“The Value of Hermeneutics”

A Reaction

“Hermeneutics” ranks high on the list of polysyllabic words we drop into conversations to help convince our wives that they married men of unusual erudition and intelligence. Pastor Lange’s splendid paper shows why we really ought to knock it off. He demonstrates that, as we often say on this campus, sound hermeneutics mostly consists of things that all users of language do automatically hundreds of times a day. Most of these everyday hermeneuticians do not seem handicapped in any way by never having been to a symposium on hermeneutics, or even by not knowing what the word means.

If so, why are we here? Isn’t there a risk that making something everybody does automatically into an object of scrutiny will land us in “The Centipede’s Dilemma”:

> A centipede was happy—quite!
> Until a toad in fun
> Said, "Pray, which leg moves after which?"
> This raised her doubts to such a pitch,
> She fell exhausted in the ditch
> Not knowing how to run.[1]

Is this symposium merely a group exercise in asking each other, “Which leg comes after which”? Maybe; but the fact is that when (as often) hermeneutics goes wrong, it is usually more productive to try to identify *what* has gone wrong than it is to sniff, “That’s not how Lutherans do it.” A diagnosis of the problem needs to rest on some kind of theoretical foundation, which Pastor Lange wisely seeks (at least in part) in some basic principles of communication.

That is not a “given,” by the way. The notion that reading written text is an instance of communication—and therefore involves a sender, a receiver, an intended meaning, and the possibility of either success or failure—is dismissed by post-structuralists as hopelessly naïve.[2] That is to say nothing of the long history within the church of exegetes preferring interpretations that the original “senders” in Scripture could not possibly have intended, for various reasons. Pastor Lange deftly handles the *mutatis mutandis*[3] involved when interpreting inspired text—i.e., text that has not only authors but an Author, who is not bound by time, place, or language and who can “intend” anything he wishes. Yet the paper makes the same point that, years ago, Prof. David Kuske labored so hard to teach us. When upon reading a text you know what its original author had in mind to say, to his original hearers/readers, under their original circumstances, you are essentially “done.” You may now move on to the tasks (daunting ones, sometimes) of determining what the author’s meaning has to do with you, and how to convey that meaning to your flock in such a way as to minimize the likelihood that they will completely misunderstand it.

Pastor Lange’s paper also shows why getting the initial interpretive task “done” can be less easy than it sounds, thanks to the disconnect between us and the biblical world. His “derby” illustration is apt. A

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[1] Usually attributed to Katerine Craster.

[2] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language,* trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), 170.

[3] “Changing that which must be changed.”

common one in the current literature involves the word "breakfast." A lexicographer from Mars who wanted to define the word might start out with its compositional meaning ("break" + "fast,") but there are probably almost no occurrences in current English that this would explain ("After he hadn't eaten for twenty-one days, a sip of orange juice was Gandhi's break-fast"?). Usage would be a better place to start, but imagine the Martian's perplexity when his "word study" unearthed usages like these:

> "She ate a 16-ounce prime rib for breakfast."
> "It was 4 PM before I had breakfast."
> "He usually skips breakfast."
> "Now serving breakfast 24/7!"

Apparently "breakfast" means "a meal eaten upon arising," except when it doesn't. It means "the first meal in a daily round of three" except when it doesn't. It means "a certain class of menu item" except when it doesn't. A word like "breakfast" is actually a heading for a whole encyclopedia entry of culturally-embedded information, some of which may be relevant in a given occurrence and some of which may not. As a cultural insider, you had no trouble deciding what "breakfast" meant in each sentence above; in fact, a problem may never have occurred to you until I pointed it out just now (if this causes you a certain Centipede's Dilemma next time you hear the word "breakfast," my apologies). The Martian lexicographer's situation is far different from yours, however, and his is much like our situation when we approach the vocabulary of Scripture.

Pastor Lange helpfully lists genre as another culture-specific text feature with important implications for interpreters. His example of the news article about the church visitor mauled by greeters shows how a text can flout the rules of a certain genre in order to make its point (for a biblical example, see the "love song" in Isaiah 5:1-7). The "news article" is taken from a satirical website, which naturally helps us identify it as satire. But what if we didn't know that? Would we really have been in danger of misreading the article, taking it seriously, and making fools of ourselves?

Probably not, but the reason has nothing to do with the linguistic codes in the article—the vocabulary, syntax, etc.—because, as Pastor Lange points out, nothing about these marks the text as satire. The reason involves something all good-faith interpreters do when they approach a text, which is to try to reconstruct in their own mind what the author had in his or hers. This, in turn, requires a theory of why an author would have written a text like this in the first place. In this example, interpreting the article as a straightforward news story *yields no plausible hypothesis as to why somebody would have bothered to write it down.* Read it as satire, however, and the author's purpose becomes clear: to poke fun at the smarmy, unctuous way some churches treat visitors, which is supposed to make them want to come back but tends to do the opposite.

Relevance Theory[4] emphasizes that in real communication, this is what receivers do. Unconsciously they interpret utterances in that way which leads most productively to a useful theory of why the sender has bothered to say anything at all, and of what it is the sender wants receivers to know, feel, and do. Long before Relevance Theory, however, it was axiomatic among us that this is exactly what good-faith

[4] A special flavor of communication-theoretic Kool-Aid of which this reactor has drunk deeply, and which he will blather on about freely with only minimal provocation. By all means, ask him about it.

interpreters *should* do. “The meaning of what is said must be derived from the reason for saying it,” our fathers used to say, and they had this exactly right.

That axiom not only helps with genre identification, as in the example above, but across the board. Take the matter of figurative language. In *Living by the Book,* a Bible study handbook for laypeople, authors Howard G. and William D. Hendricks pass along what is fairly standard advice: “Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.”[5] That is actually very bad advice when interpreting the words of an Author for whom nothing is “impossible or absurd.” Among other things, it leaves us with no answer to millennialists who accuse us of dispensing with the “plain meaning” of Scripture when we find it inconvenient.

What is wrong with the principle “literal whenever possible”? Take the example of Jesus calling Herod a “fox” in Luke 13:32. Why do we not interpret this literally? It certainly qualifies as “absurd” to think that at the time Galilee was ruled by a small bushy-tailed member of the family *canidae,* but ultimately that is not the reason. The reason is that a theory that Herod might be a literal fox *cannot explain why Jesus would have chosen that moment to point this out.* If, however, “fox” is a metaphor that conveys Jesus’ feelings about Herod, then Jesus’ reason for calling Herod “that fox” could not be clearer. The same principle applies to statements in Scripture that the time will come when smiling parents look on adoringly as their babies play next to poisonous snakes (Isa 11:8), or when making everyday purchases will require having a special mark on your hand and forehead (Rev 13:17). “The meaning of what is said must be derived from the reason for saying it.”

Above all, we strive to remember this with regard to the entire Scripture. Ultimately the question is not merely what the authors intended but what the Author intended; and again, this requires a theory of why God has given us any Scripture at all. Reading Scripture as a more-or-less coherent collection of ancient Near Eastern texts cannot satisfactorily answer that question. A reading that sees Christ in Scripture can. It was in this sense that Luther could say without hyperbole, “All of Scripture deals everywhere only with Christ.”[6] Pastor Lange makes the same point with a little less bombast, but just as clearly, and we are in his debt.

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[5] H. G. and W.D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 261.
[6] AE 35:132.