the Jesus revelation. We adopt a theory about all of Scripture being the objective revelation of who God is so that the words of Jesus must conform to the rest of Scripture. We insist upon imagining that the Scripture is a revelation of God's objective nature, so that the Jesus revelation is no different from the revelations of Moses and David. We want to believe that all of Scripture is a revelation of who God objectively is so we can balance the words of Jesus with the rest of Scripture.

Thus, when Jesus tells us to love our enemies in order that we might be like God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked',¹⁰ we can point to other portions of Scripture where God seems to be telling us to kill our enemies, even their women and children.¹¹ Whenever Jesus says something too radically divine for us, we reference another Scripture that says the very opposite. We suppress the words of Jesus by making his words conform to the rest of Scripture, instead of making the rest of Scripture conform to his words.

We do this so we can imagine that sometimes what Jesus says is the prescription for our lives but sometimes God's prescription is just the opposite. This gives us the option of deciding whether this is a time for loving our enemies or killing our enemies.

When the words of Jesus contradict other portions of Scripture, we who

¹⁰ Luke 6:35.

¹¹ Joshua 6:21.

consider ourselves Christians almost always side against the words of Jesus. When Jesus says, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and child, brother and sister, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple,'¹² we quickly point to other portions of Scripture in order to show that Jesus did not really mean what he said. Instead of treating the words of Jesus as sacred, it is our theory about God's revelation being a revelation of objective reality that we hold as sacred. Thankfully, today a belief that objective reality is something to which we have access is indefensible and we can no longer use such a theory to suppress the words of Jesus.

With such a theory debunked, we are now free to see the Jesus revelation as the ultimate understanding through which we should interpret our God experiences. Jesus' interpretation of his God experiences should provide the benchmark by which we can determine whether other portions of Scripture represent a more or less transparent interpretation of the God experiences recorded there. Simply put, the portions of Scripture that conform to the gospel are the better interpretations of God's communion with human beings, and those that oppose what the gospel reveals are interpretation formed out of a more human and less divine understanding.

Of course, some continue to believe that God can bypass the understanding through which we humans process our experience and give us purely objective revelations—that is, all God and noth-

ing of us. Since we now know that God did not do that with the natural revelation, and we do not see the sun going around the earth, as we once believed, why would we believe that the Scripture is an objective revelation?

I think the answer to that question is twofold. First, it gives us a way to neutralize the Jesus revelation by making the more palatable revelations of Moses, Joshua, or David as much an objective revelation of God's nature as the Jesus revelation. Second, it allows those who claim that God communicates to them in such a direct way to suffer no self-doubt. It gives them a sense of certainty and thus the confidence in their own understanding that their egos crave. Jesus, however, calls us to just the opposite. If we are to follow him, we must hold our interpretation loosely and trust not in our own understanding¹³ but allow the gospel to change our understanding and bring us to a more transparent interpretation of what Jesus is revealing.

As we have said, this is not easy to do. We crave certainty and we fear a loss of understanding. What Jesus offers is neither the certainty we crave nor an understanding that we can easily grasp. In fact, Jesus calls us into a mystery that we come to know only as we spend time in God's presence. Without that experience, we will always seek our security in the belief that our understanding is certain. Only the experience of God's presence in prayer brings us to find our security in the mystery of God's mercy rather than our own understanding.

12 Luke 14:26.

13 Prov. 3:5.