

Humility and Commitment: An Approach to Modern Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics is known variously as an art or as a science. Its subject-matter is said to be interpretation or understanding. Regardless of the formal definition, hermeneutics is the study of how we come to know what a text means. Nowadays this study can be either descriptive—how understanding is possible—or prescriptive—what we should do in order to understand a text.

This article has a twofold purpose. On the one hand it seeks to set the scene of some recent developments in philosophical hermeneutics. But it will also do so in the light of the more traditional role of hermeneutics, viz. to provide principles on how to arrive at the correct meaning of the text.

All too often the newcomer to the study of hermeneutics finds himself in a bewildering forest of terms which tend to obfuscate rather than clarify. If he can see his way clear to the intended debating points he may either (a) wonder how anyone can ever understand any text, given the enormous theoretical barriers, or (b) wonder how anyone could ever miss the meaning of any text, given the remarkable faculties we have for interpretation.

But surely both reactions should be unwarranted. Understanding needs to be based on careful and cautious interpretation. Yet apart from a presumption that the true meaning of a text can be derived, at least in very close approximation, it would be pointless even to undertake such an endeavour. Thus I have placed this article under the twin headings of humility and commitment. Humility is called for by the interpreter's awareness that final truth may not always be in his grasp. But commitment signifies that the interpreter must never give up in his quest to find the truth.

Finding a gate

Although hermeneutics is applicable in all fields of interpretation, it has come to special prominence with regard to the Bible. Thus from this point on, I shall focus on biblical hermeneutics. But it is impossible to do so without making use of other, perhaps at times simpler, arenas where the struggle for interpretation takes place.

Apart from all spiritual significance, what makes the Bible an especially interesting case in point for hermeneutics is that the biblical world is simply not our own. Reading a newspaper, a novel, or a letter from a friend, are all good examples of the application of hermeneutical processes. But usually for those items we can presuppose a great amount of cultural overlap. To interpret the Bible we need to bridge a much larger gap occasioned by one or more of the following distinctives: language, geography, history, life-style, attitudes, and others. These

considerations establish a distance between us and the people of the Bible which compounds the difficulty of establishing what they were trying to say.

Before going too far in this discussion, an important word needs to be said about the Holy Spirit and his role in our understanding of the Bible. The sentence at the end of the previous paragraph makes it sound as though the Bible is a purely human form of communication. That is of course not true; the Bible is the inspired Word of God. And Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth (Jn. 14:26; 16:13). The Christian interpreter ought never to proceed without relying in both mind and spirit on God's gracious gift of illumination.

Nonetheless, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (undeniable though it is) does not provide a short cut through the hermeneutical process. The obvious counter-example to any such presumption is found in the fact that Christians who are equally committed to the discovery of truth disagree with each other. But the Holy Spirit does not teach different truths to such believers. Apparently it is possible to (at least claim to) rely on the Holy Spirit alone and not arrive at truth.

Consequently it is best to say something along the line that the Holy Spirit's work of disclosure is not entirely divorced from the human task of interpretation. Far be it from us to ever limit God in what he wants to reveal to an individual, but for purposes of usual Bible interpretation, it seems most appropriate to place the Holy Spirit's work of illumination in tandem with the injunction for us to study God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Thus we must return to our original question of how to bridge the gap between the biblical world and ours, given the cultural differences. Where do we start? We can look at both sides of this interchange without initiating much progress. On the one side, we can analyse biblical culture and learn all about the differences and similarities to ours. Or we can look at the other side, namely our own, to make similar discoveries. Then we can either marvel or worry about the possibility of ever crossing the ages in conversation.

It is this last-mentioned metaphor of a conversation that perhaps provides the passageway into this entire process. The hermeneutical project is an interchange between the text and its author on the one side and the reader on the other. This interchange can be pictured as a conversation between two partners. And a dialogue needs to be understood as a whole. One cannot ignore each partner's point of view and contribution, but it is the interchange that motivates and propels the discussion onward. This would be true even in a purely didactic setting where one partner clearly has the ascendancy over the other. Thus we begin with the fact of interpretation. It is a given that the reader and the text stand in relation to each other.¹ What remains then is not to work our way from one end to the other, but to explore each side of the relationship.

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The storehouse of biblical culture

Even though we could have begun with the other side, let us look at some important principles having to do with the scriptural dimension first. We stated earlier that part of what

¹ This understanding is worked out elaborately in Harold Oliver, *Relatedness* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1984).

makes Scripture interesting to the interpreter is the difference in cultures. Let us elaborate on this point and, for the sake of argument, state as many conceivable ways of understanding this fact as possible.

1. Scripture is culture free

Such a notion by itself is a contradiction in terms. If something has been written by humans, then it is a product of culture, at least in its medium. Furthermore, since even a conservative theology of inspiration does not necessitate God's overruling of the personality and intellect of the human author, Scripture is cultural in its message as well.

2. Scripture is cast in the terms of universal culture

Regrettably for someone who might want to advocate this view, there is no such thing, except in a very minimal way. We shall return to some of the commonalities of the human race below, but only in a very rudimentary sense can it be said that there is a common culture shared by all human beings. The Bible expresses a whole range of cultural forms, including ones as diverse as the second-millennium BC Semitic culture and first-century AD Hellenistic culture. Such distinctions are traceable in the biblical text itself, and they all stand in contrast to twentieth-century cultures of various ethnic and geographic origins. Although it is true that all human beings have a culture, not all human beings have the same culture.

However, someone might reply to this point that it is correct descriptively, but not prescriptively. It could be argued that Scripture shows us a culture different from ours, to be sure, but that it is a normative culture. Insofar as our culture differs, it ought to conform itself to scriptural culture.

This is a very potent argument because it carries some truth with it. Certainly the Bible addresses cultures of all ages with mandates for reform. Nevertheless, paradoxically the cultural form of the mandate may not be mandatory in itself. For example, exhortations against Baal worship are commands against all idolatry.

3. Scripture is written in the form of a divine culture

The debate of the previous point can be extended by way of introducing the divine factor. It could be argued that the Bible does not express so much a universal, or even a universally obligatory, human culture as a culture brought about by God's intervention in history. One might consider the training which the people of Israel received from God who thus shaped the culture which became the source of biblical writing. In that case the Bible is neither culturally neutral nor universal, but what we have there is a specific divinely-originated culture. The bottom line, then, for this point of view is similar to the one above, namely that all cultural elements in Scripture are normative.

If this point is an extension of the previous one, the criticisms of the previous point are *a fortiori* applicable. The view is just too easy to be true. It could conceivably be true for the Pentateuch and other Old Testament writing (though I would not be ready to grant even this). But the argument falls totally flat when it comes to the New Testament which is written in Greek- using a language and concepts which up to that point were at home in a pagan culture. Even the very words of Jesus have come down to us in that form, not in his own language of Aramaic. To say that New Testament culture is a divinely-originated culture requires a tremendous *tour de force*.

4. Scripture is written in a culture hostile to its divine message

We must beware of the opposite mistake. Although it is risky to embrace all of biblical culture as normative, it would be even more dangerous to consider biblical culture to have been inimical to the biblical message. For the message cannot be dissected away from its cultural medium that simply. And if such a dissection is difficult, it is inconceivable that the cultural medium is counter-productive.

5. Scripture is written in a complex of several cultures that are different from ours and which are interwoven to provide the backdrop for the divine message

We return to the point of origin. There is no valid simplistic way of dealing with biblical culture except to recognize it in all its complexity as the bearer of divine revelation. But, although this recognition places a great burden on the biblical interpreter, it can still be seen in a positive light.

We can say the following: the culture of the New Testament is neither universal nor divinely-originated. But God is not opposed to particular human cultures. To the contrary, he chose to reveal himself through this particular culture without repudiating it *in toto*. This is good news for us because it gives us the boldness to see our own cultures as legitimate bearers of God's message as well.

Our contemporary living quarters

We now turn to the other side of the hermeneutical dialogue. We have repeatedly asserted that our culture² is different from biblical culture. But how radically different is it?

At this point we can listen to those modern thinkers who advocate a rather radical distinction between the twentieth-century 'scientific' outlook and the 'primitive' ancient worldview. Interestingly, that kind of self-glamorization has been a consistent pattern in the history of thought. It is no different from the Greek attitude towards the 'barbarians', the disdain of the Renaissance toward the Middle Ages, or the view of the so-called 'Enlightenment' towards all previous history. The truth is that such feelings of superiority often originate within an intellectual elite and usually embody numerous misconceptions about their own age as well as about the previous one.

One of the best known spokespersons for modernity in the twentieth century was Rudolf Bultmann who popularized the programme of demythologization.³ The basis of his approach lay in the recognition of a thoroughgoing disparity between the biblical age and ours. Whereas our age is characterized by a scientific world-view which calls for an existentialist attitude, the Bible is cast in the terms of an outmoded worldview with such items as a three-story universe, miracles, spirits, and supernatural myths. Thus even though the basic message of the New Testament is still viable, we need to excise all foreign elements and recast the message

² For the sake of simplicity I am frequently using the singular, speaking of 'our present culture', 'contemporary culture', *etc.* But such usage should not at all be construed as implying that I am unaware of the multiplicity of cultures into which the Christian message needs to be translated today. In fact, much of the challenge of hermeneutics in the present lies in the fact that a given interpretation for, say a western European, may not be at all clear for a South American Bible scholar.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' in H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1962).

in contemporary terms. In his most celebrated example, Bultmann claims that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be counted as historical fact, but that this event is crucial for the appearance of 'easter faith'.⁴

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Now I want to argue that Bultmann was gravely mistaken, but that there was at least some value in his programme which is often overlooked. When he said that the gospel must be preached, and therefore the Bible must be interpreted, in the terms of the interpreter's culture, he was actually right on target. Where Bultmann was wrong was with regard to the supposed large discrepancy he found between biblical culture and ours. His dismissal of the supernatural is no doubt gratuitous. Still there are some strong differences between then and now. It is true that Bultmann tended to think in terms of twentieth-century western European culture as the modern world-view. But even if we expand our horizons more significantly, we still have to reckon with the fact that modern people in many ways are culturally different from ancient biblical ones. Technology, almost two thousand years of history and learning, scientific insights, and many other factors have caused us to distinguish ourselves strongly from the times of Abraham or Paul. Further, it is not necessary to think merely of what we might call 'progress' for this point to be true. Just the different customs we have—the way we dress, eat, greet each other, talk, *etc.*—are all items which accentuate the distance we feel from ancient days.

However, we should not go too far in viewing ancient culture as outmoded and long overhauled, for there is also much we have in common with the culture of biblical times. Human cultures are not so self-contained as to be walled off from each other. Instead they are phenomena that both differentiate and link human beings of different places and times.

Some quick reflection will point out a few of the more basic universal characteristics of humanity which allow for cross-cultural linkage. Philosophically we all relate to being, *viz.* a reality outside of ourselves. This fact of external reality places us in an interpersonal communion (an 'intersubjective nexus') by which we are more than isolated individuals. Our common personhood—with all that is entailed by that concept—stretches beyond the barriers of time, space, and culture. In particular, it allows us to see a continuity in history. Finally, when we as Christians interpret Scripture, we know that divine reality, *i.e.* an existent God, undergirds and guarantees all truth, whether we discover it or not.⁵

Thus it is possible to feel comfortable in the otherwise overwhelming task of trying to understand what someone said two thousand years ago in very different circumstances. We do not need to be intimidated by this apparently highly ambitious undertaking.

Nonetheless, we have not now been licensed to forego further hermeneutical considerations. The cross-cultural links listed above, rooted in our common humanity, are what make interpretation possible; they do not obviate the need for interpretation. Rather they enable us

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-43.

⁵ For a more detailed defence of this contention, see my article, 'Philosophical Presuppositions Affecting Biblical Hermeneutics' in Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 493-513.

to do what otherwise would be a fruitless undertaking: to take the message derived from one culture and make it intelligible in another culture.

This cross-cultural conversation is governed by some severe constraints. Once again we need to remind ourselves of the essential distinction between descriptive and prescriptive hermeneutics. It is very easy in purely descriptive terms to say that the transfer across cultures never obtains perfectly, perhaps only in bare fragments. And there is nothing wrong with this sort of humility. But prescriptively that is not how it should be. The integrity of the hermeneutical task demands that the transfer be executed as precisely as possible.

The end result of an interpretation ought not to be merely a rough restatement of the text. Certainly there needs to be a restatement since a message can hardly be said to be understood unless it can be reproduced in the terms of the receptor culture. Mere repetition of alien phrases is neither interpretation nor understanding. But the restatement must be a completely accurate re-presentation of what the text said in its original version. Ideally, every word and concept in the interpreter's reproduction matches up with all the words and concepts in the original text.

I will call the finished product of the interpreter's task a 'conceptual isomorphism'. By this term I mean to indicate that on the one hand we are dealing with a new frame of reference, hence the need for a new shape ('-morphism'). This new shape involves the concepts of the new culture. But in the ideal situation, the new concepts match up in their totality exactly with the concepts of the old situation ('iso-').

This conceptual isomorphism is an ideal. As such its value could be prematurely impugned. In common parlance sometimes an ideal is something so unreal that it is not worth discussing at all. But this is an unfortunate misunderstanding of the rôle of ideals. An ideal may never be obtained in practice, but that is not its purpose. The function of an ideal is to govern the practice so that it will conform as closely as possible to the most acceptable standards. For example, every beginning chemistry student learns Boyle's law of ideal gases. The fact that no laboratory is able to reproduce the conclusions of the law in all preciseness does not detract from the value of this law. Without the law, the chemist would be floating in a sea of data without any unifying principle.

Thus the ideal of the conceptual isomorphism unifies and provides purpose to the hermeneutical undertaking. Nonetheless, as an ideal it cannot be had simply for the attempting of it. Although we may say that as long as some understanding takes place, the isomorphism is realized at least partially and in principle, yet we need continually to work towards achieving this ideal. But how do we go about this work? Let us look at several models proposed for understanding the process of understanding.

The workshop: finding models

In a short article R. C. Sproul attempts to set up a disjunction between two options in hermeneutics.⁶ He makes it appear as though we have a choice between only two models: a *tabula rasa* approach and an approach based on a Bultmannian notion of pre-understanding.

⁶ R. C. Sproul, 'A Response to Philosophical Presuppositions Affecting Biblical Hermeneutics' in Radmacher and Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics*, pp. 515-531.

Since to accept that the interpreter may bring pre-understanding to the text would result in subjectivism and scepticism, we need to return to a *tabula rasa* approach.

The *tabula rasa* approach has the merit of the strongest possible commitment to the ascendancy of the text. The idea is to let the text speak to us directly so that we can receive its objective meaning. The interpreter's task is to understand and not to judge. Thus prescriptively the *tabula rasa* theory carries the day. But it becomes almost ingenuous to advocate it in absolute fashion when it is so obviously belied by experience in the descriptive arena.

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Anyone who has ever been in any theological discussion, even something as simple as a Sunday school class, knows what a powerful rôle our presuppositions play when it comes to biblical interpretation. No-one approaches the text without some expectation of what it is going to say. Hence there is a pre-understanding which guides our understanding. The task then is not to obliterate the pre-understanding, but to bring it in conformity with the truth conveyed by the text. Preunderstanding and understanding must be coalesced.

A model which addresses that attempt has been proposed by Hans Georg Gadamer.⁷ Gadamer contends that the act of interpreting a text involves the conjunction of two horizons, the past and the present. Understanding takes place when these two horizons are fused. Gadamer does not intend to say that in the state of fusion either the past or the present horizons lose their integrity. On the contrary, they gain their full meaning in fusion with each other.

Gadamer's model is a good one. But it can be improved on by not abolishing the distance between the two cultures (or horizons) so quickly. In particular, the Christian interpreting the Bible will not want to dispense with the otherness of the text from his own horizon too readily.

A venerable and respectable model is that of the hermeneutical circle. It was first popularized by Friedrich Schleiermacher. At one point he stated it rather pithily this way: 'One must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says.'⁸ In terms of hermeneutics what this means is that one must first of all have some understanding of what the text is going to say before letting it speak to one. However this is a circular process. The text speaks to the interpreter and so the interpreter revises his pre-understanding. With the refined preconception the interpreter returns to the text, lets it speak to himself again, and so forth. The circle never ends. One cannot escape it.

Notwithstanding such conceptualizations, evangelical theologians have of late talked of 'breaking out of hermeneutical circles'.⁹ Gordon Lewis proposes that this be attempted by way of three steps: (1) for interpreters to become more aware and critical of presuppositions,

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroads, 1975), esp. pp. 271-73.

⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 56.

⁹ Gordon R. Lewis, 'A Response to Presuppositions of Non-Evangelical Hermeneutics: Response' in Radmacher and Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics*, pp. 613-26.

(2) for everyone to give priority to the meaning of Scripture over its significance, and (3) for all interpreters to consider their own presuppositions.¹⁰

Lewis' suggestions are extremely valuable, but they do not quite come to terms with what the hermeneutical circle is all about. They are based on the notion that this circle keeps us from discerning true meaning; it is vicious in nature. Heidegger has already stated that this is a reverse understanding of the hermeneutical circle. It is not vicious; it is benign because it helps us to understand.¹¹

However, we need not accept the benign nature of this circle merely on Heidegger's assurances. Let us once more look at its purpose. The dynamic of the circle is to take us beyond our presuppositions to the text. As Lewis himself states, 'No exegete's mind is *tabula rasa* when opening the Bible.'¹² Thus, when the interpreter goes through the continual process of letting the text mould his understanding, and thereby his presuppositions, the circle works towards letting the truth of the text be known more and more clearly. Therefore the correct attitude, even from the prescriptive vantage-point, is to make greater and greater use of the dynamic of the circle, not to escape from it.

But Lewis' point is still well taken if the ascendancy of Scripture over the interpreter is not strictly maintained. And this is an ever-present danger, as evidenced by the fact that people seem to find only such truth in Scripture as conforms to their confessional orientation. Surely at that point the interpreter has usurped the priority and is speaking to the text more than the text to himself.

If the goal is to produce the aforementioned conceptual isomorph, then the interpreter needs to work carefully with the text along the lines of inductive logic. Even though it may be inevitable that the model which a theologian produces governs his exegesis, the opposite result, that of letting the text build the model, ought to have strict priority. To say that inductive logic is the methodology for exegesis is to place it in deliberate contrast to deductive logic whereby the theologian begins with a model and then interprets Scripture in (or 'into'?) consonance with that model. This procedure is usually called eisegesis and is clearly an unacceptable hermeneutic.

Recently a number of theologians have opted for the methodology of 'abduction' as the best understanding. In this conceptualization, the interpreter recognizes the inevitability of starting with a given presupposition and then sees the interpreter's task as an informal reciprocal process of learning from the text and correcting the model. This notion of abduction seems to be exactly what is needed to suit the hermeneutical circle, but in point of fact it gives away too much.

Using inductive logic does not mean that one is ignorant of one's presuppositions and is merely collecting objective facts. Induction is always cognizant of the possible distortion or

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 619-620.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 194. Heidegger writes: 'But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just "sense" it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up.'

¹² Lewis, 'Non-Evangelical Hermeneutics', p. 620.

predisposition introduced by the person doing the induction. Its conclusions are always of varying degrees of probability. But what induction does that abduction obscures is to emphasize the priority of the text. In the same way in which the notion of a conceptual isomorphism is an ideal, so induction must be the ideal of the interpreter on one side of the hermeneutical circle. By insisting on an inductive methodology in the context of the hermeneutical circle we are able to maintain the commitment of the *tabula rasa* prescriptive approach with the humility of the descriptive reality.

In the lab: a test case

In the light of all of the foregoing material it is clear that the best kind of hermeneutics is one which makes optimal use of both sides of the circle: the best possible reading of the text and the most enlightened tools of the present. One of the finest examples of this kind of effort is represented in the work of Anthony Thiselton who has combined his New Testament scholarship with first-rate expertise in philosophy.¹³ Out of the many contributions he has made, we shall look briefly at his use of the later work of Wittgenstein in order to illustrate how philosophical hermeneutics works and to raise some final questions.

There is no shortage of studies on the hermeneutics of Heidegger, its antecedents in Schleiermacher and Dilthey, its revision by Gadamer, or its application to theology by

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Bultmann. But Thiselton notes that 'no New Testament scholar has as yet sought to draw on the insights of Wittgenstein in order to enrich or deepen his understanding of the New Testament'.¹⁴ Of course that omission must not be considered a serious lack in and of itself. Presumably the same thing is true for New Testament scholars' strict disregard of Moritz Schlick or Paul Weiss, two other important twentieth-century philosophers. I know of no study attempting to use their conclusions in facilitating New Testament interpretation either.

Clearly Thiselton must think he has good reason to direct us to Wittgenstein. And indeed he says, 'One of the major conclusions of the present study will be that in the context of the problem of hermeneutics Wittgenstein's notion of "language-game" has striking parallels with Heidegger's understanding of "world" and even with Gadamer's notion of the interpreter's horizons.'¹⁵ Furthermore, the point is not simply that Wittgenstein is repeating things said by various German philosophers and is thus ipso facto authoritative in theological circles, but that at the same time Wittgenstein's version of the similarities in question is sufficiently novel to be able to shed some new light on age-old problems in New Testament interpretation.

The aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy which Thiselton emphasizes has to do with the theory of language games. Within each such linguistic context the meanings of various utterances are derived from their use. The analysis of the use of a certain statement within its language game may describe its 'grammar'.

¹³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Inherent in the theory of language games is the recognition that in different contexts words have different meanings. These are 'polymorphous concepts'. Different language games determine what particular meaning a concept may have. It is at this point that Thiselton strikes to the heart of his intentions, 'I now suggest that the theological vocabulary of the New Testament contains some polymorphous concepts.'¹⁶ These include the words 'faith', 'flesh', and 'truth'.

Let us concentrate on only one of several questions which Thiselton raises in order to demonstrate his contention. 'What kind of faith is justifying faith? How do we avoid making "faith" a special kind of substitute for "works"...?'¹⁷ Here Thiselton turns to the analysis of what he calls 'Paul's grammar of faith'. Justification and faith are bound up with each other grammatically, viz. the two concepts are inseparable from the very basis of their meaning: 'In Wittgenstein's language, to say that justification requires faith is to make a grammatical or analytical statement comparable to "every rod has a length", "green is a colour"...'¹⁸ Thus faith is not a work; it cannot be a work, for Paul's grammar of faith simply would not permit it.

The answer to this question in turn raises the subsidiary one, 'If we can arrive at a concept of faith which escapes [the problem of faith being a work], how does it relate to the concept of faith in the Epistle of James?'¹⁹ Thiselton suggests that James does not merely present a different side of faith or criticize a deficient view of faith, but presents his grammar of faith, which differs from Paul's. Thiselton argues that, 'whereas in Paul we see an internal or grammatical relation between faith and justification ... in James we see an internal or grammatical relation between faith and works, because the very concept of faith entails acting in a certain way'.²⁰ Thus one cannot play off James and Paul against each other or devise a common denominator. We simply have to recognize that 'each has a rich and positive view of the grammar of faith, which emerges in the context of a given language-game or language-situation'.²¹

Thiselton's answer to this complex of questions illustrates his use of Wittgenstein's philosophy. We can now turn to a quick evaluation of its helpfulness.

The first characteristic of Thiselton's interpretation which stands out is his willingness to engage the text on its own ground. Rather than force a reconciliation between James and Paul, Thiselton is willing to let each writer speak for himself with his own language game and grammar. Thus the 'text' side of the circle is protected. The 'reader' side then becomes paramount.

Does a use of Wittgenstein heighten our understanding of the text? At the risk of belabouring the obvious, neither James nor Paul would have known what was meant by their 'grammar of faith' in the context of their 'language games', as indeed no human being prior to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

Wittgenstein could have. So the question is more specific: does this use of Wittgenstein help modern people understand James and Paul more clearly?

The answer to this question has to be a guarded 'yes'. Anyone who has struggled fruitlessly with a possible inconsistency between James and Paul and who accepts Wittgenstein's analysis as valid, would be helped by Thiselton's description. But the cautiousness of our assent points out some concerns which remain open.

For most contemporary interpreters Thiselton's analysis would involve two steps. First one must learn about Wittgenstein, then one can apply him to James and Paul. Bultmann's representation of the modern world-view was seriously mistaken, but (more benignly) Wittgenstein is not exactly the spokesman for the twentieth century either. Thiselton's resort to him may be quite valid, but it is not as helpful as it could be since it is somewhat arbitrary.

To be more specific, the concern is this: I cannot be sure whether James and Paul would have thought in terms of an essence of faith with various properties, but I think most contemporary people still do. There is nothing obsolete about the idea that there is an essence of faith with the properties of not being a work, but resulting in certain actions. It has become fashionable to disparage so-called 'Aristotelian' notions in theology as outmoded, but all-in-all Aristotle's ideas, such as the above, may still be more representative of how our contemporaries understand reality than the Wittgensteinian notion of language games with their grammars. Until this state of affairs changes, Thiselton's analysis must be seen as experimental. But then no philosophical tool is final, and Thiselton makes no absolute claims for his innovation.

We see here then that, even though the Bible is God's Word for all ages, there is no final complete interpretation for all ages. Efforts like Thiselton's must continue with the commitment to discern as closely as possible what the text is saying to us, but with the humility that as human beings we do not ever have direct access to the mind of God.

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