
God's Lordship in Interpretation*

—
Vern Sheridan Poythress

Since philosophical and theological circles are increasingly dominated by concerns for hermeneutics, it is important to work out explicitly the implications of God's Lordship for hermeneutics. Because of the vastness of the implications, I can only begin the task in this article.

1. The Enlightenment desire for religiously neutral exegesis

In our time, subtle pressures tempt us to say that God is irrelevant to exegesis. Biblical scholars are justifiably concerned to interpret the Bible with discipline and intellectual rigor. But in an academic atmosphere dominated by the Enlightenment idea of autonomous human reason, rigor gets confused with scientific "neutrality." To be neutral supposedly implies that religious viewpoints are set aside. Scholars therefore aspire to conduct the central steps of biblical exegesis in a manner independent of their relationship to God. For example, early proponents of the historical-critical method wanted to free biblical interpretation from "dogmatic prejudice" by providing an objective method of investigation that was in principle open to historians belonging to any

* An expanded form of an address delivered by the author on the occasion of his inauguration as Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary on October 15, 1987.

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 28

religion, just as the results of natural science were open to all.¹⁽¹⁾

In contrast with this idea of neutrality, Christian believers through the ages have always acknowledged the necessity of piety and spiritual discernment in appropriating the Bible's message (1 Cor 2:10-16).²⁽²⁾ Superficially it might appear that these contrary views can be reconciled by assigning them to distinct stages in the process of interpretation. The stage of exegesis itself becomes scientifically neutral, while the subsequent stage of application is conditioned by presuppositions.³⁽³⁾ For example, if we are evangelicals we acknowledge at the beginning that God is the origin of the biblical text. After the exegesis of a text is complete, we deduce from God's truthfulness that the assertions of the text are to be believed. We also acknowledge that God may help us to accept the implications of the text for our lives. But what happens in between these endpoints? The basic issues of interpretive objects, methods, goals,

validity, and evaluation we seem to explain without reference to God. Such explanation can be misleading. For one thing, a perfect chronological separation of exegesis and application into distinct stages is an ideali-

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 29

zation that oversimplifies the actual practice of interpretation. But more important, exegesis even in the narrowest sense can never be self-sufficient; it has its basis in God.

2. God's Lordship

The Bible's teaching about God's Lordship clearly overthrows self-sufficiency. Acts 17:28 proclaims, "In him we live and move and have our being." God is inescapably present in all our living, including our acts of interpretation. If we do not recognize his presence, it is because our eyes have been blinded and our hearts hardened by our own sin and the sinful influences of the culture around us. Explicit reflection on God's Lordship can help to overcome our sinful blindness.

John Frame has usefully summarized biblical teaching on the Lordship of God in terms of three categories or attributes: authority, control, and presence.⁴⁽⁴⁾ The attribute of presence we have already seen in Acts 17:28. God is inescapably present in all human interpretation. As people engage in interpretation, whether interpretation of the Bible or interpretation of secular literature, they continually stand before the face of God, they are sustained by God, and their thoughts are reflections of God's thoughts either obediently or disobediently. The structure of human thought, the structure of the world, the structure of human language, the structure of the text, and the structure of meaning and communication are all ordained by God. In all these facts God exposes us to his gaze

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 30

(Heb 4:13), he confronts us (Psalm 139), he exhibits his eternal power and deity (Rom 1:20), he displays his goodness, and he manifests his anger at sin (Jas 1:17; Rom 1:18).

The attribute of authority describes God's claim to our allegiance and obedience. All of our lives are to be devoted to his service (Deut 6:5-9; Exod 20:3; Luke 16:13; 4:8; Matt 6:33). We ought to have God as the standard in judging all rules in interpretation, all right and wrong in interpretation, all claims to truth or falsehood, all use of language to change other people, and all claims about the meaning of words. In fact, there is no valid claim to obedience or to obligation anywhere in the world, except those claims that rest on God's command.

Do God's standards really have this pervasiveness? Often our culture sees ethics quite narrowly, as pertaining only to certain traditionally debated areas of economic, familial, and

personal life. But all of life is thoroughly saturated with implicit “oughts.” All judgments about truth and falsehood are simultaneously judgments about what *ought* to be believed. They involve decisions about what standards *ought*, to be followed in weighing claims to truth. All human choices about action involve judgments about what *ought* to be done. Though secularists wish to deny it, all such “oughts” derive from God. Of course we have responsibilities to other human beings as well as directly to God. But our responsibilities to human beings derive ultimately from God’s plans for creation, from God’s commandment to love our neighbor, and from more particular commands requiring us to care for the weak, to honor parents, spouses, and those in authority, and so on. These standards seem to be our own, and not merely God’s standards, because God impresses the standards on our minds. As image bearers of God we inescapably know something about what is right (Rom 1:32).

The same things that can be said concerning human action in general can be said concerning human interpretation in particular. Without reference to God, interpretation is unintelligible from beginning to end, because intelligibility presupposes criteria—it presupposes a standard. We cannot make one move except by reference to “oughts” that reflect standards ordained by God.

GOD’S LORDSHIP IN INTERPRETATION 31

Next, the attribute of control describes the fact that God rules all things (e.g., Ps 103:19; Dan 4:34-35; Eph 1:11; Lam 3:37-38). All facts are facts ordained by God. Each text exists because God, using created means, has brought the text into existence. Moreover, God controls the actions and thoughts of each human being who engages in interpretation, whether the interpretation is good or bad when measured by God’s standards.⁵⁽⁵⁾ Interpretation is intelligible only because we exist, texts exist, languages exist, words exist, things to talk about exist, activities of interpretation exist. All these exist only by virtue of the sustaining activity of God (Heb 1:3).

As John Frame has shown, the three attributes of authority, control, and presence imply one another. Each can be used as a perspective on the others and on the whole world.⁶⁽⁶⁾ Authority implies presence, because God’s authority is universal. His standards of truth are present to us in every fact. Authority implies control, because God is the standard even for what happens, and thereby controls it. God must, moreover, be able to enforce standards if the standards are to be truly absolute. Control implies authority, because God controls even the standards for all our evaluation. Control implies presence, because God manifests himself and his attributes in every event precisely in controlling it. Presence implies authority, because God’s demands cannot be escaped. Presence implies control, because God must be able to prevent anything from separating him from us.

3. The purpose of interpretation

Within this framework, what do we say about how we properly engage in interpretation? Hermeneutical theorists have vigorously debated the purpose of interpretation. Is our purpose to understand the intention of the author, to experience an existential self-transformation, to become open to other people's ideas and worldviews, to increase our skills in living,

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 32

to master the world, to use communicative opportunities to advance critically toward an ideal social order, to destroy the author's pretensions to set forth a univocal thesis, or to engage in free play?⁷⁽⁷⁾ Obviously it is possible to create quite a variety of modes of interpretation, each with its own purpose. But in each case the proposed purpose implies "oughts" and value judgments. All interpreters implicitly believe that their goal is worthwhile and that it ought to be followed. There is no motive for any human action except by reference to standards. What could those standards be, except divine standards? Of course, the standards could be autonomously chosen human ideas. But even then, to present something as a standard is to present it as possessing virtual divine authority. The alternative to God is an idol. Hence, to the degree that one deviates from God's purpose, one tacitly sets up an idol. This idol may take the form of scientific rationality, self-realization, communion with the best minds of the ages, an ideal society, technical domination of the world, or destruction of meaning.

From a biblical point of view, the purpose of interpretation must be to receive and respond properly to the word of God. Let us first of all consider our interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is the written word of God. God intends for it to play a unique role in remedying our sin, in giving us true knowledge of God, in giving us knowledge of ourselves, and remedying the corruptions in our understanding of the world (Ps 119:105). But in addition to speaking in the Bible, God speaks in all created things (Psalm 19) and through our own human constitution (e.g., Rom 1:32). His word is truly inescapable.⁸⁽⁸⁾ God's communication to us always displays his Lordship. That is, it displays his authority, his control, and his presence.

First, God expresses his authority by putting us under obligation. His commands are to be obeyed, his assertions to be believed, his questions to be answered, his exhortations to be digested. God confronts us with his meanings in the form of specifications of God's will for us. In the covenants

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 33

that God makes with human beings, his authority expresses itself most obviously in the stipulations of the covenant, that is, the specifications of the commandments and obligations

binding human beings (for example, the Ten Commandments of Exod 20:3-17).⁹⁽⁹⁾

Second, God expresses his control by changing us. God never leaves us the same. Even if we decide to ignore what he says, we are judged and cursed for it. When we receive what he says in faith, we are transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). When we respond in ignorance or unbelief, we suffer for it (Rom 1:24; 2 Thess 2:11-12). In the covenants in the Bible, the blessings and cursings are the most obvious form of assertion of control (e.g., Exod 20:5; 21:12; Deuteronomy 27-28).

Third, God expresses his presence by meeting us and fellowshiping with us. He makes us his friends (John 15:15). In the covenants of the Bible, God's self-identification (Exod 20:2a), the historical prologue (Exod 20:2b; Deuteronomy 13), and the promise of God to be God to his people express this emphasis (Exod 20:2; 29:45; etc.).

Hence we might speak of a triad of purposes here, namely expressing meaning, exerting control, and approaching in friendship.¹⁰⁽¹⁰⁾ But these three are perspectives on one another. Each can be seen as encompassing the other two.

Let us begin by using meaning as a perspective on everything else. All control changes us into something or other: a way of life, perhaps, that itself has meaning. God's control is not brute power, but power expressing the meaning of his righteousness, truth, and love. It is power with the purpose of meaningfully expressing God's glory and beauty. Thus, exerting control is an action that has meaning arising from God's purposes and standards. It is a form of God's expressing

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 34

his meaningful purpose. Moreover, when God approaches, we confront God, and therefore all the meaningfulness of his will and purpose. God's presence is thus a form of meaning.

Next, let us use control as a perspective. All God's exposure of meaning confronts us with God's will, and this confrontation changes us noetically: it is simultaneously an exertion of control. Moreover, God's fellowship with us transforms us: we cannot remain the same when we stand in the presence of the Holy One. We are either destroyed or made holy. Thus God's presence is always a form of control.

Finally, consider God's presence and fellowship as a perspective. In revealing his will, God reveals himself. In knowing the content of the Bible, we know what God thinks on many subjects. He reveals his mind to us. Friendship and fellowship occurs precisely as God shares his thoughts with us (John 15:15)—not, as in modern theology, by a bare “personal encounter” stripped of propositional content. All of God's articulate speech, all his meanings, are an exposure and

display of his character, and thus a mode of his presence. Moreover, God's exerting control is always a form of his coming near: even in condemning someone, God draws near in judgment. Thus, control involves personal approach.

4. The objects of interpretation

We may see further interdependence of various aspects of interpretation by asking about what we are interpreting. If we are thinking of biblical interpretation, we are interpreting a text that is the standard or law for our lives. But, as John Frame has shown in an analysis of the knowledge of God, knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of the law, knowledge of the world, and knowledge of oneself.¹¹⁽¹¹⁾ We may translate that same insight into the area of interpretation. Interpretation of the Bible is simultaneously interpretation of God's standard, interpretation of the world, and interpretation of ourselves.

First, the Bible speaks directly about God's demands, his standards for us. Those demands are always demands that

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 35

bear on us and on our conduct in the world. They make sense only as we are able to relate them to ourselves and the world. In the second place, the Bible speaks directly about facts in the world, both events that take place and constant states of affairs. Each fact contains implicitly a demand that we acknowledge it, take it into account, believe that it is so, live by it, and see it as exhibiting God's power and deity. Thus any particular fact implies law (standard) and is a fact-for-our consciousness, something that I must acknowledge.

Thirdly, the Bible speaks about people, including me. When it does, the people spoken of are themselves to be judged by the Bible's standards. They are to be imitated or seen as bad examples (sometimes, of course, a mixture). In short, people embody standards negatively or positively. Moreover, the actions and constitutions of people are, from one point of view, among the important facts about the world. Thus whether the Bible speaks focally about law, world, or self, we must interpret its teaching as simultaneously involving all three.

In fact, we must interpret law, world, and self at every stage of interaction with the Bible, not merely at the end when we are thinking about the implications of a finished analysis of its content.

First, we interpret the world. The message of the Bible comes to us through created media: through our eyes, light waves, and paper and ink. Interpreting the Bible is interpretation of a piece of the world, namely a particular book. We cannot begin interpretation without making use of many assumptions about the world and its stability. We must have a trust in our senses. We

must assume that we can obtain knowledge through a process that includes book-making and reproduction, manuscript copying, the learning of language, and so on. Moreover, understanding the Bible must involve thinking through what it is saying about the world.

Second, we interpret the self at every stage. At every stage, I must do the interpreting. I must weigh, remember, compare, and consult with other interpreters. No one else can do it for me. In a sense, I never get outside my own brain. Every stage of interpretation will be affected by the background of my skills, my assumptions, my limitations, my memory, and my religious predispositions or prejudices.

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 36

Third, we interpret the law at every stage. Every decision I make to do one thing rather than another in interpreting is a decision governed by standards (law). Every decision is a decision that this way, not that way, is a proper embodiment of standards of interpretation. At every step I make judgments about how the standards of interpretation apply to my case.

In sum, the law, the world, and the self are intimately involved at every point. Every word, every nuance, every stylistic variation is intelligible only as a fact of the world that impinges on me in a way that is regulated by law.

There is still another way of using this triple of perspectives. Discourses in human language are suitably designed to express the law, to be embedded in the world, and to address a person (a self). A particular utterance has a fixity that reflects the fixity of law. It says what it says and not other things that might be said. Second, it says what it says within a surrounding worldly context (speaker, addressee, subject-matter, context of situation) that colors its function. Third, it says what it says to someone, in a process of communication.¹²⁽¹²⁾

5. Interpreting human communication

So far we have focused only on communication from God. What happens when we are interpreting communication from other human beings? God speaks to us in every created thing, and especially in human beings who are made in God's image. So here also we must be engaged in interpreting God's word. But we are simultaneously interpreting human words. Since human beings are made in God's likeness, their communications display the marks of authority, control, and presence. But these attributes occur at the level of an image rather than the original. First, the meanings and intentions of human beings have a right to be attended to; but they are not the ultimate standard for truth. Second, through communication human beings command us, control us, influence us, persuade us, manipulate us; but their control is never absolute, and may sometimes have to be resisted in the name of loyalty to

God. Third, human beings draw near to us to establish friendship, to greet, to bless, or sometimes to blame and show hostility to us; but their intimacy never extends to every area of our lives.

6. Rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism

Within a Christian framework, the law, the world, and the self go together. God has authority over all, God controls all, God is present in all. But within non-Christian systems, there is no way to hold them together. The non-Christian, needing an ultimate source of law, fact, and self, must deify some aspect of the world. In the area of knowledge, the deification of law leads to rationalism, the deification of fact to empiricism, and the deification of self to subjectivism. But each must fail because none can exist without the others.¹³⁽¹³⁾

Similar tensions can arise also in the area of hermeneutics (which, of course, is closely related to knowledge). Thus, rationalism in hermeneutics takes the form of attempts to reduce interpretation to rules. But (1) an interpreter must still interpret the rules themselves, resulting in a potentially endless regress. (2) Interpreters must be able to assess whether they are following the rules; they must be capable of self-assessment, we might say self-interpretation. (3) Pure objective rationality appears to be possible only if interpreters are not influenced by the unique texture of their past experiences. But rules isolated from the texture of individual experiences are empty. Precisely these experiences of the world are necessary in order for interpreters to make sense of what a text says about the world. We understand another person talking about a chair partly because we are familiar with chairs. We understand another person's anger partly by relating it to experiences when we have been angry. We understand another person's marriage partly through experiences of our own marriage and—particularly for those who have not been married—through observations of other married people that we know personally, as we attempt to synthesize an under-

standing of an unknown experience by piecing together parts that we already understand.

Next, empiricism in hermeneutics takes the form of reducing interpretation to understanding the effects of language on the world. In different ways, behaviorist, Wittgensteinian, and Marxist theories of interpretation move in this direction. But (1) much of our interpretation of the world takes place by means of language; hence we seem again to be in an endless regress. (2) We as interpreters must still choose what we are going to pay attention to, among the effects in the world. Do we pay attention to the socioeconomic effects like the Marxist? To the immediate animal-like correlations of stimulus-response patterns like a behaviorist? To dream-like symbolism and sexual overtones like a Freudian? The interpreters and

their personal presuppositions are indispensable. (3) We need standards to assess what the effects are, and which effects are correlated with which aspects of a communication. Whose standards will these be?

Finally, subjectivist approaches to interpretation attempt to reduce interpretation to the experiences of the interpreter. But (1) relativistic subjectivism cannot explain the measure of agreement that exists between different interpreters of the same text, and the intuitions that interpreters have that they have come to a “better” interpretation after rejecting an initial impression that seemed to them to be right at the time. Standards concerning good and bad interpretations crop up not only when two people argue concerning a correct interpretation, but when a single individual struggles between competing interpretations. The absence of standards means not freedom for interpretation but madness, the absence of anything resembling interpretation. (2) If interpreters grant that someone else, another subject, is communicating with them, they cannot plausibly maintain that they are sovereign in relation to the other subject. On the other hand, if they do not grant that there is another subject, then the marks on the page or the sounds in their ears are no better than random hen scratches or a cloud that happens to have the shape of the letter *A*. One cannot interpret pure accident, pure chance.

Thus rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism can sustain themselves only by borrowing from one another. The text

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 39

and the subject need standards to guide judgment, while the standards need text, subject, and world to have anything to operate on. But how do we get standards, text, world, and subject together? Making one the source of the others exalts the source into an idol and leads to a collapse. All of them stand in harmony only if we acknowledge God as simultaneously source of standards, controller of the world and of texts, and personal subject who is present to us, in whose image we are made.

7. Debating the primacy of intention, use, and personal transformation

The major approaches to hermeneutics in the secular world can be categorized by whether they see the primary goal of interpretation in (1) unlocking the expressed meaning of the text, (2) setting in motion the personal transformation of the interpreter, or (3) weighing the impact of language on the world. There is some borrowing and overlap among these categories. But roughly speaking we find in the first category E. D. Hirsch and Emilio Betti, as well as those who focus more on the text than on the author (e.g., William K. Wimsatt and John Ellis).¹⁴⁽¹⁴⁾ In the second category, emphasizing personal transformation, are Hans-Georg Gadamer, Stanley Fish,

and reader-response critics.¹⁵⁽¹⁵⁾ In the third category, emphasizing

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 40

use in the world, are Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Marxists such as Jürgen Habermas.¹⁶⁽¹⁶⁾

These three categories are simply a reflection within hermeneutical theory of the themes of law, world, and self. Rationalism, in giving priority to the law, results in hermeneutics with a rule-based explication of fixed meaning. Subjectivism, giving priority to the self, results in hermeneutics of self-transformation. Empiricism, giving priority to the world, results in hermeneutics that analyzes effects of language on the world. In a biblical worldview, these are perspectives on one another; there is no innate priority, hence no need to champion one over against the other. God's authority, expressed in exhaustive knowledge and unchangeable law, guarantees the fixed and definite character of meaning; God's presence guarantees that communication meets us as persons and changes us; and God's control over the world guarantees indefinite insights obtainable as we think through applications in the world. At the very heart of any one of these approaches we necessarily find the others. For example, at the heart of our affirmation of a fixed meaning and a fixed text we affirm God's inexhaustible knowledge of truth. Precisely because of the nature of God, our finite interpretation remains partial. We necessarily grasp truth by way of historical growth, as we experience personal communion with God and apply his law to the world.

Evangelicals desiring to protect the objectivity of propositional, revelation in Scripture have usually gravitated toward, E. D. Hirsch's view, since it promises an objectively fixed, textually expressed authorial intention. But in a biblical worldview we need not choose between Hirsch and his competitors. In one sense, cleansed of their non-Christian presuppositions, all three approaches provide a useful perspective on the whole of interpretation. In another sense each falls into an idolatrous absolutism by granting epistemological ultimacy to something in the world instead of God.

For Hirsch, that absolute seems to be the human author. Hirsch needs an author whose human nature is perfectly

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 41

clearly defined, whose language is perfectly defined, who somehow knows perfectly what he means, who expresses it perfectly without manipulation or conniving, and whose intentions can therefore be read off from the text more or less unproblematically. To be sure, Hirsch knows that he must adjust away from the ideal in actual cases. But the ideal must nevertheless be invoked. For example, with the category of unconscious intention" Hirsch acknowledges that in fact authors are not perfectly self-conscious. But within his interpretive framework the authorial

intention is a “type,” still perfectly fixed in principle. Thus even though authors are not conscious of it, they apparently achieve perfection of intention on an unconscious level. By postulating such fixity Hirsch appears also to assume that a discourse is a seamless whole and that authors do not grow or change in intention through the course of composing a work. Moreover, Hirsch assumes that the author’s intention can be learned by questioning the author. Hirsch thus still presupposes that authors *potentially* achieve perfect self-consciousness when questioned. And he supposes that under questioning they *potentially* express themselves perfectly.¹⁷⁽¹⁷⁾

If one substitutes God for the human author in Hirsch’s model, or even if one has God as the all-knowing interpreter above, behind, and through all human communication, many of Hirsch’s claims do become true. When evangelicals come to Hirsch, they read him in terms of their own concerns. In particular, they presuppose that God is the primary author of Scripture. So they may perhaps be forgiven for not noticing that Hirsch’s general theory of human meaning virtually requires a divine author, not merely a human one.

But evangelicals have often failed to notice that Hirsch’s competitors are neither better nor worse off than he is. For example, consider first the approach of new criticism, which focuses on the supposed autonomous text. Such a focus may or may not include study of the environment in which the

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 42

text and its linguistic forms were originally produced. This approach will work if the text to be interpreted is the entire word of God, the canon of Scripture against the background of the speech of God in general revelation. General revelation always completely fills in the historical and grammatical context of the verbal texts of Scripture. Hence, contrary to some of the exaggerations spawned from new criticism, the text does not hang in air without a context.

Next, consider Gadamer’s approach to interpretation, in which self-transformation is highlighted. Personal transformation arises from a “fusion of horizons” between the author and the interpreter. The interpreter’s own precommitments and worldview are transformed in interaction with increasing understanding of the views of the author. If the author is God himself, “fusion of horizons” becomes equivalent to a transformation to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), to know “the truth that is in Jesus” (Eph 4:21), “to be made new in the attitude of your minds” (Eph 4:23), to be “transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18), to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). Evangelicals fear that such a “fusion” would imply picking and choosing among the ideas that we find, and never abandoning but merely enriching the presuppositions that we already have. This result is not what Gadamer has in mind even, in the case of our interpretation of human writings.

But when we interpret divine writings, the authoritative claim of those writings is part of the authorial horizon. We do not “fuse” with that horizon at all unless we acknowledge its authority, and therefore submit all our ideas and precommitments to the judgment of Scripture.¹⁸⁽¹⁸⁾

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 43

Finally, in Habermas’s approach to interpretation, a decisive role is given to an ideal interpretive community, an ideal situation of dialog in an ideal society. In our own acts of interpretation, we should critically evaluate communication in terms of its relation to society, to economics, to production, and to human desires for personal and social emancipation—always with the goal of the ideal society in view. If such a procedure is not to be an idolization of human society and human freedom, it must confront the emancipatory communication of Scripture, whose author is the ideal trinitarian communicative Society. Hence Scripture, as simultaneously emancipatory power and communication from the ideal divine society, takes precedence over all human thoughts, which must be freed from bondage to sin (see 2 Cor 10:4-5).

8. Author, discourse, and audience

Consciousness of the Lordship of God also helps us to defuse a controversy over the priority in interpretation of author, discourse, or audience. Is interpretation interested primarily in what the author intends, in what the discourse discloses, or in what the listener/reader makes of it all? As I have argued elsewhere, these three interpretive interests may differ from one another.¹⁹⁽¹⁹⁾ A human author may not always succeed in expressing what he intends; or he may express it partially but not fully. In such cases, authorial intention and discourse expression are distinguishable. Likewise, listeners may misunderstand a discourse which is not in itself ambiguous. In such a case, discourse expression and listener interpretation are distinguishable.

To resolve this problem, let us ask ourselves first what happens in God’s communication to us. God is a master communicator, fully in control of the media that he uses. Hence he brings to expression in the text exactly what he intends to express (Isa 46:10). Authorial intention and discourse expression agree. We as human beings may sometimes misinterpret the Bible. But the Holy Spirit is the true interpreter who

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 44

guides us into all truth. “He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears” (John 16:13). We are accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture, and that view is correct (e.g., Acts 1:16). But John 16:13 presents the Spirit as the divine “hearer” of God’s word. Paul points out that the Spirit “searches all things, even the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10). Here the Spirit is presented as a recipient. As one who indwells us, he stands with us in

interpreting what God says. And of course because he is able to search the things of God even to the depths, his interpretation is always correct.

By using this insight and by piecing together a number of other texts of Scripture, we can arrive at a trinitarian picture of God's communication. God the Father is the author and source of his wise speech; God the Son is the content of divine wisdom (Col 2:3); and God the Holy Spirit is the hearer or searcher of God's wisdom. Here we have an author (the Father), a discourse (the Son), and a listener (the Holy Spirit). All three agree in wisdom, but none is simply reducible to the others.

When now we deal with God's communication to finite human beings, we must assert that we are fallible, sinful listeners and interpreters as well as sinful in our speech to God. But the Holy Spirit indwelling us is an infallible listener and an infallible speaker of our prayers (Rom 8:27). We are not left alone in either our listening or our speaking.

When we come to communication from one human being to another, we know that human beings created in the image of God cannot but reflect God's speech. Human beings do express what they intend, and those intentions are understood by listeners. But communication is still finite, and since the Fall it is marred by sin. Authors bungle, they lie, they misperceive the implications of what they say, they deny the knowledge of God that they simultaneously presuppose, they suppress the knowledge of their evil intentions, they violate the standards of God for truthfulness, sincerity, respect, and love at the same time that they simultaneously endorse them (Rom 1:32). Readers are sinners as well. They bungle, they twist, they pervert, they slander, they distort what is plain, they too disobey God's standards. Language and discourse

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 45

become instruments of sin. We cannot find perfect purity here. Respect for the humanity of authors and readers must be combined with criticism of sin and its effects.

As human beings we are authorized by God to take an interest in all that goes on under the sun. All of God's works display his glory—even what is perverse reminds us by its perversion of what is straight and right. But we must also exercise the caution enjoined in Phil 4:8 to fill our thoughts with what is good. In principle we may attend to the entire process of communication. We probe the author's intentions, the structure of the discourse itself, the readers' interpretations and reactions. Out of respect to and love for other human beings—whether authors or readers—we are to pay careful attention to what they say, and not merely to impose our own ideas. Such is an important emphasis of the approaches focusing on authorial intention and on textual expression. We may also analyze our own reactions, querying whether our own sins or presuppositions have kept us from understanding. But we must not suppose that author or reader always understand their motives, any more than we ourselves do. Nor do we ignore the fact that

human speech can manipulate, enslave, deceive, and blaspheme. We will sometimes stop trying to understand because it is not profitable. In any case, we live as servants of God in a world that is God's, in dialog with human beings who owe him allegiance. Our responsibilities and opportunities are rich. Understanding the author, understanding the discourse, understanding ourselves and other readers are all worthy tasks. Without confusing them, we can learn things from any one of the tasks in a way that throws light on the other tasks.

Yet we cannot agree with the goals and interests of any of the major schools of hermeneutics, unless those goals include a critique of authors, readers, and texts alike on the basis of God's standards for sin. For example, we can never legitimate the goal of understanding in depth the devil's intentions in his deceitful speech (following a Hirschian program) or fusing with the horizons of a blasphemer (following a Gadamerian program) or incorporating the inhabitants of hell into an ideal dialog (following a Habermasian program). Sometimes God

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 46

calls us to stop trying to understand "from inside," and instead to condemn.

9. The dynamics of interpretation

Let us see how the framework developed above can explicate the process of interpretation in a particular case. Interpretation of the Bible has corporate, ecclesiastical, ideological, and even political dimensions. However, for the sake of simplicity we will concentrate on an individual interpreter, who is reading a passage of the Bible alone. Let us suppose that Sally (a Christian) is studying Ps 23:1a, "The LORD is My shepherd." For the purpose of our analysis, let us skip over the process of copying and translation that brings the message from its origin in the autograph all the way to Sally. Even when we start with Sally's immediate situation, there is complexity enough.

We may use God's Lordship attributes in analyzing the impact of the passage. In the English translation, the passage itself reminds Sally of the Lordship of God with the word "Lord." The underlying Hebrew word is the tetragrammaton YHWH, which is closer to a proper name than is the English word "Lord." But in view of the explanation in Exod 3:14, the proper name probably does have some of the connotations of Lordship. In any case, we are for the moment concerned with Sally's interaction with the English translation, so we shall ignore technical questions about the accuracy of the translation.

In addition to the word "Lord," the analogy with shepherding suggests control, authority, and presence. The shepherd guides the sheep (control). The shepherd has a right and a claim as the owner of the sheep, because he is a skilled person who understands their needs and a person who has their good in mind (authority). The shepherd is involved with his sheep (presence, cf. Ps

23:6). Even if Sally does not think self-consciously about these attributes of God, she will hear the thrust of the message holistically. All these implications are wrapped up together in the one assertion “The Lord is my shepherd.” The one assertion can suggest a multitude of

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 47

implications, which Sally absorbs without explicitly enumerating them.

We may also see how God expresses authority, control, and presence in the very act of speaking the passage to Sally. First, God expresses his authority. He makes a definite claim about a propositional truth. He demands that Sally hear what he is saying. Sally ought to pay serious attention even to another human being who speaks to her, because human beings are made in the image of God and she is commanded to love her neighbor. But when God speaks, Sally ought to give absolute submission. She *ought* to believe that the Lord is her shepherd, because he tells her so. And of course this “ought” is reinforced by the entire context, not only the message of other parts of the Bible, but the (general revelational) experience of her own life and of other Christians whom she knows.

Next, God manifests his presence by meeting Sally. She has communion with God as she reads this passage and God through his Holy Spirit comes to her. God in speaking to her shows his truthfulness, faithfulness, wisdom, and so on in everything that he says. He shows his wisdom in understanding that she needs to hear these comforting words, that she needs to be reminded, that she needs to have the truth driven home to her using a variety of comparisons (in this case, a comparison between God and human shepherds). Like a human lover, God says “I love you” not merely by using the sentence “I love you” but by many acts of thoughtfulness and understanding, of which this passage is one. Thus in reading this passage Sally experiences God coming to her and saying “I love you.”

Next, God controls Sally. God’s word is powerful to change her. By saying this word, God changes her inside. He creates and deepens faith in her, and he strengthens her character to stand firm in trials like those mentioned in later verses (23:4-5). He alters her mind by making firm in her memory the record of these words. He causes her to start thinking again about the relation of the truth of these words to the rest of Psalm 23, to other passages of the Bible, and to Christians’ experience today.

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 48

Any one of these three points could be expanded in depth. For the purpose of examining the dynamics of interpretation, let us concentrate on the third aspect, namely God’s control.

10. Understanding more content

God controls Sally in causing her to come to understand more about what he is saying. Perhaps up to the present she had romanticized ideas about shepherds and sheep, ideas that kept her from appreciating the note of authority. Then God's control may be exerted in the direction of straightening out her ideas. Or perhaps she simply grows in depth of emotional appreciation and love for the goodness that God expresses to her in this passage.

Her growth through God's control can be further analyzed as growth in understanding the truth expressed in the passage, growth in understanding God the author, and growth in understanding herself. First, God brings about growth in her understanding the passage. Not all the Bible can be read at one moment, and not all knowledge can be acquired in a moment. Even a passage as short as Psalm 23, or as short as the single half verse 23:1a, takes time to read and process linguistically. At a very low level, she must synthesize the message of "The Lord is my shepherd" from the visual data that impinge on her eyes. But it is more interesting to look at the higher levels of integration. Ps 23:1a says something, even when taken by itself. But it says more to her after she has read through the rest of Psalm 23. Then she is more confident that she understands the *ways* in which God is like a shepherd, and the ways in which she is like a sheep. Moreover, in the purpose of God this passage is meant to be read in the light of other OT passages that speak of God as shepherd (e.g., Gen 49:24), other psalms concerning the experiences of David as a representative Israelite worshiper, and still other passages that, without using the word "shepherd," illustrate God's shepherding care (e.g., the story of Jacob's life or Joseph's life in Genesis).

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 49

In addition, God intends that Sally should read Ps 23:1a in the light of Jesus' claim to be the true shepherd (John 10).²⁰⁽²⁰⁾ God controls the entire process whereby Sally reads larger and larger contexts and thereby refines her appreciation of the implications of this one passage. God brings to bear on her even general revelational knowledge about shepherds and sheep. Without some knowledge of what a shepherd is and what a sheep is, she simply would not understand the passage. More knowledge helps, because it may serve, for example, to dispel romanticized pictures of the cuteness of sheep. Moreover, Sally's appreciation of the implications of the passage grows as she identifies experiences in her life where God showed his providential care. She grows as she identifies situations where she needs to trust God rather than grasping for a moment's pleasure or lashing out in anger or shriveling up in bitterness.

The process of growing in understanding need not involve only linear reading. Sally might oscillate back and forth through the verses of Psalm 23 or through the pages of the Bible as a whole. Of course, she ought to realize that God gives Psalm 23 to us in a certain order, and that

this order must be attended to in understanding how the message of the whole psalm fits together. But to accomplish this very assessment, she may find that her eyes will move first to one verse, then to another, in an order different from the order on the page.

Note that we can further analyze the details of this process, in terms of the triad of law, fact, and self. Every move that Sally makes in reading and meditating is defined by facts. Sally deals with the facts of written communication, the facts of the English language, the facts that these words stand in this order in her Bible, the facts about shepherds, the facts about her needs before God, the facts about the typical ways in which she fails to trust in God's care, and even the facts about how she as a human being goes through a process of interpretation. These facts are ordained by God and controlled by God (Eph 1:11; Ps 103:19; Lam 3:37-38; etc.). Every

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 50

one of these facts manifests a law: it is something that Sally has an obligation to acknowledge. At every point she ought to attend to lawful principles of interpretation. The interpretive principles touch again on how language operates, how Sally operates as an interpreter, how she may expect God to speak to her, and so on. Finally, all of this process that is taking place is taking place in Sally's consciousness. It is a process of the self.

In addition, the content of the psalm cannot be isolated from its contexts, above all the context of the subject-matter about which it speaks. Sally's growth includes growth in understanding the world.²¹⁽²¹⁾ At the very least, she may come to understand more of how the Lord in his wisdom has designed that the shepherds and sheep in this world would be able to serve as an analogy for his care for his people. But Sally may also grow to appreciate more how the Lord is able to deal with her enemies in the world (23:5), to provide circumstances which give her relief or nourishment (23:2-3), and to deal with the power of death (23:4). Sally begins to perceive the whole world differently because she sees it as a platform for God's shepherding work. And she sees that the same is true for other people besides herself. She understands other people differently as she sees that they are people with the same needs and the same promises offered by God. She sees more clearly how she can help others, either by verbally reminding Christians that the Lord is their shepherd, by speaking to nonChristians about God's offer to those who come to him, or by acting to supply other people's needs and so become a channel through which God exercises shepherding care to others (e.g., 2 Cor 9:12-15).

11. Understanding God

But let us move on to consider another aspect of the process. Sally's study of Psalm 23 increases not only her understanding of the contents of Ps 23:1a but her understanding of God the author (the perspective of personal presence).

God controls the process of coming to know him. This process involves struggle. Sally must overcome lack of understanding in some areas and even misconceptions of who God is. Because Ps 23:1a speaks directly about who God is, it directly controls Sally's conception of who is speaking to her. But even if this were not so, she would have to take into account who God is. As a general principle in interpreting any message, an interpreter must try to learn about who is sending the message and for what purpose. To use a simple example, the message "I love you" can have very different implications depending on who is the author, who is the addressee, and what are the circumstances (is sexual passion, deep friendship, or Christian love in view?). Likewise, in reading Ps 23:1a Sally must interpret it in the light of what she knows about God. If in the past Sally has thought of God only as a teacher who gives her facts, she will have to alter her perceptions to hear the note of love. Or if she has thought of God only as a supplier of on-the-spot solutions to difficulty, she will have to alter her perceptions to perceive that God is asking her to store up his word as a promise of which she can remind herself when difficulties do not resolve immediately. Moreover, as Sally adjusts her ideas about God, she will find herself going over the whole psalm and all of its surrounding biblical context once more. Subtle changes in interpretation can take place all along the line once she has a different perception of the author.

12. Understanding oneself

Using the perspective of the self, we can also view the entire process of interpretation as a growth in self-understanding. Sally's study of Psalm 23 causes her to grow in understanding of who she is as a sheep of the shepherd. Ps 23:1a speaks specifically of the role of David when it presents David as saying, "The Lord is my shepherd."²²⁽²²⁾ According to the general purpose of the Book of Psalms, the psalms are to be viewed as poems uttered by the king of Israel as a represen-

tative worshiper of God. If so, they also apply in one way or another to the experience of those whom the king represents, including Sally. So Sally is right to place herself in the role of being a sheep. Even if Psalm 23 had no direct reference to the role of a worshiper, it would be proper in the light of the practical applicability of all Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17) for Sally to ask herself what implications it has for her understanding of herself, her attitudes, and her behavior.

Sally's growth in self-understanding and in her own experiences puts her in a better position to understand the psalm itself. If she knows her own weakness and waywardness, she can better see the meaning and appropriateness of being called a sheep. If she has experienced comfort, guidance, nourishment, and protection in the midst of the threat of death (23:4), she is

better able to imagine what these words meant to David, and what they are intended to mean to all who experience comfort or protection from God the shepherd.

Moreover, we know that in a very general sense sin darkens our minds (Eph 4:17-18), makes us hostile to the truth of God, and gives us a propensity to distort what other people say because of our pride, willfulness, and desire for self-justification. Sally's sin is overcome by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by the love that Christ has stirred up in her heart as a result, by the renewing of her mind (Rom 12:1-2), by the work of the Holy Spirit enabling her to "see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), and by the Spirit interpreting spiritual things to those who have the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14-16). Sally is not able to form a valid conception of God the author of Psalm 23 unless the Holy Spirit gives it: "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Cor 2:11-12).

Sally's growth in self-understanding also includes growth in humility. As one aspect of humility she grows in understanding her limitations in knowledge and in interpretive skill. For example, in coming to know for the first time details about shepherds and literal sheep, she may also come to realize that she had mistaken, romanticized conceptions about sheep. She

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 53

did not know that there was a possibility of error in this way until she began to grow out of the error. Similarly, she may not realize that sin or lack of Christian experience keeps her understanding at a superficial level, until in a situation of distress she gets desperate and starts taking Psalm 23 to heart. Then in turn she realizes that the psalm means more than she had thought at first. But if so, still other limitations of which she is not aware may still conceal some of the implications of the psalm. In the light of the consummation she will see still more (1 Cor 13:12).

Thus Sally could come to appreciate that explicit reflection on her own assumptions and limitations may give her a greater humility about her present understanding and may aid her to break through to deeper understanding. She could self-consciously adopt hermeneutical distance from time to time in order to overcome blind spots.

13. The possibility of destroying understanding

So far we have described Sally's experience in entirely positive terms: she grows in understanding. But in their sin people can also suppress truth and grow more ignorant (Rom 1:18-23). Sally could increasingly doubt whether Ps 23:1a is true. She could be swayed by experiences in which she has not been conscious of God's care (e.g. Ps 43:2), or experiences in which she has selfishly expected God to do something that he did not do (Jas 4:2-3), or arguments

that God does not really know her need, or arguments that the Bible is not divinely inspired, and so on. For one reason or another she could cease to be confident that Ps 23:1a is true. But destruction of understanding can also take place more indirectly. Sin may affect hermeneutics, self-understanding, and knowledge of God, and thereby subtly distort the way Sally goes about studying the text. Through a distorted concept of spirituality she might suppose that detailed study or meditation or memorization of a passage is “unspiritual” and that the Holy Spirit works best through an empty mind. Or in pride she may overestimate her understanding. Or under the influence of skeptical ideas she may doubt whether she can ever come to understand what a text is saying. Wrong ideas about God or

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 54

about herself will necessarily affect her interpretation, since every text must be interpreted in the light of what she knows about the author, what she knows about the reader, and what she knows about the subject-matter about which the text is speaking.

The interaction of understanding and sin is a deep and complex process, involving innumerable interlocking influences. Some non-Christians may demonstrate much knowledge about Psalm 23. There is nothing surprising about this state of affairs. No one escapes knowing God (Rom 1:21). Even the demons believe and shudder (Jas 2:19). The crucial question is not how much insight God has granted to us in some particular area, but whether we are friends or enemies of God. On the other hand, some non-Christians may know little or nothing. Their particular form of sin leads them to refuse to read the Bible, or to adopt a radical skepticism that evaporates the possibility of communicating truth, or to adopt a radical hermeneutic which discounts the possibility of any authoritative speech of God appearing in this world.

In all this situation, both growth in understanding and destruction of understanding take place under God’s control. God gives people all the knowledge that they possess (Ps 94:10b; Job 32:8; Jas 1:17). All their knowledge derives from the store of all wisdom in Christ (Col 2:3). Contrariwise, as a judgment on sin, God “gives people over” to foolishness (Rom 1:18-32, especially 1:21-22).

14. Types of hermeneutical circles

Without calling things by their usual names, we have analyzed not one but several interlocking hermeneutical circles. One circle concerns growth in understanding the text. We interpret each part of the text in the light of the whole, so that there is a circular dependence of judgments about the parts and judgments about the whole. A second circle concerns growth in understanding the author. Our understanding of the author and his purposes depends on the text, while understanding the meaning of the text depends on previous judgments about the author. A

third circle concerns growth in self-understanding. Interpretation of the text depends on

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 55

our previous experience, while our understanding of ourselves and our experience depends on the illumination that the text casts on who we are. If we wish, we can also delineate a fourth circle, in which knowledge of the world informs our judgments about the text and knowledge of the text may alter our judgments about the world.²³⁽²³⁾ In fact, these circles are not distinct but interlocking. Growth in understanding is simultaneously growth in understanding what the text means, what the author means, what the world means, and who the interpreter is. And, as many have observed, the circles are not really circles but spirals: there can be growth or destruction as well as simply maintenance of an existing state.

We may also speak of a fifth circle, the circle in which we self-consciously analyze what Sally is doing as she interprets. But we are not neutral onlookers. We ourselves are engaged in interpreting God's world, God's law, and God's design for ourselves. Or, to put it more pointedly, we are all so many Sallys. Sally can herself stand back and analyze hermeneutically what she is doing. She can then adjust what she is doing in her "naive" contact with the text by bringing to bear her hermeneutical standards. But her standards may also undergo adjustment as she sees more what texts are like, who God is who creates and governs the interpretive process, and who she is who is practicing interpretation. For example, suppose that in hermeneutical practice she has assumed that the task of interpretation is merely intellectual mastery of content, or that she has assumed that it is more spiritual not to use one's mind to study the Bible. Either of these hermeneutical biases might be overcome through deeper knowledge of God, deeper knowledge of the workings and intentions of biblical texts, and deeper knowledge of herself. In particular the hermeneutical biases might be overcome when a deep experience of God speaking to her in Psalm 23 makes her realize that there is more to reading the Bible than -what she had supposed before.

Hermeneutical standards are "oughts," hence they too must derive from and be subject to God's law. Hermeneutical stan-

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 56

dards must embody the truth about the law, the facts, and the self. That is, they must express the universal rule-like obligations that require human beings to interpret responsibly (law); they must take account of what texts, language, and communication are like (facts); and they must take account of the particular limitations and predispositions that Sally has as an interpreter (self).

All these circles are related to the correlativity of law, world, and self. We always know what we know in the context of other things. Sally knows God through the created means of

world and self, hence Sally increases in understanding as she interacts with God, world, and self. Any part of the world is itself understood only in context of the rest of the world, the self who knows the world, and God who governs the world with his law. Hence texts are interpreted by contexts. The circles are so many expressions of the implications of what it means to be a finite creature in the image of God.

At this point we can use the self as a perspective on the whole. All these circles are manifestations of a single circle, the circle of a growing self. Each act of interpretation changes Sally, and each change in Sally influences every subsequent act of interpretation. This circle expresses God's control over his image bearers. At every moment God exerts control over Sally and changes her. At every subsequent moment God as wise controller exerts control over Sally in harmony with the change he has controlled in the past. Sally's experience is not, really a dialectic but a dialog, or better a communion between Father and daughter through the Word. God speaks to Sally in every moment and in everything ("I will be your God"). In response she interprets God ("You will be my people"). Because in speaking God controls Sally, impresses himself on her, and renews her in his image, she continually surpasses her past. Conversely, because God and His law are the same, Sally continually returns to interpreting the same beauty of God. As a servant of God subject to his law, she is herself the same through all the changes. Both continuity (the same law and the same Sally) and discontinuity (surpassing the past) belong together as implications of the Lordship of God over Sally and her history.

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 57

Because God is present everywhere, this pattern reoccurs at every scale: in long time spans and indefinitely short time spans, in superficial matters and in matters of infinite depth. The creation and the consummation, the individual depth of heart and the totality of the human race manifest God's control. God's control affects non-Christians as well as Christians, since in spite of non-Christians' desires they do not escape God's control and presence. It affects not only our reading of the Bible, but all of our interaction with the world, since the whole world is a product of God's word (Ps 33:6; Lam 3:37-38; Rom 1:20).

15. Validation of philosophical hermeneutics

Thus we have established the universality of the hermeneutical circle and the radical historicity of human existence. But we have done so in a nonstandard way, namely by appealing to God. Secular philosophers might object to bringing in such a "dogmatic" premise. They would observe that (1) such a premise cannot command universal assent and that (2) the appeal to dogmatic content is alien to the conditioned character of all human knowledge.

But actually, the real quandaries arise when we suppress the knowledge of God. Let us consider the two objections one at a time. The ideal of universal assent is a mythic ideal unless it

is rooted in God's promise of the new Jerusalem. Genuine positive progress toward consensus in the truth takes place only through love, which we receive only in communion with God (1 John 4:7-21). Outside of fellowship with God and knowledge of his law, love turns into sentimentality or paternalism.²⁴⁽²⁴⁾

Next, what about the objection of dogmatism? How do we tell when an attitude, a presupposition, or a worldview is "dogmatic"? When should it be jettisoned or critically reformed? When and where is it valuable to be hermeneutically self-conscious? If everything is subject to doubt, how do we know that our consciousness of historicity is not an illusion

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 58

conditioned by our particular tradition? What are our standards here?

To answer such questions we must return to the same basic truths as before. We are indeed able to transcend or surpass ourselves, to see our own self-consciousness, to see ourselves in a larger historical setting, and to arrive at universal truths. We can do so because we are made in God's image. Because we know God and his wisdom, we have a degree of understanding of larger wholes to which we belong. We are finite and simultaneously we know the One who is infinite. In fact, only in knowing God do we know our own finiteness. But when we refuse to acknowledge God, our sense of transcendence shrinks to an invisible mathematical point and becomes empty. Our very self-mastery becomes a curse, because we become our own standard which is the same as having no standard. Human life disintegrates into a million possible standards. There becomes no way to mediate the infinitude of a universal claim (law) and the finitude of the human being (self). Thus the debates over criteria for hermeneutical criticism can find no resolution. If we posit the ultimacy of human limitations, the very description of those limitations becomes merely formal, unable to provide criteria for discrimination (as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas fear). At bottom we become relativist and subjectivist. Or if we posit the ultimacy of critical criteria that contain specific substantive content, we deify the criteria (as Gadamer fears). Their universality rests on dogmatic assumption. Other people and other ages may deny them, and we ourselves hold them to be universal in apparent violation of our own limitations.

16. Naivete and critical distance

What role then do we give to critical analysis in interpretation? Paul Ricoeur speaks here of a hermeneutical arch containing three phases, a first naivete, an adoption of critical distance in order to explain a text, and a second post-critical naivete.²⁵⁽²⁵⁾ Without following Ricoeur in detail, we can say that

several kinds of distance and several kinds of “belongingness” or naivete characterize interpretation. In a broad sense, everything in creation has distance from everything else, because there is no exhaustive understanding or exhaustive communion between creatures. Conversely, everything belongs to us and is near to us naively, even before an act of critical analysis. As image bearers of God we can understand something about everything through our knowledge and communion with God. Sin introduces an additional complexity by creating both ethical distance from God and belongingness to Satan’s kingdom. In some ways both distance and belongingness must characterize our entire situation as creatures and as sinners, including our acts of interpretation. Interpretation and coming to understand something overcome epistemic distance without abolishing it in exhaustive insight.

But let us be more specific. One kind of distance arises when Sally feels that the text as it stands does not make sense. Her puzzlement may have a variety of sources. She is at a loss as to what kind of person the author is or what are his purposes, or how to make sense of the text semantically, or how it can possibly be true of the world that she knows, or to whom it is addressed, or how it can be relate to what she knows about herself Another kind of distance arises when she analyzes hermeneutically what she has been doing in interpretation. This may or may not be occasioned by an experience of one or more of the other kinds of distance. A second naivete in one sense will occur when she returns to studying

the text after her self-conscious hermeneutical reflection. Another type of naivete occurs if she works through her problems and questions about the author, about the semology of the text, or about the text’s relation to the world that she knows. Then she is ready not simply to puzzle over an unknown quantity in the text, but to read it as something enabling her to meet the author, to enhance her understanding of the world, and to transform herself. In addition we might say that a third type of naivete enters if her hermeneutical reflection leads her to reject modern assumptions about interpretation—for instance, the assumption that God cannot speak to her in fixed verbal propositions in a text.

Ricoeur sometimes has in mind something more specific than any of these cases. In the modern West, the growth of historicism (including the historical-critical method), Marxism, Freudianism, the sociology of knowledge, structuralism, and deconstructionism provides hermeneutical critical tools that enable people to notice previously hidden aspects of texts and that simultaneously inhibit them from seriously hearing what the texts have to say after they have, been analyzed. Ricoeur wants to retain the insights generated by the critical distance that these methods involve, yet to be able to hear what the texts say after the critical analysis is finished.

Ricoeur's concerns are valid and helpful. In one sense, the use of the above methods are simply instances of the oscillation between study of the text and hermeneutical study of what one has been doing in studying the text. But two warnings must be included. First, to some degree the above methods discount, deny, or prescind from the fact that whole people are reading texts and being changed in enormously complex ways. To the degree that they do so, they reductionistically falsify the very reality of the process of communication, and so must inevitably distort our judgments about texts (though sometimes by causing us to concentrate on one aspect of communication they may provide limited insight). It is not enough to affirm as a matter of faith that we can somehow get back to a second naivete. If we ever leave behind a knowledge of the wholeness of human communication, we get darkness rather than profundity. Second, all the modern methods are fruits of the Enlightenment assumption that God

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 61

cannot appear or speak in the phenomenal world. We must therefore apply to these methods themselves a hermeneutic of suspicion. We must become suspicious first of all of the effects of sin and the desire for human autonomy. Do people use these methods in order to find sophisticated ways to escape God and deny his presence? Why have these methods typically served to keep people back from a second naivete in which they read texts seriously and respectfully? The methods appear to promise definitive redeeming insight into human beings' position in the world. They promise renewed dominion and freedom. But because these methods do not submit themselves to God and his wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-25), the dominion and freedom of which they speak are tailored to make human beings their own gods. People who have achieved godlike liberation need no longer submit themselves to any other people, particularly since the others are still in bondage.

But the hopes of liberation through these methods are illusory. All of us are in bondage to sin apart from Christ. Freudian interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire to kill the Father. Marxist interpretation takes place in bondage to an ideology that conceals the true structure of the functioning of the means of production. That is, the ideology conceals the reality of God's ownership in order oppressively to appropriate work, possessions, and thinking itself under the exclusive power of a revolutionary leadership disclaiming obligations to God.

We may go on. Rationalist interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire for godlike, absolute human control of meaning. And so it irrationally refuses to listen to what every author and every text subconsciously says, namely that the intention of an author and the meaning of a text exist only by virtue of communion with the unfathomably infinite meaning and intention of the absolute personal God imaged in them. Subjectivist interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire to master oneself without God. And so it objectivistically claims to know when it has achieved definitive insight in self-understanding as opposed to deception or suppression.

Structuralist interpretation takes place in bondage to thinking structures of Satan's deception. The assumption that God

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 62

is not present in all meaning closes the mind to the personal character of meaning and creates ignorance of the structures relating meaning to God. Deconstructionist interpretation takes place in bondage to a piece of undeconstructed Western metaphysics. Namely, when deconstructionism exposes the desire of Western metaphysics to satisfy hunger for God with false "Presence," it does not deconstruct the underlying motivating denial, the denial that hunger is satisfied through the life of Jesus Christ, true man and true God (John 6:32-40).

The very insights of hermeneutical self-consciousness can snare people in their pride. Sally could take pride in her hermeneutical insight. She could imagine that her own self-criticism is sufficient to free her from misunderstanding. So she would make out of the process of hermeneutical self-reflection a definitive means of purification. She would have subtly shifted from redemption through Christ to redemption through hermeneutical insight. She would be relying on herself and not on God.

Such a procedure will not work. We can never discern the distinction between self-reliance and reliance on God merely by better hermeneutics but by humble submission to Christ and the working of his Spirit, sometimes operating in ways that we cannot anticipate. Modern philosophical hermeneutics fails most deeply here in not seeing the idolatrous foolishness of its autosoteric desires. Claiming to be wise in self-consciousness, it has missed the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor, 1:18-31), and so also missed the *sina qua non* of self-understanding (Prov 1:7).

Intellectual bondage is no less severe than other forms of bondage. It is bondage to darkness (John 3:18-21) and to the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). To this bondage Jesus Christ is the only remedy (John 14:6). "For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). But accepting such a remedy destroys human pride and wisdom (1 Cor 1:29-31). With men this acceptance is impossible, whatever hermeneutic they use (Luke 18:27). People are willing to abandon pride only if they are made willing by the control of God (John 6:44,65) revealing the beauty of the Son (John 1:14).

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 63

I do not mean that Christians should cease interacting with philosophical hermeneutics. But we must be aware of the ways in which the spirit of autonomy and apostasy have deeply penetrated the modern discussion.

17. The omnipresence of God in human interpretation

We have reflected on interpretation itself and on the self-consciousness of the hermeneutical principles that bear on interpretation. It is fitting to close by returning once again to our main concern, God's Lordship in interpretation. God's Lordship is the necessary presupposition not only of interpretation of the Bible but interpretation of all human communication.

The facts of human utterances are intelligible only as utterances of persons rather than random sounds or marks. Persons in turn are intelligible only as beings made in the image of God. Their created structure and relation to God distinguish their sounds from the roaring of the sea or the crash of thunder. Without knowledge of God, persons disappear into facts in the world, as in structuralism. Or else the world disappears into the self, as in solipsism. But because we know persons against the background of knowing God, we treat their sounds as sounds from people who have a derivative, finite authority, control, and personal presence. Thus all of interpretation must follow the patterns delineated above. These patterns are nothing other than the law of God for his created world and his image bearers in the world. Whenever we interpret human communication, we confront the realities of God's law for us, and we engage in interpretation of God's word, his wisdom governing creation (Ps 33:6; Prov 1:7; 8:1-36).

It is fashionable in theological circles to hope that maybe some way may be found to make intelligible the idea of divine revelation in the Bible by stretching the frameworks for interpreting human communication that have grown up from the Enlightenment. Actually, the converse is the case. Only by rooting ourselves in the knowledge of God in Christ, provided by his communication to us in the infallible Bible, may

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 64

we truly understand human communication and how to analyze it.

Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia

WTJ 50:1 (Spring 1988) 65-80

Endnotes

1 (Popup - Popup)

¹ In fact, natural sciences are themselves far from presuppositionless, but other academic disciplines are only now beginning to take into account this new view of science. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970); Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

2 (Popup - Popup)

² See, e.g., Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.4, 1.9; John Owen, *Sunesis Pneumatikē: or, The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein;... in Works* 4/2 (Philadelphia: Leighton Publications, 1862).

3 (Popup - Popup)

³ Such a separation seems to be implied by, e.g., Daniel P. Fuller, “The Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 189-98. A similar tendency may be at work among many evangelicals who hold to Eric D. Hirsch’s distinction between “meaning” and “significance” (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University, 1967]). John Owen distinguishes between what we can know by natural reason and what we can know only by supernatural aid (*Works* 4/2.124-27). But he also asserts that all understanding “is the work and effect of the Holy Ghost” (*ibid.*, 172). All of these views are dealing with the fact that some people possess a large amount of knowledge of the contents of the Bible without being saved. But there is more than one way of explaining the situation.

4 (Popup - Popup)

⁴ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). See also Frame’s unpublished classroom syllabi on “The Doctrine of the Word of God” and “The Doctrine of God.” I am in complete agreement with Frame, but I cannot in this article set forth the full framework that he develops. Readers who wish to understand the implications of this article more fully will be well advised to become familiar with Frame’s writings. In addition both Frame and I have a large debt to the work of Cornelius Van Til. See, e.g., Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963); *id.*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974);

id., *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969); id., *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971); id., *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967); id., *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969).

5 (Popup - Popup)

⁵ I maintain a Calvinistic, not fatalistic view of God's sovereignty. An extended discussion of the compatibility of God's sovereignty with robust human responsibility and the genuine significance of human choice is beyond the scope of this article.

6 (Popup - Popup)

⁶ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 17-18.

7 (Popup - Popup)

⁷ With some oversimplification, this list corresponds to some major hermeneutical trends.

8 (Popup - Popup)

⁸ See the more elaborate explorations of this point in Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 62-145; Frame, "The Doctrine of the Word of God."

9 (Popup - Popup)

⁹ On the covenantal form of Scripture, see Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

10 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁰ This triad corresponds to formative, conative, and emotive impact in Vern S. Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis: The Components of a Discourse, from a Tagmemic Viewpoint," *Semiotica* 38-3/4 (1982) 285-87; and to referential, conative, and emotive aspects in Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language* (ed. Thomas A. Sebeok; Cambridge: M.I.T., 1960) 350-77.

11 (Popup - Popup)

¹¹ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 62-100.

12 (Popup - Popup)

¹² This triple aspect of discourse is further defined as unital, contextual, and hierarchical

meaning in Poythress, “A Framework for Discourse Analysis,” 287-89.

13 (Popup - Popup)

¹³ Once again, I must refer readers to Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 109-22, for a full exposition.

14 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*; *id.*, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1976); Emilio Betti, *Teotia generate delta interpretazione* (2 vols.; Milan: Giuffre, 1955); William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1954); John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974).

15 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980). Though I later talk about subjectivism, it is wiser to see Gadamer and Fish as primarily making a negative point about the implications of human finiteness for interpretive methodology. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (2d print.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980) 315-89; David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978) 101-7.

16 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (2d ed.; London: Heinemann, 1978); *id.*, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

17 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁷ There is a further difficulty here, in that Hirsch distinguishes the author from the speaking subject (Hirsch, *Validity*, 242-44; Hoy, *The Critical Circle*, 31-32). Unlike Hoy, I assume that Hirsch is holding fast to the author’s consciousness, but excluding aspects of the author’s knowledge that the author himself does not intend to reveal.

18 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁸ Gadamer concentrates on describing what does take place rather than prescribing what should take place. Hence in Gadamer’s terminology “fusion” does not necessarily imply

acceptance of a text's point of view and its theses, but does imply a necessary openness and an understanding of the text. In the case of Scripture, "understanding" would at least involve seeing the Bible's authoritative claims and responding in obedience or disobedience. But in the deepest sense, one could not have understood God without being captivated by him and obeying him.

19 (Popup - Popup)

¹⁹ See Vern S. Poythress, "Analyzing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions," *SJT* 32 (1979) 113-37.

20 (Popup - Popup)

²⁰ For a further explanation of my view of the relation of single passages to the entire canon, see Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241-79.

21 (Popup - Popup)

²¹ Cf. "mundane context" in Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis," 290-93.

22 (Popup - Popup)

²² I will not at this point enter the debate over whether the titles to the psalms are inspired. Inasmuch as David is a salient part of the background of reflection even of non-Davidic psalms, the general point is valid.

23 (Popup - Popup)

²³ This fourth circle was discussed above as a subdivision of the first circle, growth in understanding the text

24 (Popup - Popup)

²⁴ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

25 (Popup - Popup)

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 356; id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981) 164. But there are considerable difficulties in discerning just what Ricoeur is talking about, whether one phenomenon or several. To begin with, Ricoeur's three phases are neither linearly successive to one another nor circular. (See Thomas W. McCormick, "Interdisciplinary Contributions to the Theory of Reading" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington, 1985] 244-62.) In addition, Ricoeur analyzes five or six kinds of "distanciation" characterizing written texts over

against oral communication (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976] 25-37; id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 139-44; McCormick, "Interdisciplinary Contributions," 57-66). A close analysis shows that all six characterize oral communication to some degree, and the degree to which they characterize written communication varies enormously with the circumstances, the type of text, and the stance of the reader. In light of what we have already observed, we can also say that Ricoeur is presenting merely a secularized form of the structure of creation, redemption, and consummation.