

ORDINARY HERMENEUTICS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH – ANDREW ROGERS

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MOST BIBLE READERS RECEIVE SCANT ATTENTION IN DISCUSSIONS OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS.

However, it would seem likely that the hermeneutical habits of ordinary Bible readers in churches – or 'ordinary hermeneutics' – might usefully inform theological reflection on the Church's use of the Bible. So I spent six months in a local charismatic evangelical congregation ('The Fellowship') looking at their uses of Scripture and associated hermeneutics.¹ Hermeneutics, is being used here to describe the implicit and explicit means by which ordinary Christians come to understand the Scriptures. One congregational account may have a wider usefulness to the Church since 'every congregation is, in certain respects, like all other congregations, like some other congregations, and like no other congregation'. Spotting the general in these particulars is where we are heading.²

HERMENEUTICAL CHARACTERISTICS

For most members of the congregation there were three main settings for biblical hermeneutics, namely, congregational services (so 'liturgy', songs, sermons), small group Bible studies and personal Bible reading. In some of these settings the hermeneutical encounter with Scripture was more passive (e.g. songs using Scripture in services), whereas small group Bible studies required a much more active hermeneutical engagement. There was a striking diversity of ordinary hermeneutics observed and/or reported across these settings, but certain hermeneutical characteristics stood out as significant for understanding ordinary hermeneutics, seven of which are included here.

Firstly, the signature characteristic of the Fellowship was a 'Jesus hermeneutic', an approach outlined by the pastor, Derek:³ 'Jesus is God's answer, Word to us, and so we interpret the written word in the light of who Jesus is, and we look back at the Old Testament in the light of who Jesus is ... so Christ in all Scriptures, how can I find Jesus in Deuteronomy 24?'

The Jesus hermeneutic was explicitly taught and intentionally modelled on the apostolic hermeneutics of the early Church.⁴ Tom remembered a church-based course where he learnt that: 'when we read the Bible, even the Old Testament ... it's important to look at it in terms of Jesus being at the centre of the Bible and, really, the whole thing is about Jesus.'

Opportunities to practice the Jesus hermeneutic appeared to be infrequent, however, since use of the Old Testament was uncommon. This characteristic was amplified in songs, since they referred to 'Jesus' over ten times more often than 'Father' or 'Spirit', although there was some dissonance with songs that used Old Testament Scripture without a Christological key.⁵

Secondly, a traditional hermeneutical characteristic was mediated through three small group Bible studies led by the pastor. These studies worked through books of the Bible, session by session, with an hermeneutical agenda that included authorship, audience, historical/cultural context, genre, literary structure, brief

references to the Greek and thematic emphases. Derek's enthusiasm for such issues was related to the part-time course he was taking at the local theological college, which was 'balancing things' he had 'picked up' in the theological tradition of the Fellowship. The Bible studies started with questions of exegesis and then moved on to points of application – in essence, the classic hermeneutical 'two-step', with a linear movement from the world of the text to the world of the reader/group. The final stage of the hermeneutical process was prayer, described as 'praying this into our lives', with the intention of making the results of the hermeneutical encounter a spiritual reality for the participants. Derek's approach was eagerly taken up by the youth workers who replicated it with their large youth group. Derek rarely used this method in sermons, however, since, 'it's a mixture of wanting to be faithful to the passage and to want to communicate something helpful to people'. Therefore interpretative options could not normally be included in a sermon, rather hermeneutical 'short cuts' were sometimes made pragmatically, such that the interpretation tended 'to go down one particular route'.

Thirdly, the default hermeneutical characteristic for many church members was a 'direct connection' between the text and the reader. Gordon thought, 'if you can understand the text in a straightforward way, that ought to be the right way.' This characteristic takes the distance between text and reader to be minimal. As Gordon added, 'some parts of the Bible ... are so clear that they don't really need interpretation'. This approach was witnessed in many Bible settings (e.g. 'liturgical' use of the Psalms in services or studying doctrinal passages in the Pauline letters in small group Bible studies). There was some critique of direct connections made in songs that used Old Testament passages: 'it's like you're ... jumping from thousands of years ... from then to now ... there's this ... odd time-shift.'

Fourthly, despite a high view of Scripture as 'the written Word of God', there was a notable freedom to raise questions about the status, value or coherence of the biblical text. For example, in a small group Bible study on James, the pastor described the book as being disjointed, illogical and confusing (amidst many more positive comments). Preachers, such as Bob, described Scripture as 'difficult'. This critical trait was thought to be a feature of congregational subculture more generally, as Penelope explained: 'I think that's one of the things we liked about [the Fellowship], that there was more encouraging people ... to think things through, to question and to view the other end ... you could ask questions and if you had problems with something, that was OK, you could voice them.'

The freedom to ask questions of the text and each other was also a prized feature of small group Bible studies. This relative critical freedom was not a hermeneutics of suspicion, however, but rather a hermeneutics of trust with regard to the text. It was a freedom that was bounded by an expectation of meaning and coherence in the Scriptures.

The other side of this questioning characteristic was a thoroughgoing hermeneutical caution across the congregation. Interviewees were unresolved on a range of interpretative issues, such as how to understand Genesis 1–2. Small group Bible study was valued because one could learn from the differing perspectives – this had helped Gordon to see 'that there wasn't a single way of interpreting what the Bible said'. Hermeneutical caution was particularly evident in the language of some preachers through the use of modifiers such as 'may(be)', 'possibly', 'perhaps', 'seem(ed)' and 'think' in relation to the Bible, with statements of certainty being unusual. This characteristic cohered with informal and non-authoritarian aspects of the Fellowship's subculture – suggesting that local church subculture may shape hermeneutical practice.

A fifth characteristic, which also resonated with apostolic hermeneutics, was a 'single fabric' treatment of the Bible, meaning that readers felt free to draw from any part of Scripture in support of points being made.⁶ A particular form of this treatment was found in sermons, where a speaker would move from one text to another, indicating either the thematic, linguistic or theological connections between the passages. For example, songs also frequently combined Scripture. There was something of a recontextualising effect for these single fabric treatments in services. The venerable principle of 'Scripture interprets Scripture' was a common instance of the characteristic in small groups, where participants would refer to other biblical texts to elucidate points under consideration. For example, in a house-group session, Jason searched through the Bible for verses on the hardening of hearts in relation to Mark 6.52. Such practices reflected a biblical theology that emphasised the divine authorship of the Bible.

In a sixth characteristic, there was some emphasis on the individual as the primary recipient of Scripture – almost by definition in personal Bible reading.⁷ Gordon spoke of his 'very simple approach' to hermeneutics – 'What does the biblical text say? And, what does it say to me?'

The strongest emphasis on the individual was found in congregational songs,⁸ where 'I' language (i.e. the worshipper) was approximately four times more common than 'We' language (i.e. the congregation). In addition, the language of intimacy in some songs tended to reinforce this focus on individual experience. Tom, however, had experienced a hermeneutical change on this point: 'I think my understanding of the Bible ... [has] changed ... for a [long time] I ... read the Bible from a very me-centred perspective, and how does this passage relate to me, what's God saying to me about this? And I think, in doing that ... I've weakened the message of the Bible very significantly.'

The overriding seventh hermeneutical trait under which all other characteristics were subsumed was forcefully expressed by Bruce of his personal Bible reading: 'I want to hear from God, in my life. I want to hear what he's saying about what's relevant to what's happening in my life today, like today, not just generally in this period of my life, but today, what's going on.'

The emphasis on God speaking through the Bible was strongest in relation to personal Bible reading,⁹ but the expectation was often mentioned in sermons as well. The existential immediacy expressed here was a striking characteristic of the Fellowship's hermeneutics.¹⁰ The quintessential example was the charismatic practice of bringing 'words' (i.e. a Spirit-inspired message from God for the congregation here and now, sometimes based on Scripture, given by a member of the congregation from the front during the 'worship' period of a service). Such a practice powerfully reinforced the idea that God speaks to us here and now through Scripture.

HERMENEUTICS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Although this unique configuration of hermeneutics belongs to a particular congregation, I suspect that a number of the characteristics will be shared by other churches, or may provoke comparison with their hermeneutical practice. However, there are also broader hermeneutical issues in this particular configuration that may be of interest.

Three initial points can be made. Firstly, such a description goes a little way to subverting stereotypes of hermeneutical absence in the church, particularly in

evangelical congregations.¹¹ Secondly, hermeneutical inconsistency is not unique to this congregation – it is difficult to imagine a church that is entirely consistent hermeneutically. Thirdly, it is possible that all seven of these hermeneutical characteristics may contribute to a wise reading of Scripture. Conversely, they could be used to distort the Scriptures, depending on their priority and degree of emphasis, even as the critical quotations imply.

The big question that emerged from this case study of ordinary hermeneutics was 'How might the Church read both affirmatively and transformatively to hear God's address through Scripture?'¹² Affirmative reading is often caricatured with the disliked word 'eisegesis', that is, reading *into* the text our own prejudices to legitimate existing Church belief and practice. But there are two objections here – firstly, no one comes to the text naked of prior beliefs and secondly, it then rather depends on *what* we bring to the text. Church tradition includes an accumulation of prior understandings of Scripture, so if our presuppositions are Scripture-shaped, then there is a place for reading that affirms and celebrates the theological tradition of a church. Affirmative reading was particularly prevalent in Fellowship services and in some small groups, with the Jesus, Single Fabric and Direct hermeneutical characteristics often aiding this mode of reading. Such Bible reading recognises that there is more to the Bible-in-the-church than hearing it, but doing it as well, as has been said, 'It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand which give me trouble but the parts which I understand only too well.'¹³

Affirmative reading furthermore recognises the value of hermeneutical stability in the Church, where people's lives and behaviour are affected by interpretative choices;¹⁴ hence the 'constant iconoclasm' of tradition can be 'an artificial idol'.¹⁵ However, the danger of affirmative reading is that it may not be recognised for

what it is, so the role of tradition is downplayed or even denied, and the authority of the Scriptures is replaced by the authority of particular interpretations.¹⁶ Alongside affirmative reading there needs to be space for a transformative encounter with Scripture,¹⁷ where the Bible has the 'force to disturb our prior orderings and an ability to surprise and reorder'.¹⁸ The breaking open of congregational tradition through transformative reading was fascinating to observe in the Fellowship, and just a few key examples are given here.

Partly through the influence of his theological college, the pastor's two-step hermeneutical programme enabled Bible study participants to distance themselves from the text a little for part of the sessions. This also prompted closer reading of the text which led to some prior beliefs being overturned. For example, Mary reconsidered what 'we would say' in the light of what 'Paul would say' on the question of 'getting your spirit right' in relation to Philippians 1.15–18.

Transformative reading is sometimes difficult because the biblical text becomes too familiar, and we think we already know what it says. The familiar text can be 'made strange' to the reader through exposure to different perspectives. The Fellowship was quite a 'porous' congregation, in that there was an openness to influences from books, visiting speakers and church members from different backgrounds.

Perhaps the most striking feature of transformative reading was the action of 'organic theologians' within the congregation.¹⁹ These were home-grown thinking Christians within the Fellowship with a natural theological curiosity who liked to ask 'Why?' – and had the freedom to do so. Congregational subculture probably contributed to this freedom, including the questioning characteristic. Renee was one who fulfilled the organic theologian role to a degree, through fostering greater

hermeneutical self-consciousness in the congregation, as she critiqued the hermeneutics of songs and popularised explicit hermeneutical discussion in her house group.²⁰ Organic theologians are also accountable to other members of the congregation – for Renee, the ‘collective wisdom’ of her house group provided a hermeneutical sounding board.

All these examples of transformative reading utilise academic theologians for ordinary hermeneutics in some form. This was not uncritically, however, since the contribution of academic hermeneutics was thought to have only a *relative* value.

This cautious relationship between ordinary and academic hermeneutics points to an ideal described by Christopher Rowland: ‘the learned should not put themselves in a position of being adjudicators of the text’s meaning, but become participants in a common interpretative enterprise, in which they do not presume to hand down what the text means for consumption by “ordinary readers”. They will have things to say, information to impart, and insight to complement what is on offer.’²¹

Such a common enterprise coheres with an understanding of the body of Christ benefiting from the hermeneutical gifts of its members, *both* ordinary and academic readers. Since no one has arrived hermeneutically, all Bible readers should be apprentices in reading the Scriptures wisely. This brief account of ordinary hermeneutics in a local church provides examples of how this apprenticeship might work.

NOTES

1. Although closely interlinked, Bible ‘use’ and ‘hermeneutics’ are different. Here, ‘use’ refers to how Scripture is incorporated into the practices of a church, such as songs, sermons, house groups etc., and ‘hermeneutics’ refers to the meaning-making strategies associated with that use.

2. A Dowie, *Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 1, 38, 65.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

4. Cf. RN Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), esp. pp. 103, 206.

5. Cf. I Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), pp. 53–4.

6. DH Juel, ‘Interpreting Israel’s Scriptures in the New Testament’, in AJ Hauser and DF Watson (eds.), *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 297.

7. James Smart comments critically on personal Bible reading (with some overstatement in my view), ‘The Bible is marching orders for an army, not bedtime reading to help one sleep more soundly.’ JD Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 1970), p. 23.

8. Of which 85 per cent used Scripture in some way.

9. According to my questionnaire, 20 per cent read the Bible once a day, 52 per cent four times or more a week, rising to 75 per cent who read twice or more a week (N=71).

10. A characteristic reiterated in a much larger study of ordinary hermeneutics in H de Wit, LC Jonker and DS Schipani (eds.), *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Ekhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2005), esp. p. 9.

11. Contra B Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), pp. 87f.

12. Cf. Craig Bartholomew, ‘Reading for God’s Address’, at British Evangelical Identities Conference, King’s College, London, 2004.

13. Attributed to Mark Twain.

14. Cf. RW Jenson, ‘Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church’, in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 94.

15. AC Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 9.
16. T Hart, 'Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture', in M Turner and JB Green (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 184.
17. A Bible Society research project which presented 'snapshots' of Bible use suggested there was little evidence of transformative reading in pastoral practice, so I Dickson, *The Use of the Bible in Pastoral Practice: Research Project of Cardiff University and Bible Society 2002–2003* (December 2003, accessed June 2007); available from www.cardiff.ac.uk/relig/research/researchprojects/previousprojects/index.html
18. The phrase is taken from T Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach*, (Methodology and History in Anthropology Vol. 5; ed. David Parkin; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 10.
19. The original concept is from the Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, but has been developed theologically by AE McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 146f.
20. The session drew on GD Fee and D Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
21. C Rowland, 'Reflection: The Challenge to Theology', in C Rowland and J Vincent (eds.), *The Gospel from the City* (British Liberation Theology; Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1997), p. 131; cf. R Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

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