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HERMENEUTICS: A CASE STUDY FOR EVANGELICAL/ ANABAPTIST RELATIONS

Greg Camp

"...There's glory for you!" (said Humpty Dumpty.)

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously, "of course you don't — till I tell you.

I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use the word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

This quote from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is cited by Perry Yoder in *Toward Understanding the Bible*. In a humorous, but very serious manner, Humpty Dumpty focuses an issue which is very central to the task of hermeneutics: the role of the text and the

*No other
foundation*

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interpreter. As way of an introduction allow me a few observations regarding Humpty Dumpty's insights. First, he does not allow the word(s) to have any intrinsic value. He shall be the master of his speech. He ignores the cultural, or lexical, use of the word(s). Herein lies the temptation of many orators and writers — to do as they wish with language. And, to a degree, it is their prerogative. Note also, however, that Humpty Dumpty's veiled assertion, while overtly being directed toward language, is also targeted at Alice. It is Alice who offers a challenging alternative (nea, standard) interpretation.

The art/act of interpreting, like the art/act of speaking and writing, is an attempt to impact, or to have the power to move, someone. That someone may be another individual, a diverse population or even ourselves in our prior understandings. My thesis is that our view of the process and goals of understanding will govern our use of specific types of interpretive techniques. Different views of the process and goals of understanding are operative among "Evangelicals" and "Anabaptists." Each will be caricatured for the sake of contrast and should not be taken as strict historical depictions. An "Evangelical" and then an "Anabaptist" portrait will be drawn, followed by some thoughts regarding the direction I would like to see Mennonite Brethren take in regards to hermeneutics.

Basic Issues

Hermeneutics, by focusing on the process of understanding, has become a science concerned with formulation and appropriation. As we "understand" we formulate new perceptions and appropriate them into our current world of thought and activities, assigning new understandings to a place within a hierarchy or framework. It is not possible to foresee or control the myriad of ways in which these new understandings will impact our lives, and so we need to offer normative (authoritative) guides in the process. The process of assigning or pledging allegiance to some authority may not necessarily be a conscious decision. The degree to which authority and understanding interact within the act of interpretation is frequently a matter of debate and is as old as the founding of hermeneutics as a systematized field of inquiry.

In reading *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* by Hans Frei it is possible to glimpse the ferocity of the debate surrounding

the new results of interpretation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Competing views of God and the world drove and were driven by the interest in how we understand and interact. The very ability to know, believe in, and follow God, in sum the whole Christian faith, seemed to be at stake. Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology and hermeneutics, forged his views on interpretation partially as a reaction to the vagaries of philologists and theologians. Evangelicals and heirs of Anabaptism continue to struggle with the basic issues mentioned in these last two paragraphs. By looking at these two traditions I hope to clarify differences and similarities between these groups. I also intend to illustrate basic issues and directions in hermeneutics and to encourage the reader into particular interpretive practices.

Evangelical Heritage

Schleiermacher's notes on hermeneutics show his attempt to move beyond disjointed rules of interpretation to a systematic reflection of the process of understanding. The careful systematization which Schleiermacher foresaw, and which he built into the *The Christian Faith*, was in keeping with the spirit of natural science. Along with natural science, hermeneutics was viewed as a human endeavor not requiring special appeal to the divine. God was removed from the mapping of human understanding. Removing the self-evidency of God resulted in the search for the point of contact between humans and God. People, texts, cultures or history as a whole became these points of contact.

Evangelicals and their predecessors, earnestly trying both to assert that the God of the Bible was in control of life and to locate the place where God could be shown or proven, initially reacted against, but have, ironically, become the champions of interpretive methods which emerged from the emphasis on history. The Word, primarily understood as specific authoritative texts, was long accepted to be the locus for hearing God. However, it is the Word as seen through historical filters, transformed by the latest historical reconstruction, which becomes authoritative. A variety of reasons were available for the reliance upon historical reconstruction. The most attractive was the appeal for objective, verifiable, and therefore non-relativistic images for God's interaction with the world. The

Genesis creation account and the historical books became central. Much of the pentateuch and wisdom literature have been neglected.

Each critical method contributed to a growing body of theoretical and factual knowledge. Each offered a point of contact with God which lay somewhere in the past. Textual criticism searched for the original wording of the biblical texts. Occasionally coupled with strong views on inspiration by dictation, source criticism could be used to establish the very same words which God had spoken to the biblical author, truly the divine autograph. This would assure the validity of the point of contact with God as well as comforting the reader than an appropriate understanding must naturally follow from the current wording. Impressive amounts of data have been uncovered, systematized and made available by the intense search for the words of God. But, in fact, textual, grammatical and parts of literary criticism have forced us to see that biblical texts are human texts, regardless of any particular theory of inspiration. The differences between the text and reader in terms of language, grammatical structure and history have accentuated the distances between the author and reader. Understanding is still problematic, even if the text is divine. If God was identified with particular linguistic and historical acts, appropriate contextual realism and relativism emerged. God may have been active then, but what about now? Relativism was, and is, a threat to the reader as the gulf between the reader and author became increasingly apparent.

If the source criticism located God in the original words of the author, then tradition and redaction criticism located God's activity at later stages in the evolution of the text. Noting that texts showed change and development from oral to written forms, tradition criticism focused on the activity of the community which shaped each stage of the text. Redaction criticism focused on the final formulation of the text. The original wording was not as important as the canonical form. At our extreme historical distance from the canonical process it is tempting to assume that all decisions made in that process were ordained by God. "Understanding" was not sought in these criticisms, it was assumed. Accuracy in pinpointing the intervention or activity of God in our sphere of activities became vastly more important.

Historical and Form criticisms build on the assumption

that we are historically distanced from both author and linguistic context of the text. Understanding shifts from the reconstruction of the original wording of a text to the reconstruction of every thought, feeling and action of the author and his/her original audience. Understanding occurs, then, when we are able to provide a reconstruction complete enough to allow us to re-live or re-experience what the author experienced, if only in our imagination. While we may not be experiencing God, we can be sure that in imitating those past patterns we are continuing to be faithful. The desire to pattern our activities after certain authorities has led us to ask how they would act if in our situation. Problems arise, however, if too much dissimilarity is accepted between contexts. Is it legitimate to repeat biblical patterns in a non-biblical context? Frustrations arise between what a text meant and what it means.

Evangelicals are not alone in using these biblical criticisms and being involved in the difficulties which arise. Mennonite Brethren have been involved in recent decades but do not share the same lineage as many groups in the Evangelical world. The seeming remoteness of God, the level of individualism, the search for an objective grounding for contact with God and the problems arising from the chasms of history provide a framework for Evangelical hermeneutical practices.

Anabaptist Foundations

Anabaptists predated Evangelicals and modern concerns for hermeneutics. Their interpretive practices, far from being systematized, do reveal an alternative to the issues raised above. There are numerous similarities on the view of biblical texts and the importance of personal appropriation of the will of God, but the differences are critical enough to call some current practices into question.

One of the first difficulties which confront us when trying to ferret out an Anabaptist hermeneutics is the lack of any systematic reflection on the topic. Situational case study approaches are all that are available. Anabaptists did not reflect on the nature of the Bible, the difficulties of history, nor on the nature of understanding. However, even during the Reformation, the Anabaptists showed significant dissimilarities from their contemporary reformers. The primary assump-

tion governing Anabaptist hermeneutics was the conviction that no insurmountable gulf existed between God and the believer. God was not relegated to a text or any singular interaction with a prophet or nation. Rather, God is to be found in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It was not the goal of understanding to locate God; rather, it was the assumption that God is in Jesus Christ that serves as the foundation for understanding. We are assured of continued contact with God through the Holy Spirit and the biblical accounts. The purpose of the interpretive enterprises changes given this basis.

Since it is not necessary to begin from a position of doubting our knowledge of God, the emphasis shifts from gaining understanding to using it. There remains ample room and reason for clarifying our understanding and assimilating new information. The critical methods treated above remain useful within strict limitations. But when a community assumes that God is to be found in and finds us by Jesus as Christ, the Bible and the Holy Spirit, then the goals and means of interpretation shift in accordance with those assumptions.

In contrast, the Evangelical heritage includes a strong propensity to prove “objectively” for the world where God may be located because of the assumption that a history which is for humans alone displaces God. Anabaptism was guided by the assumption that the individual and community needed to live by the reality of Jesus as Christ. To Evangelicals, this may appear to lead to an overly “subjective” basis for interpretation which is too individualistic and lack verifiability. On the other hand, their “objective” criteria may be too bound to a predominantly European-American worldview.

Interpretation within an Anabaptist community operated within communal limits, such as a selection of normative texts and methods of discernment for appropriate interpretations. Communities did not seem to be as bent on providing an interpretation that the world would accept as they were in using the text to convince the world of that which was foolish by the world’s standards, namely that Jesus is Christ. Interpretation was not guided by “objective” rules of human mental abilities, but by the desire to be faithful to God. In a highly disputed belief, Menno interpreted New Testament texts to mean that Mary had no part in the procreation process. Physiologically, he was incorrect. In addition, the text is silent as to Mary’s biological functions in terms of seed and egg. We might

conclude, as have many before, that Menno was physiologically and religiously incorrect. Yet, he was much more orthodox than his opponents who made Jesus out to be little more than human. Menno fought to preserve Jesus' humanity and divinity. In this sense, Menno was hermeneutically correct, because hermeneutics must move beyond the confines of certain scientific principles. Schleiermacher referred to hermeneutics as an art which allowed for technical imprecision or error while en route to a clearer understanding of the text. Before leaving the example of Menno, it should be noted that he struggled with the role of an individual interpreter within the hermeneutical community. His companions urged him to keep silent. His opponents discouraged his views. Yet, he continued pursuing his avenue of thought, at times to his own anguish. Should the individual keep silent when his/her interpreting community disagrees? That difficulty remains.

If the primary assumption of Anabaptist life and thought was faithfulness to Jesus as Christ in every word and deed, then the goal of Anabaptist hermeneutics would be to facilitate that faithfulness. Interpretation was always used in hortatory, exhortative, epideictic, juridical and other similar rhetorical contexts both in and outside the community of faith. Universal truths systematized into pre-packaged answers for questions rarely asked were inappropriate to the needs of a discipling and preaching community. Contextual interpretation attempted to be faithful to both text, reader and community. A simple model may provide the necessary illustration.

community — author — text — reader — community

In this diagram there are multiple parties involved in the process of interpreting a text. Evangelicals are prone to identify God with one of those parties. Anabaptists assumed that God was part of, but also more or other than, the process. The conviction that Jesus is God led Anabaptists to hold that the New Testament is a significant, but by no means exclusive, witness to be used in living faithfully. Jesus was part of the New Testament world and its reconstruction by the New Testament authors. Jesus is also a part of our world. This diagram is not a map for locating God, but for recounting significant human players in the process of understanding. While it is assumed that God is in Christ, God's role in the process of understand-

ing a text is left somewhat ambiguous.

The critical methods discussed earlier need to be utilized within a rhetorical critical framework. Literary and rhetorical criticisms focus on the goal of a text within a particular community. Concern is given to take into account the text with its author(s), the reader, and the larger communities affected by and contributing to the reading of a text. While rhetoric has developed a serious stigma as being merely the ability to use oral and written power, at root it is concerned with changing people — the same concern shared by Anabaptists. It is always necessary to question our motives for interpreting. Our assumptions, goals and relationship to our audience are not things about which critical methods can assure quality control. These are theological concerns. It is possible to be correct in many technical aspects and completely abuse the hermeneutical task. Likewise, it is possible to be incorrect in technical aspects (as Menno was regarding the Incarnation) yet be hermeneutically, theologically and ethically correct. The task is to work toward correctness on both sides so that we may be as faithful to Christ as possible. Hermeneutics is a component of our increasing maturity.

Final Considerations

I am indebted for many of my thoughts to *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* by R. Lundin, A. Thiselton and C. Walhout (three Evangelical professors). My intent has not been to defame Evangelicals or unduly praise Anabaptist. I assume that there are historical inaccuracies in my accounts for which I plead the reader's indulgence. The labels could be changed if that would be less offensive and more suitable to the reader. The use of more objective, "academic," arguments may have been more effective to convince an academic audience. These factors are somewhat incidental to the main goal of arguing for more appropriate interpretive techniques. It is absolutely necessary that we strive to retain, or regain where required, a proper rationale and perspective for our hermeneutical tasks. Anabaptists focused on the interpretive experience as it contributed to the life of the community of God. Communities struggle with self-definition and purpose; our goal must be maturity in Christ. It is the task of the hermeneutical community to discover and seek to achieve that standard.

Rather than focusing on the disintegration of community, we need to be discerning how community has and should be re-configured. What shall be the role of Evangelicals and Anabaptist-Mennonites in seeking this maturity in the body of Christ? Anabaptists and Evangelicals use different approaches which appear to place at odds our relation to Christ and our ability to know God apart from Christ. With Humpty Dumpty we should ask, "The question is which is to be master — that's all." Anabaptists, with Menno, should insist: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

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