

The promise of consensus: towards a communicative hermeneutic

by Kevin Vanhoozer

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To recognise what God is doing in and with and through the texts of Scriptures is the ultimate goal of the new communicative hermeneutic, says Kevin Vanhoozer. That things are done with words and language interpreted in the context of its performance is an important insight.

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15.28). The Jerusalem Council must surely rank as the high-water mark in the history of church consensus. In recognising the validity of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, the apostles at Jerusalem made a great leap forward in their understanding of both God and the gospel. James’ interpretation of what God was saying through

Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah provided the crucial scriptural warrant for this new understanding and the ensuing mission to the world.

Achieving consensus in the present is an entirely different affair. Nietzsche’s shocking suggestion that consensus is less a matter of apprehending than creating truth has become, for postmoderns, a virtual default position. Interpretations, we are told, tell us more about the reader – about one’s gender, race, and politics – than they do about its allegedly real “meaning”. Clearly, it is hard to think that hermeneutics will achieve consensus if textual interpretation is merely a matter of “what I will it to mean”.

Are texts simply passive victims, at the mercy of interpretive communities and the corporate will to power? Is meaning simply a matter of what individuals and communities can get out of texts?

The Jerusalem Council’s decision did not reflect a lust for power. It was not a racist, sexist, or capitalist decision. On the contrary, the decree of the council in Jerusalem was prompted out of a concern for precisely those who were “other”: non-Jews, non-Christians. If anything, the apostles interpreted the prophets *against* their own interests.

At the heart of debates over interpretation lies the issue of authority. Whose interpretation of the Bible will direct the Church? Whose “say-so” counts, and why?

Of the making of interpretation theories there is no end. Too true! One promising newcomer, however, has become the focus of an emerging consensus of scholars, who, while working in different fields, are nevertheless united in their concern to address the crisis in biblical interpretation where every reader does “what is right in his own eyes” (Judges 17.6).¹

The key premise of the new view is that speaking and hearing are forms of *action* for which both speakers and hearers are responsible in different ways. It all started when two mid-twentieth century Oxbridge philosophers approached ordinary language as a topic worth examining. J L Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* introduced the crucial distinction between *speaking* and what a speaker does *in speaking*. Meaning, Austin realised, is not simply a matter of using words to refer to the world; no, one can actually do things with words, things like thanking, joking, asserting, questioning. These are all “illocutionary” acts – acts performed in speaking.²

About the same time, Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the notion of a “language game”. He was fascinated by the way in which words have meaning thanks largely to the situation in which they are used. Again, the meaning of words is not what they refer to, but rather the way they are used in a particular situation or “form of life”. Interpreters need to know what kind of language game is

being played in order to understand and play along.

What these two approaches have in common is an emphasis on interpreting language in the context of its performance. Communicating is more than a matter of decoding linguistic signals; it is rather a matter of inferring what a speaker was doing with her words on the basis of linguistic and non-linguistic evidence. Understanding, then, is essentially a matter of grasping what a speaker is doing with her words, a matter of discerning what illocutionary acts she is performing.

Is it so revolutionary to suggest that people do things with words? Yes and no. On the one hand, even ancient texts like the Bible depict people doing things with words: reporting what happened, making promises, issuing commandments, asking questions. Indeed, the book of James is especially concerned with the right use of the tongue. On the other hand, contemporary literary theorists have announced the “death of the author”. It is very common to find readers, and even biblical commentators, exploring “the sense of the text”, as if authorless discourse could have meaning. Many such interpretations resemble journeys of self-discovery more than attempts to hear the voice of an other. At the limit, such readers tend to identify the sense of the text as the sense it would have had if *they* had authored it!

This brings us back to the current crisis in biblical interpretation. Whose voice counts, and why? Or better: whose use of language – whose performance – counts, and why? An increasing number of thinkers in a variety of academic disciplines would answer: the *author's*. The author is the agent of the communicative act. It is only the author's intention that makes a speech act like “I will”, uttered by the bride in the course of a wedding service, a promise rather than an affirmation of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Promising is only one example of the ways in which speakers assume rights and responsibilities for their word

acts. Yet hearers and readers have responsibilities too. Most importantly, readers have a responsibility for doing justice to what an author has said and done. Indeed, interpretation is the process of inferring authorial intentions from the evidence of the text, and understanding consists in recognising what illocutionary acts an author has performed.

Language is the means by which we establish relationships with others. In doing things with words, humans enter into all kinds of interpersonal relationships with one another. We enter into the “covenant of discourse”, an arrangement where speaker and hearer seek to have a meaningful encounter, perhaps to communicate important information, perhaps to coordinate their action.

Who is my neighbour? Anyone who says “Hello”, or “Help” or “Please pass the salt”. For every speech act is a mission statement, a statement on a mission: to achieve understanding. So it is with the Word of God: “it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55.11).

Texts, too, are forms of communicative action. Authors can do complicating things in their texts. The author of Jonah satirises religious ethnocentrism. The author of the Fourth Gospel narrates the story of Jesus in such a way as to display the reality of God's kingdom working through Jesus' life and ministry. So to say what the Evangelist is doing in his text just is to interpret it. To ascribe something to the author that was not the author's intention is to bear false witness. Readers are responsible not to bear false witness. This is nothing other than the Golden Rule applied to hermeneutics: “do unto others' communicative acts what you would have them do unto yours”.

Interpreters are participants in the covenant of discourse. Interpretation is fundamentally about doing justice to communicative agents, human and divine. Yes, God too can author, either by appointing human spokespersons or by appropriating human discourse. The ultimate goal, then, of the

new communicative hermeneutic is to recognise what God is doing in and with and through the texts of Scripture. This is how we know God: by understanding his communicative acts.

Of course, God's most important illocution was done in the Word made flesh: the promise to give life to those who trust in his Word. This is the same Word ministered and made efficacious by God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit speeds the Word – living and written – on its way and helps it to fulfil its mission. What seems good to the Spirit, then, is the ministry of the Word. May it seem good to us as well. ■

Notes

¹ Some of the people involved are Nicholas Wolterstorff (philosophy), Craig Bartholomew (Old Testament), Anthony Thiselton (New Testament), Francis Watson (Biblical Theology), and Kevin Vanhoozer (theology).

² See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975), John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1969) and William Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Cornell University Press, 2000).