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# *Address and Understanding: Some Goals and Models of Biblical Interpretation as Principles of Vocational Training<sup>1</sup>*

ANTHONY C. THISELTON

What kind of questions are questions of interpretation? The answer, I have little doubt, is the very opposite of what is conveyed by the popular image of the subject. It is *not* about hair-splitting differences among antiquarian scholars about stretches of language or historical data. I am *not* asking that the living address of the gospel today be buried under layers of dry academic argument. This impression of the theory of interpretation is based on misinformation and fallacy. There was perhaps once a time when hermeneutics, to give it the name which I have been avoiding as long as possible, was concerned mainly with philology, or questions about vocabulary, grammar, and linguistic code and context. But this era now lies in the distant past. Hermeneutics is concerned precisely with address and understanding as they may occur in the living present. We might suggest the analogy of an orchestra performing a concert, or of a drama company producing a play. Faithfulness to the musical notation of the composer, or the author's script for the play, necessarily remain fundamental considerations. But we are equally concerned with the actual concert. How does this concert audience actually hear Bach (it has to be Bach) from this orchestra? How has this drama group interpreted the voice of Shakespeare for these people?

It is unfortunate, and it contributes to the popular misconception of hermeneutics, that in everyday life we tend to restrict the word 'interpretation' to what is puzzling, ambiguous, or exceptional. I might well speak of 'interpreting' the symbolic beasts of the Book of Revelation in this or that way. But I should not normally speak of 'interpreting' my own night

1 This paper was first given by Dr Thiselton as his inaugural lecture as Principal of St. John's, Nottingham on 9 January 1986. It will also appear, probably in altered form, in his book on biblical hermeneutics to be published in due course by Marshall's.

attire as my pyjamas; nor of telling a policeman that I had simply 'interpreted' the red light, on this particular occasion, to mean 'go'. However, the difference between interpretation and understanding is a subtle and not always simple one. I do in fact interpret traffic lights, but because the arbitrary convention by which 'red' means 'stop' is a socially universal one in the modern technological world, I proceed on the basis of reflex action without conscious reflection. I do not realize that a hermeneutical process is involved because I have been trained and habituated to perceive red lights at street corners as directive signals to drivers.

Hermeneutics is the study of what is actually going on when an act of communication and understanding takes place. It enquires critically about the process and the basis of this understanding: for example, in the case of traffic lights, the acceptance under British or international law as expressed in the Highway Code that certain lighting signals are functionally equivalent to a policeman's directions. It is sometimes said that this kind of study intellectualizes the gospel, and misses the centrality of experience. We might as well say that studying in the Highway Code the operation of traffic lights intellectualizes the experience of driving. Let the driver find out by experience what it is to cross a red light! If he is pig-headed enough, we might be tempted to let him, except that in this case, as also in the case of the Christian ministry, other people's lives are also at stake.

The gospel of Christ comes to us primarily as address. Indeed it is not to be intellectualized, if this means to regard it primarily as information for the head rather than as an address to the heart. It is not only a message *about* God (though it includes this), it is an *address from* God. It is an *act* of promise to be accepted; an *event of grace* to be received; a reconciling process to be lived out. It is no more intellectualist than when one person says to another 'I love you', as an *act of love* and not just a statement about love. But what the word of address *amounts to* is seen partly by reflecting on it, only by seeking to understand it. In this article I want to explore this inter-relationship between address and understanding. In the course of preparation, I noticed that many of the points which I wish to make are expressed in the form of prayers in the Bishop Ridding litany.<sup>1</sup> This confirms my conviction that these points have pastoral and devotional significance, and I hope to return to Bishop Ridding's words at various junctures. I propose now to select for our consideration six models of the task of understanding which feature in current hermeneutical theory. They form three pairs. The first two focus on *presence*; the second two on *persons*; the third pair on *power*.

### **1. The Word as Presence and Address: Lessons from Existentialist Models**

I must begin by re-tracing ground which will be familiar to some of you already. Language which superficially appears to be descriptive in-

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1 *A Litany of Remembrance*, Allen and Unwin, London Reprint 1959. Bp. Ridding was the first Bishop of Southwell.

formation often turns out, on closer inspection, to be the language of direction or even of personal involvement. On our television screens we regularly see what in all purely *formal* respects appears to be a piece of information which would be of interest to biologists, physicists, chemists, GPs, and students of human anatomy: 'Heineken refreshes the parts which other beers cannot reach'. Nothing in practice, however, could be a more existentially immediate mode of address, for what it functions simply as an invitation to part with our money in a certain direction. We are meant to transfer the sense of pleasure derived from the ingenuity of the very entertaining advertisement to the supposed quality of taste of the beer which bears its name. The hermeneutical critic, of course, knows full well that no cognitive truth-claim whatever has been made. Indeed hermeneutical reflection unmasks the whole utterance as nothing more than emotive address, a phatic communion in which two parties try to establish a relationship by enjoying a joke together. The result of this kind of reflection, even though it is intellectual reflection, is to appreciate more intelligently, indeed to understand, that the *address-like* quality of the address is what it is all about.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger used an example no less simple. Sometimes, he observed, such a statement as 'the hammer is heavy' may indeed function as an assertion of fact, as it might if someone were weighing it for postage. But more characteristically it means in more typical circumstances: 'I can manage with this: the nail is going in'; or 'bring me a lighter one - this is no good for panel pins'. The practical context gives the language its life and its immediacy. But how much biblical language do we interpret as theoretical statements about states of affairs which in fact function with a more practical dimension of immediacy and presence?

I have used elsewhere already as an example of this point the fundamental Christian confession 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. 12:3).<sup>1</sup> What is it to say that Jesus is Lord? I remember to my shame preparing a talk as a curate on the phrase of the Apostles' Creed '. . . and in Jesus Christ our Lord'. It was to my shame because although the whole talk probably represented orthodox doctrine, it remained too largely in the realm of the abstract in the metaphysical depicting Christ's sovereign power as Lord of the universe, but failing genuinely to translate it into terms of practical experience. If confessing Christ as Lord is the test of what makes a person a Christian, this cannot turn only or primarily on having a particular head-content of beliefs *about* Christ. It is being devoted to Christ as Lord of my life, and therefore 'belonging' to him as the one who has the care of me. This is why the liturgical contexts of this confession are significant. The confession has to do with worship, obedience, and devotion. Only because

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1 A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, Paternoster, Exeter 1980, pp 266-9 and 283-92. See also 'Understanding God's Word To-day' in John Stott, ed., *Obedying Christ in a Changing World*, vol. 1, Collins, London 1978, pp 110-12.

Christ is my Lord can I yield up the care of my own life, for I belong to him. I am his servant, for whom he takes responsibility. Rudolf Bultmann (and we shall see shortly why it is significant that Bultmann says it) declares: 'This freedom arises from the fact that the believer . . . no longer belongs to himself (1 Cor. 6:19). He no longer takes the care for his own life, but lets this care go, yielding himself entirely to the grace of God. He recognizes himself to be the property of . . . the Lord, and lives for him: "none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's"' (Rom. 14:7-9).<sup>1</sup>

This is the dimension of address, of presence, of immediacy. In hermeneutical theory it is the emphasis which is captured by a particular interpretative model. It is known, not only in theology but in philosophical and literary hermeneutics, as the *existentialist* model. But in Christian experience it brings theology into the realm of worship and doxology. For it represents a pledge of belonging. There is a Christian hymn or song which captures this existential dimension devotionally: 'Now I belong to Jesus; Jesus belongs to me'. This exactly captures Bultmann's words.

Before we ask whether this model is adequate, we may note language about the distant past or about possibly remote future may also be interpreted along similar lines. The statements about creation in Genesis 1 and 2 do not concern only past events. They address me now, speaking to me of my present creatureliness and present dependence on God; of my responsibility as steward of resources which have been lent to me in trust, and of my dignity and potential capacity as a person made in God's image. Language about the last judgment, similarly, does not speak *only* of a final event, but also of my present accountability to God. The doctrine of a future resurrection speaks not only of my future destiny, but of the sovereign power of God who is able to transform me into a mode of existence appropriate to what he has prepared for me.

The first principle of vocational training is that we should be those who hear and learn how to pass on God's word of address as a living gospel in a living situation. We cannot proclaim the Lordship of Christ if we know nothing of what it is for Christ to be our Lord, and for ourselves to be his bondslaves. Christian service is exactly: Christian *service* under Christ's lordship. But all this is only one side of the coin. It is not enough to measure the Lordship of Christ simply by my experience of, or response to, this Lordship. It is not enough to say that Genesis speaks only of my creatureliness, or that the last judgment speaks of nothing more than my present responsibility. Theology is concerned with the basis, the validity, and the significance of experience. The existential hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann expose, in point of fact, both the strength and the weakness of the language of pietism. Bultmann rightly stresses that the language of the

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1 R. Bultmann *Theology of the New Testament* vol. 1, ET, SCM, London 1952, p 331.

gospel is that of address. Christ is Lord because he is *my* Lord, just as he was *Paul's* Lord. But in an essay written long ago in 1941 but only just published last year under the title 'Theology as Science' Bultmann comments that when theology ask itself 'What am I doing when I believe? . . . With this it is already unfaith. This is the paradox of theology.'<sup>1</sup> This of course is the dilemma of many an ordinand in training. Bultmann has done what many a devout Christian does when confronted with critical thinking in theology. He opts for the solution of two self-contained compartments. On one side stands faith and obedience; on the other side, argument and historical enquiry. This is why historical doubt and scepticism is no particular problem to him. But while address and immediacy *are* principles of vocational training, the separation of these from reflection on their ground and cause is *not*. I propose now to amplify this point with reference to a second model drawn from current themes of interpretation.

## 2. Presence and Critical Understanding: Models from Reader-Response Theory

Imagine that you have projected yourself into the narrative world of historical novel. Or still better for our purposes, you are totally absorbed in a film which accurately portrays certain events of the past. You have been lowered into a life boat and you are battered by the roaring wind. Your stomach turns as the little boat rises high, then drops twenty feet into a trough between the waves. You taste the salt of the spray on your lips. As lightning breaks across the sky you catch a glimpse of rocks only yards from the prow of the ship you have just left. Thunder rolls and reverberates, and you take one long, last look at the ship which has been your home for months. An awestruck voice whispers beside you: 'No-one would ever think that that was a two-foot model in a six-foot tank.'

The spell has been broken; your narrative world shattered. For your friend is a professional, whose business is films. Like a devoted and faithful ordinand, you wanted to be left alone to enjoy the immediacy of your experience, and you resented having it disrupted by technical comments about its possibility, its validity, or its historical basis. But a film director or a critic has responsibilities not only to himself or to herself, but to a wider public. His or her official responsibilities make it necessary to ask: is this true to the facts of history? Are the narrative conventions consistent? Are the effects convincing? Is the sound-system adequate? All these are responsible questions, and all the more necessary for the effective communication of the narrative world to other people. But there is no denying that they destroy, if only temporarily, the experience of immediacy and address. From the point of view of personal enjoyment or even edification they may be said to spoil the film.

In a very recent volume of *Semeia* devoted to Reader-Response hermeneutics, Robert Fowler offers a detailed comparison of the

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1 Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *Rudolf Bultmann: New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1984, p 56.

respective roles of the reader and critic.<sup>1</sup> As readers we allow ourselves to be mastered by the text. The text has its way with us. Our expectations are aroused and even at times manipulated. We feel what we are meant to feel; we live out the story. But the role of the critic reverses the relationship. The critic scrutinizes the text as his or her object of enquiry. The critic deliberately creates enough distance from the text, creates a high enough level of abstraction to ask: how does this work? What is going on here? The critic looks into the text from outside it; the reader accepts its invitation to enter in wherever it leads.

Fowler rightly observes, however, that when readers are solely readers, and not critical readers, or when critics are solely critics and not reading, listening critics, the results are tragic. We need, he rightly urges, *both* 'readerly passion' (or we might call it the dimension of address) *and* 'critical distance'<sup>2</sup> (or we might call it critical understanding or discernment). One who is both a perceptive or discerning reader, or perhaps a listening interpreter; deeply and actively involved in the message and its reality, but also cultivating a discerning eye for what is actually going on in the process.

If we do not undertake this task, the risk we take is failing to distinguish between the divine and the human. We may risk discounting and setting aside what God is saying by failing to perceive that it is God who says it. Or, even worse, we may clothe our own all-too-human experiences and understandings with the authority of the divine voice and presence. This is where, I believe, there has been such tragic and terrible misunderstanding about the respective roles of the practical and the academic in vocational training. These misunderstandings have dogged our history for a hundred years. Even the history of the College has been marked by differences and polarizations on this issue, as at around the turn of the century when once again the debate about the respective roles of academic and the practical was exceeded in bitterness and recrimination only by battles about drains and hot water pipes.<sup>3</sup>

What critical assessment or discernment always extracts is the capacity and ability to step back from an experience of immediacy and to evaluate how one understands it. One analogy might be to suggest how much better one can understand England if one has spent at least some significant time abroad. An understanding that is *wholly* academic would be like that of someone who has never lived in England, but only seen pictures of it and read about it in books. But a *wholly uncritical*, or readerly, assumed understanding would be that of someone who had never compared English life with anything else. He or she might well, of course, be an admirable Englishman or Englishwoman; but if he or she were preparing for

1 'Who Is "The Reader" in Reader Response Criticism', *Semeia* 31, 1985, pp 5-23.

2 *Ibid.*, p 9.

3 G. C. B. Davies, *Men for the Ministry: The History of the London College of Divinity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1963, pp 41ff.

leadership in English life, it might be suggested that something was lacking in critical perspective within which to make judgments about leading or changing English life.

It is important to see what is right and what is wrong with trying to set in contrast the academic and the experience-centred. On the one side, hermeneutical models, as we shall shortly see, re-enforce the point that we can only begin to understand from where we are. We shall develop this point in a moment. Furthermore, critical reflection is no substitute for personal experience. It is also true that, as *Faith in the City*<sup>1</sup> suggests, no single pattern of syllabus or learning is appropriate for all. But two things must be distinguished. *Everyone* needs to learn how to change his or her 'world' or angle of viewpoint, in order to evaluate and to understand events or experience critically. Without that there is no *honesty*, no *penitence*, no *radical change*, no *amendment* of life and thought.

But there is also the great danger of a second possibility, that critical distancing becomes an all-absorbing habit of mind. The one who *only* evaluates and criticizes may be as self-indulgent as the one who *only* experiences and never thinks. The latter is like someone trying to train to be a film engineer who never leaves his seat in the audience; the other has become so absorbed in the science of sound-systems, make-up, and of special effects that he or she has come to believe that this represents the total reality of the film.

I should like to conclude this point by drawing together lessons from our first two interpretative models in a way which suggests principles for our worship and for our vocational training in leading worship. First, our worship should embody both the immediacy of address and worshipping reflection of the mind. When Paul states, 'I will sing with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also' (1 Cor. 14:15), I do not think that he means to refer to separate modes and occasions of worship, but to say that truly Spirit-inspired worship involves *both* the immediacy of address *and* the reflection of understanding. In our rediscovery of the prayer and music of immediacy, therefore, we should not turn our backs on those deeply theological hymns which celebrate not simply our experience of Christ, but also the deeds of God which provide its basis. Second, those who lead worship need to develop a habit of mind and attitude whereby they both *worship*, yet remain conscious of questions about the propriety of how it is done. The worst thing in the world is for a man or woman to lead a service conscious only of his or her own words or person. As the Bishop Ridding Litany expresses it: 'From all love of display . . . from thought of ourselves in our ministrations; from forgetfulness of Thee in our worship . . . hold our minds in spiritual reverence that if we sing we sing to the Lord, and if we preach, we may preach as of a gift that God giveth.' But it is equally possible to be so caught up in the immediacy of worship that we never

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1 Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, Church House Publishing, London 1985, pp 119-29.



critically ask ourselves: Is my voice audible? Should I really stare down the church like this? Do I really need to share with the congregation every thought that springs to my mind? A good leader of worship is one who *worships*; but he or she is also one who critically reflects on whether it is being done as well as possible.

My ambition for our community of St. John's College is first and foremost that we should speak to others as those who have been addressed by God; that our preaching of the gospel should be like that of those who have come out of the audience-chamber of God. But I long also that we should have acquired the habit of mind of critically reflecting on what we are doing, and what we are asking others to do. These two dimensions of address and understanding certainly characterize Paul's posture when he uttered the words which constitute College's motto: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.' (1 Cor. 9:16). He has no choice, because God has commissioned him, called him, constrained him, addressed him. The gospel is a fire in his bones, because God's love has been poured out into his heart. As James Black observes in his book on preaching '... that love is a contagion. If this is not somehow in our hearts, our preaching is a performance . . . or worst of all a subtle type of insincerity. To preach without reality and passion may do lasting mischief to a congregation; but in the end it will blight our own spiritual life . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Yet in the same chapter in 1 Corinthians Paul stands alongside the church at Corinth and critically evaluates his theology and theirs in the light of the cross and the common apostolic tradition. Paul stands back and submits all these shared theological slogans and jargon to the word of the cross; to the message of Christ crucified. The catchphrases about 'wisdom', 'foolishness', 'fleshliness', 'freedom', 'spiritual', are all patiently revaluated in the light of a Christ-centred gospel. Wolfhart Pannenberg observes:

An otherwise unconvincing message cannot attain the power to convince *simply* by appealing to the Holy Spirit . . . Argumentation and the operation of the Spirit are not in competition with each other . . . In trusting the Spirit Paul in no way spared himself *thinking* and arguing . . . Luther used hard words against 'bragging about the Spirit' at a point where it was a matter of establishing an assertion on the basis of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Whether we speak of a theology of the cross, or of a theology of the word, or of a theology of the Holy Spirit, or simply of the gospel, address and understanding belong together.

### 3. Persons and Empathy: Lessons from Romanticist Models

There are innumerable points of connexion between pastoral vision or pastoral sensitivity, and what is known in the theory of interpretation as the

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1 *The Mystery of Preaching*, James Clarke, London 1934, pp 20-1.

2 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2, ET, SCM, London 1971, p 35.

Romanticist model of hermeneutics. This approach aims to hear a text, and to understand it, by rediscovering, and by entering into, the human experience *behind* the text which produced it. If the text is to be understood, and even more to fire our vision and imagination, we need to re-think, to re-live, and to re-experience what it was that made the author express his or her message in the text. The model is a *personal* one: a text is a medium through which one *person*, the writer or author, speaks to another *person*, the reader or the audience. The goal of interpretation, in the Romanticist tradition, then, is to penetrate *behind* the text, in order to enter the mind and experience of life which created it. The hermeneutical bridge is primarily that of psychological sympathy, resonance, or empathy.

Perhaps the most basic starting-point for hermeneutical theory is that an isolated text remains incomprehensible. To understand a text the interpreter needs to re-insert it into some context. The text must be seen *as* something above and beyond marks on paper. In practice, this means that it must engage with a context which has some significance for the interpreter. An understanding of a stretch of language depends on at least some provisional understanding of that out of which, or concerning which, this stretch of language speaks; but at the same time the language in question constitutes one of the avenues through which an understanding of the total subject-matter is still reached. In the context of Pauline studies, the principle is simply true to the every-day experience of the biblical scholar. For example, to achieve understanding of Romans 7 it is helpful to acquire a detailed and concrete understanding of each verse. But even this exercise depends for its accuracy and productiveness on how well we can meet another need: to enter the mind of Paul and the argument of Romans *as a whole*. Painstaking detail and wholistic creative vision are *equally* necessary to the hermeneutical goal of interpreting Romans 7 correctly and adequately. The principle can be demonstrated at almost any level. In Pauline studies, for example, the valuable work of J. Christiaan Beker admirably illustrates the principle.<sup>1</sup> He terms the two poles of understanding that of contingent situation and that of coherent theology. An attempt to understand Paul's mind as coherent gospel proclamation, he urges, cannot and should not be avoided. But every such understanding must be tested by a painstaking examination of detail. Each of the attempts to provide a hermeneutical principle, or 'key' to Pauline theology has contributed something to our understanding of Paul: Marcion's emphasis on freedom from the Jewish law; the Reformers' focus on justification by grace alone as the coherent centre; Albert Schweitzer's stress on eschatology; Bultmann's contrast between humankind under sin and humankind under grace; Stendahl and Munck on the historical relation between Israel and the Church; Whiteley and Sanders on participation and transference theology. But, Beker writes, 'the center cannot be bought at the price of emendation, selective concepts, and *a priori* decisions about

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1 *Paul The Apostle*, James Clarke, Edinburgh 1980, especially pp 3-36.

what is central and what is peripheral.' We need to check our vision of the whole by our detailed historical study of the Pauline texts and pastoral situations. Beker adds: 'Paul's hermeneutical skill exhibits a creative freedom that allows the gospel tradition to become living speech within the exigencies of the daily life of his churches.'

To sum up this point: this model of understanding suggests that our primary aim in training is to understand the one indivisible single gospel revealed through Christ. But this is not achieved by flattening out the distinctive forms which this gospel takes in different historical and pastoral situations. Indeed the man or woman who tries to proclaim the one gospel simply by reciting the same words in every possible pastoral situation will not have learned anything from the professional quality of training for which my predecessor, Colin Buchanan, rightly called. But to achieve this understanding entails two different modes of discovery. On the one hand, the hard work of detailed scientific study; on the other hand the creative experience of listening, waiting, discerning, praying, for the meaning of the whole to come together.

Sometimes it is suggested that all this is a purely intellectual process, and that the work of the Holy Spirit is simply to apply that understanding to the dimension of living and willing. I cannot limit the Holy Spirit to the dimension of doing, as if the Spirit were merely an activist. The Spirit, if he is the Creator Spirit, is the One to whom we look for the creative vision to which things come together in their appropriate coherence and significance. Because the Spirit's work is never one-for-all, however, that will be an ongoing process of ever fresh understanding. Each moment of life adds to, modifies, changes or enriches, the systematic theology of the previous moment.

There is also a second lesson to be learned from the Romanticist model of interpretation, to which I must refer more briefly. It is focused especially in the work of Dilthey.<sup>1</sup> Dilthey developed the Romanticist theme that the aim of interpretation is to experience *rapport* with the personal experience behind the text. The bridge towards understanding is therefore one which he associates with pastoral qualities of mind: *how to enter into what someone else feels and what someone else lives through*. But here, once again, Dilthey established two principles. The ground and bases for understanding is summed up in his famous aphorism: 'To understand is to re-discover the "you" in the "me"'.<sup>2</sup> I therefore reflect on what it feels like to live through *my* experiences, and I *put myself in your place*. This is surely one of the most fundamental principles of all vocational training, though in reality it is one part of what is involved in actually *loving* people. Dilthey argued philosophically that what made this possible was not the sharing of particular *thoughts* or *beliefs*, but the *shared flow of human life* in which we are all participants. Living makes it possible to re-live. But at this point Dilthey rightly noticed the need to take account of a second principle. Because

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1 *Gesammelte Schriften*, 12 vols., Teubner, Stuttgart 1962.

2 *Ibid.*, vol. 7, pp 191.

the flow of life moves on, my experience is *never precisely* the same as your experience. There remains an opaqueness or obscurity especially in the case of cultural or historical distance that necessitates what Dilthey called historical understanding. Both our reason and our experience are conditioned by our place in history and by our historical inheritance.

We do not have time to expound Dilthey's philosophical thought. But he has brought to our attention two different aspects of what it means for one person to understand another. The first, we have seen, is the need to cultivate the habit of trying to put ourselves into other people's shoes. But the second is one which is perhaps even more easily overlooked in a caring community such as this, where an 'openness to one another' has become almost a catchphrase. We are *not* all the same. Our experiences and historical, religious, and social inheritance is different. Understanding someone, therefore, includes taking account of *differences* as well as similarities. Both call for love and pastoral sensitivity; but where one principle calls for activist giving and receiving, the other calls for a measure of reserve, of reticence, of respect. Dilthey's hermeneutical model stresses what philosophers call our historical finitude, and the Bible calls our creatureliness, fallibility, ignorance, and proneness towards sinful presumption.

If we move beyond Dilthey to the theological principle which represents a very partial and implicit parallel, there are clearly also lessons to be learned for our understanding of God himself. Through the incarnation God has met with us through one who 'sympathizes with our weakness and was in every respect tempted as we are yet without sin' (v 16). (Heb. 4:15) This is why we may with confidence 'draw near' (v 16). But the intimacy of the *experience* of 'Abba', Father, is not the exhaustive measure of the reality of God; to measure God by *our* own experience takes us very near to a kind of idolatry. In the end Dilthey's hermeneutics failed because having acknowledged theoretically the otherness of the thou, in actual practice he over-stressed the extent to which 'I' and 'you' can actually share the very same experience. The Bishop Ridding Litany focuses this principle of vocational training in a prayer. 'Give us true knowledge ("understanding" would have been better) of our people, in their differences from us and in their likenesses to us, that we may deal with their real selves, measuring their feelings by our own, but patiently considering their lives and thoughts and circumstances.'

One final comment may be offered on the contribution of the Romanticist model. Emilio Betti, the major representative of the school of interpretation today, argues that this approach has much to offer our society in the fact of competing ideologies, labels, and party slogans. There is nothing more important, he urges, than *patience* in the long process of arriving at *mutual understanding between persons*.<sup>1</sup> Too often we attack or

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1 *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methode der Geisteswissenschaften*, Mohr, Tübingen 1962.

defend before we have genuinely understood. We can live out of the convictions of our own understandings and traditions without dismissively failing to respect judgments which may in turn cause us to modify, develop, correct, or deepen our own. Yet once again Bishop Ridding's litany articulates the principles as a prayer: 'Give us the faithfulness of learners with the courage of believers in Thee. Give us boldness to examine, and faith to trust, all truth, patience and insight to master difficulties . . . Alike from stubborn rejection of new revelations and from hasty assurance that we are wiser than our fathers, save us . . . we humbly beseech Thee, O Lord.'

#### 4. Persons and Perceptions: Models from Reception Theory

The fourth model returns to literary theory, and once again focuses on persons. But in this case the focus is less on the human or divine author: it is more on the person or persons to whom language is addressed. It is a hermeneutic of the addressee, known in biblical studies as audience criticism, in literary studies as reception theory, or more generally as an aspect of reader-response hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> The greatest actual practitioner of this hermeneutic was Jesus of Nazareth, who always began where his hearers already were. The teaching and preaching of Jesus rests on three principles of action. First, Jesus shaped his teaching and his preaching in accordance with his hearers' capacity to understand and respond. The importance of audience-orientation and audience identification received partial recognition from K. L. Schmidt and T. W. Manson, but it was J. A. Baird<sup>2</sup> who argued this point most conclusively in 1969 in a book which has been curiously neglected entitled *Audience Criticism and the Historical Jesus*. Jesus told narratives which projected *their* world, the world of the rural Galilean community: of weeds sown among wheat, of sheep wandering from the flock, of fishing nets, of signs of changing weather, of children playing in the street, of traders doing business deals. It is a cardinal error to imagine that these were merely decorative wrappings for independent truths. Jesus was not simply illustrating: he was meeting people where they were. As in the event of the incarnation itself, Jesus came to live and speak within our world, our horizons. As Ernest Fuchs observes, this is the way of love: for love prepares the place of meeting.<sup>3</sup>

We have not finished, however. For Jesus did not enter the world we know simply to leave everything as it is. Into that familiar world enters a profoundly disturbing, puzzling, challenging, transcendent dimension. A dishonest manager is somehow commended; those who work for one hour are paid the same full day's wage as those who worked a full day; the person who helped a traveller who had been mugged was not a religious Jew but a despised Samaritan. These are not cosy trivializing illustrations, in which

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- 1 Cf. R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton and C. Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, Paternoster, Exeter 1985, pp 90-113.
  - 2 Westminster, Philadelphia 1969.
  - 3 *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, ET, SCM, London 1964, p 129.

the Gospel is toned down to the lowest level of memorable harmlessness; they bring a disturbingly transcendent and holy gospel into the midst of the shared flow of everyday life. Indeed recent research in the parables in such writers as Madeleine Boucher rightly stresses that the parables conceal as much as they reveal.<sup>1</sup>

Why should this be? Partly it is so because, in C. H. Dodd's famous phrase, they leave the mind in sufficient doubt about the parable's precise application to trace it into active thought.<sup>1</sup> The hearer is drawn, almost seduced, into a narrative world, and finds himself or herself almost against his or her will led to react and respond. Sometimes the effect is a self-critical revaluation of the hearer's values, as when he or she discovers in the story of those received a day's wage for an hour's work that God's grace eclipsed and subverted traditional human concepts of natural justice and even social rights. Sometimes people were left baffled and indignant. But how much better that was for them than that they should mistakenly believe that they had understood and rejected some easily-packaged message, and that they could now go on their way having dealt with it. Jesus the shepherd, the evangelist, the loving pastor, wanted to prevent a premature understanding which was unaccompanied by inner change. Eventful communication took place when there was a transforming and a creative engagement between the world or the horizon of the hearer and the world on the horizon of the message.

Increasingly in gospel studies, all four evangelists are seen as those who very carefully shaped this material in relation to the horizons and pastoral needs of the communities for which they wrote. This is yet another principle for which I am ambitious that men and women of St. John's will be prepared and trained. The first step in ministry and preaching is to reflect on the needs of people or the congregation and to seek to stand within their horizons. What we actually *communicate* as teachers, preachers, or speakers is not what we say, but what we are *heard* to say. The pages of the New Testament reflect a grasp of this principle again and again. The writer of Acts, for example, points to the distinctive shaping of the gospel message in relation to at least four kinds of audience: Jews of Jerusalem, Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora, educated Gentile intellectual, and simple village folk in Gentile Asia Minor. He does not have Peter telling a Gentile village community that the last days of Jewish prophecy have dawned; that is the message for a Jerusalem audience. The message for the village community was to turn to the living God. This is the hermeneutical model of the second horizon: that understanding takes place when a message is addressed to hearers in terms which will actively engage with these existing horizons of experience and understanding.

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1 *The Mysterious Parable*, Catholic Biblical Association, Washington DC 1977.  
 2 *The Parables of The Kingdom*, Nisbet, London 1936, p 16.

## 5. Power and Suspicion: Lessons from Socio-Critical Models

We turn now to one last group of hermeneutical models. We have looked at those which focus on proclamation as living *presence*, and those which focus on understanding between *persons*. Our last models for consideration direct our attention to the question of *power*.

Any person who appeals to Scripture as the source of an authoritative directive for others bears an awesome responsibility. For on the basis of Scripture declarations, exhortations, and recommendations are put forward which actually shape and control people's lives. We may put the matter in sociological terms, quite bluntly: the use of the Bible frequently amounts to an exercise of power and social control. Many ordinary devout church people see it as an act of obedience to the lordship of God in Christ to submit their otherwise free decision to the judgment of Scripture. But very often, in practice, this understanding of Scripture is heavily, even decisively, influenced and conditioned by the interpretation of Scripture mediated by their local church, their ecclesiastical tradition and their parish clergy.

To see the issue clearly we have to acknowledge that the history of the Christian Church contains some tragic cases of misplaced pronouncements in the name of the Bible. Willard Swartley has collected some remarkable examples.<sup>1</sup> His first is that of Bishop John Henry Hopkins who saw the Bible as a divinely ordained conservative bulwark against the 'modernist' trend of seeking to abolish slavery. He wrote 'The Bible's defence of slavery is very plain. St. Paul was inspired . . . Who are we that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the word of God?' There is one sin which is even worse than that of failing to preach the gospel when we have been commissioned to do so. The Deuteronomist speaks of the sin of 'the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have *not* commanded' (18:20).

Alongside the Romanticist, existentialist, and reader-response models of hermeneutics, there is an approach which is generally known as socio-critical model. Where Schleiermacher and Gadamer speak of existing horizons of understanding, or more technically of pre-understanding, Jürgen Habermas and others speak of *interest* or even of vested interest. Interest is the practical stake which the interpreter has in enquiring for, or even noticing, the meaning and significance of a particular piece of writing or speech. Habermas<sup>2</sup> takes up the concept of power and domination which was developed by Nietzsche and more especially by Max Weber. Power is perceived as legitimate when it is interpreted as authority. Language, in the shape of laws, traditions, sacred writings or constitutions, may their legitimate relations of organized power. Habermas, in other words,

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1 *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*, Herald Press, Scottsdale 1983, pp 31-7.

2 *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Heinemann, London 3rd ed., 1978.

explores the extent to which desire and will influence and condition our interpretation of language. Indeed there is now a vast literature on this subject ranging from Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx to Paul Ricoeur.

The principle, however, is clearly expounded in the Johannine Gospel. Christ says 'How can you believe who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?' (5:44). 'Everyone who does evil hates the light . . . lest his deeds should be exposed' (3:20). 'If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God' (7:17). John consciously portrays some of the Jewish leaders as those who could not be honest and open to the truth about Jesus because vested interests caused them to look in the wrong direction and at the wrong thing.

The socio-critical model of hermeneutics develops this principle. How much of my understanding, how much even of what I take to be a word of address to me, is really what I wanted to hear and hope to hear? The principle of socio-critical hermeneutics is that we must learn to be suspicious about what lies behind our own interpretative judgments. At one level this simply reflects the insight of the Reformers that the Bible must never be allowed to become a mere tool for the perpetuation of some particular religious tradition, which some have a vested interest to preserve. For interpretative judgments can be influenced not only by individual desires on my own part, but by the corporate sin of seeking to preserve a particular tradition or way of life at all costs. Thus at the Reformation the concern with hermeneutics focused on the need for the Bible to make its address to the Church; in Luther's words, sometimes the word of God comes as our adversary, not merely as that which confirms what we most hope for.

Among contemporary theists of interpretation, Paul Ricoeur gives expression to this principle most strikingly. In the course of his study entitled *Freud and Philosophy*, which examines relationships between symbols and language and human will and self-deception, he observes: 'Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen: vow of rigour, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to *listen to symbols*.'<sup>1</sup> Idolatry is that which elevates the human to the status of the divine: it takes *our* thoughts and wishes, *our* assumptions about God as perceived to be addressing us, and it claims these fallible and sometimes self-deceivingly mistaken interpretations and passes them off as if they were the same unmediated word of God.

I have several tentative reservations about *some* of the ways in which socio-critical hermeneutics has entered theology. For example, in Latin American Liberation theologies the term *praxis* has a special hermeneutical context, but it is often popularized in such a way as to threaten the balance

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1 Yale, UP, New Haven 1980, p27. Cf. also *Interpretation Theory*, Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth 1976.



between action and reflection. Sometimes also the impression is given that vested interests operate only when an institution or an individual has vested interests in preserving the *status quo*. That this often occurs is true. It is equally true, however, that sin may take the form of vested interests in the destruction of an order which itself may reflect the will of God. Vested interests can blind us to the need to change; vested interests may also make obsessional advocates any kind of change simply because we *enjoy* killing what *we* see as other people's sacred cows. In *both* instances we need to be suspicious about attitudes of will that lie behind our processes of perception and understanding.

The gospel message is indeed a power. But it is not a power to be interpreted and used as a means to impose on others our own personal vision for the world, or even that of our own particular tradition. It is the gospel of Christ, which is a power to salvation. As the Deuteronomist reminds us, the false prophet is one who 'presumes to speak a word in my name which I have *not* commanded' (18:20). Here, then, is yet another principle of vocational training. It means that prayer and purity of heart need to accompany diligent self-questioning and rigorous study of the words of text whose authority we invoke. At the risk of exhausting your patience with Bishop Ridding's litany: 'Give us knowledge of ourselves, our powers and weaknesses; teach us by the standard of Thy word . . . that from all fancies, delusions, and prejudices of habit of . . . society, save us . . . Give us chiefly, O Lord, . . . knowledge of Thee . . . to hear and know thy Call. May thy Spirit be our spirit, our words, Thy words . . .'

## **6. Power in Language and in Action: Models in Semiotics and in Speech-Act Theory**

I should like to end on an entirely positive note. Various hermeneutical models explore the operative nature of language as power. Most may be broadly classified as belonging to the branch of interpretation theory known as the theory of signs, or as semiotics. Where Romanticist models look *behind* the text to the author, and where socio-critical theories place us *under* the text as listeners, semiotic models place us, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase, *in front of* the text, where the action is. I select deliberately the two most different and contrasting examples which I can think of which illustrate language as operative power. First, there is the discussion of narrative, metaphors, symbol, and paradigm. Symbols and metaphors, in contrast to more abstract thought, invite to participate in their reality and movement. Some may grasp our imagination in such a way as to become controlling models for major orientations of life. To see God as a father, or oneself as a pilgrim, or Christ as the expiatory sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, is to invoke powerful models which generate appropriate attitudes and acts. If God is my father, I may trust; if I am a pilgrim, I am prepared to make sacrifices; if Christ is expiatory sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, I may draw him in the confidence that God has dealt with everything that might intervene.

Vocational training entails among many other things the crystallization of thought and experience in appropriate models that generate vision. But

care must be exercised about two or three matters. One is that the models, metaphors, stories, or symbols should be authentic. Another is that they should be held together in sufficient variety to allow balanced judgment and a critical check against obsession with a single symbol. For example, if someone who has had a difficult or negative relationship with his or her father, to place everything on the symbol of God as father might be pastorally disastrous, just as for someone who experienced an almost clinical obsessiveness about guilt would be in even greater anguish and difficulty if the paradigm or symbol of judge and judgment obscured that of God as Saviour, deliverer, and helper. But most of all, the enormous power of these symbols and paradigms to be operative at a pre-cognitive or more-than-intellectual level has to be understood and appreciated, and this understanding and appreciation represents a principle of vocational training. As I said at the beginning of this lecture, even if hermeneutics is an intellectual discipline, it may nevertheless help us to appreciate some of the important non-intellectual functions of language.

By way of example, simply recall the symbols evoked by Revelation 21:

The city had no need of the sun or the moon to shine upon it for the glory of God gave it light . . . There will be no night . . . The angel showed me the river of the water of life sparkling like crystal. On either side of the river stood a tree of life . . . the leaves of the trees serve for the healing of the nations. Every accursed thing shall disappear . . . They shall see God face to face and bear his name on their foreheads. There shall be no more night. (21:22-22:5).

It may be that we need historical research to tell us that such things as water of life means running, flowing, water; but we want no crass wooden literalism which seeks to unweave the rainbow by inappropriate intellectualizing here. To be open to the power of such symbols is to be inwardly nourished, and, in truth, to be envisioned and empowered.

There is one final model, however, with which I should like to end. This is the speech-act or performative model which focuses the use of language actually to effect change. The standard examples include that of saying 'I hereby give and bequeath . . .' in a will, or 'I take thee . . . to be my wedded wife' in a marriage service. In neither case is the speaker giving information. He or she is performing an act. The ministry of Jesus was full of such speech-acts. He did not simply utter 'truths about' forgiveness; he said, 'Your sins *are* forgiven you'. He did not simply talk *about* mission; he said 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. Even so, the goal of *our* vocational training is not to talk *about* reconciliation but to *reconcile*; not to talk *about* freedom, but to *liberate*; not to talk *about* assurance and joy, but to *assure* and to *give* joy.

To be sure, it means that the currency of our words must always be backed by our lives. Jesus' words *about* God's grace became effective performative *invitations* of grace, because he ate with tax collectors and sinners. He did not simply talk about God's attitude to children, he took

them in his arms and blessed them. He did not simply give a sermon or service, he washed his disciples' feet. Hermeneutical reflection helps us to notice what is going on, and to grasp the difference between operative and inoperative language. When he warned against idle words, Jesus did not condemn small-talk or verbal trivia. We often need to use trivial language simply as a way of getting alongside someone. At least we are likely to agree on the weather, if nothing else. Jesus condemned ineffective speaking; that which offered hopes it could not substantiate, promises it could not fulfil. But we are privileged to speak a gospel which is not ineffective, if it is articulated in Scripture, quickened by the Spirit and backed by a corporate and individual witness that makes it credible. It is a message of transforming power, in as far as it speaks as promise, as pledge, as encouragement, as warning, as assurance, as judgment, as liberation and as reconciliation.

It has been my task to argue that the use of such language involves two inseparable dimensions, namely that of address and that of understanding. It is the convention in an Inaugural lecture to speak on the subject of one's academic specialism. But my distinguished predecessor also set the precedent of an expectation that the Principal of St. John's College will also offer programmatic comment on the goals and priorities of vocational training today.<sup>1</sup> I hope that I have shown that it is possible to go at least a little part of the way towards meeting both expectations simultaneously without undue artificiality or contrivance.

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1 Colin Buchanan, 'The Role and Calling of an Evangelical Theological College in the 1980s', *Churchman* 94, 1980, pp 26-42.