

In Front of the Text: The Quest of Hermeneutics

Craig Bartholomew

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CHAPTER 8:

In front of the text: the quest of hermeneutics

CRAIG BARTHOLOMEW

Introduction

One would imagine that pastoral care would be an area of theology where the Bible is central. Surprisingly however, as Stephen Pattison points out, ‘pastoral theologians seem to have almost completely avoided considering the Bible ... There is an almost absolute and embarrassing silence about the Bible in pastoral care’ (Pattison, 106). Two reasons for this spring to mind: the well-documented subjection of pastoral care to psychotherapy rendering theology and Scripture marginal and irrelevant, and the difficulty of relating the results of historical-critical readings of the Bible to pastoral care. Until late in the twentieth century historical criticism dominated biblical studies and it is arguable that it tended to lock the Bible into the past rather than facilitate an encounter with it as Scripture in the present.

Recent decades have, however, witnessed a remarkable recovery of emphasis upon practical theology as primarily a *theological* discipline. Stone speaks for a growing number of practical theologians when he asserts that, ‘In order for pastoral care and counseling to be more than just psychotherapy “with a twist”, it must have a sound theological base that informs its theory and practice’ (Stone, 9, 10). This widespread recovery of practical theology as theology has brought with it something of a renewed interest in the Bible; but a renewed interest in theology does not necessarily imply a renewed focus on the Bible. Theology and biblical studies have become separate in the modern academy and only recently have we seen determined efforts to break this wall down. There thus remains considerable work to be done on the relationship between the Bible and practical theology.

In this respect hermeneutics holds out great hope. Any recovery of the Bible in practical theology faces the crucial question of ‘how’ to hear the Bible and more particularly how to hear it in relation to the interests of practical theology. Hermeneutics concentrates on this ‘how question’ in terms of the

different components involved in the ecology of 'understanding' (author, text, reader, historicity and so on) and is therefore well positioned to help in the use of the Bible in practical theology, with its emphasis on experience and particularity. Indeed, because of its sensitivity to the ecology of factors involved in understanding there is already a widespread emphasis on hermeneutics in contemporary practical theology, with practical theologians regularly appealing to the works of Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas as they develop models of pastoral care (Gerkin 1984; Capps 1984).

Hermeneutics and depth analysis of the use of Scripture in practical theology

Pattison helpfully discerns five ways in which Scripture is used in pastoral care:

- 1 Fundamentalist – e.g. Adams and Crabb
- 2 Tokenist – e.g. Clinebell
- 3 Imagist or Suggestive – e.g. A. Campbell
- 4 Informative – e.g. Capps
- 5 Thematic – e.g. Oglesby

As Pattison (115) notes, the hermeneutical principles in these diverse and not necessarily mutually exclusive appropriations of Scripture remain implicit rather than explicit. In our opinion an advantage of a hermeneutic approach to the use of Scripture in practical theology is that it foregrounds that which is implicit and aims at a depth analysis of the use of Scripture.

This chapter is headed 'In front of the text'. This is both helpful and confusing. Helpful, because it is true that an effect of hermeneutics upon biblical interpretation has been to make us aware of the biblical books as texts with a unified, literary character, which come alive in engagement with a reader/s. The phrase 'in front of the text' comes from Ricoeur and it refers to the world that opens up in front of the text as the reader engages with the text. It is to be distinguished from that which the text refers to, which Ricoeur describes as 'behind the text'. The primary concern of historical criticism has been with that which lies behind the text, and by contrast hermeneutics has generally shown a refreshing concern with the text in its present, final form and the world the text opens up. Gadamer, for example, starts off his *Truth and Method* with a discussion of how one encounters a painting. Comparable to this in his hermeneutics is one's understanding of a text whereby a fusion of horizons occurs. This does not mean that hermeneutics is uninterested in historical questions when it comes to textual interpretation, but it does mean that generally speaking hermeneutics has privileged the final form of the text as the focus of interpretation. This has redirected the attention of many biblical scholars to the biblical texts in their final form, whether it is under the guise

of canonical criticism or a smorgasbord of other approaches, and thereby opened up exciting new possibilities for engagement with the Bible as Scripture.

On the other hand 'In front of the text' could be confusing, because it might suggest that hermeneutics is simply another in the smorgasbord of methods of interpreting biblical texts. This is not the case. Indeed it has been suggested that Gadamer's great work should be called *Truth or Method*, because of its critique of scientific method as the key to understanding. Historical criticism exudes this type of approach which seeks neutral objectivity and which hankers after the right method so that the results can be assuredly scientific. Thus, generations of biblical scholars were initiated into source, form, tradition and redaction criticism and taught how to apply these methods rigorously to the Bible. This fixation with method often prevented us from encountering the biblical texts in their givenness. Gadamer, and especially Ricoeur, do not deny the place of method but they loosen its stranglehold by placing it within the dialogical process in which understanding occurs, a process facilitated by the prejudices of the interpreter and one whose goal is a fusion of horizons.

It is this sense of the ecology of understanding that has made hermeneutics so very attractive to practical theology. Recent decades have witnessed a widening of the horizons of practical theology, and hermeneutics fits well with this enlarged understanding. Practical theology has moved from a focus on the functions of the pastor and pastoral counselling in the light of Scripture to a focus on the whole Christian community and the contemporary situation of the believer/s. In the process praxis itself has been recovered as an indispensable element of practical theology (Farley, 7). The consequent breadth of interest in current practical theology is evident in Pattison and Woodward's (1994, 9) definition of practical theology as 'a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical, and practically transforming'. The breadth of this definition aside, contemporary practical theology is rightly aware of the historicity of Scripture and the particularity of the contemporary situation, and the consequent variety of factors that practical theology must attend to. In this respect it is fully in line with hermeneutics, at the heart of which is an acute awareness of the embedded-ness of text and reader in the historical process. The inability of the reader to stand somewhere outside of the historical process is central to hermeneutics, which developed out of Heidegger's critique of Husserl's last-ditch attempt to secure the autonomy of humankind in the knowing process, that is, epistemologically.

It might be thought that once hermeneutics has helped us identify the ecology of understanding, its work is done. However, this is to misconstrue the complexity of such an ecology. As is well known, small alterations in an

ecology can trigger major effects. Indeed, within the hermeneutic tradition a variety of views have developed as scholars have sought to configure the ecology of understanding. Caputo helpfully identifies the following main approaches to contemporary hermeneutics, or what he calls the interpretation of interpretation after Heidegger's *Being and Time*: the late Heidegger; Gadamer; and finally deconstruction (Derrida).

Gadamer and Derrida are in a sense 'exemplary' figures of these three movements. In the broad strokes I am painting here, e.g. Ricoeur's position is a derivative of Gadamer's and his criticisms of Gadamer only move hermeneutics closer to metaphysics. Likewise Derrida is part of a broader group of recent French philosophers who have made much the same argument against hermeneutics (e.g. Deleuze, and especially, Foucault). (Caputo, 304)

A way of understanding the difference these positions make to interpretation is as follows. Biblical scholars are nowadays well informed about the different components in the interpretive process. Thus, for example, John Barton, at the end of his *Reading the Old Testament*, uses M. H. Abrams' well-known diagram of the four basic elements in 'the total situation' of the work of art to sum up his discussion of the variety of methods in Old Testament studies. Any contemporary interpretative approach to the Bible must take into account 'the work', the universe underlying it, the artist/author/community, and the audience/reader/s. In Abrams' and Barton's diagrams 'the work' is the fixed centre of their triangles. However, this model fails to note that shifting the emphasis from one component in the triangle to another can radically destabilise the triangle and thus undermine the centrality of the text. The triangle evokes a geometrical objectivity – however, in fact this conceals an ideology of objective interpretation, which underlies this model. As Freund perceptively notes,

Abrams's implicit presupposition is that these terms are fixed and determinate points of reference in a universal and timeless 'total situation' ... But this latter qualification – the enfranchisement of the viewer's perspective – is precisely the feature which introduces the subversive possibility that each term in the 'total situation' is radically unstable or indeterminate, a product of the beholder's gaze ... The drift of the 'pragmatic' or, as it is nowadays called, reader-response orientation in critical theory challenges the privileged position of the work of art and seeks to undermine its priority and authority not only by displacing the work from the centre and substituting the reader in its place, but by putting in doubt the autonomy of the work and, in certain cases, even causing the work to 'vanish' altogether. (Freund, 2)

Derrida might say that Barton, with his mathematical model of the triangle with the text at the centre, has espoused a strong metaphysics of presence. Freund rightly alerts us to the fact that there is more to interpretation than the four elements identified by Abrams. The 'more' relates to the sense of historicity in all interpretation, and the point made by Freund that how one configures these elements in the process of understanding is highly significant.

Underlying these alternative approaches to hermeneutics is, I suggest, the question of how we understand 'world'. Tracy (146–52) rightly draws attention to the contemporary importance of the theme of cosmology for theology. There is, he asserts, a growing sense that the anthropocentric centre of much contemporary theology needs to be challenged. Redemption cannot be understood without creation, and history cannot be understood apart from nature. In Tracy's view (147) this nexus of questions is 'the new *status questionis* that must be understood before the new constructive theological work can be assessed'. Similarly Farley (25, n26) notes that a recovery of praxis involving the interpretation of situations is closely related to the sort of analysis we find in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

This, in my opinion, is quite correct. Different perspectives on 'world' lead to different views of understanding, and there is a great need for theological attention to this question, and not least in practical theology. The question of how to understand 'world' is theological through and through, and there is no single answer to this question in the Christian tradition. Niebuhr argues that there are five basic ways in which Christians have understood the relationship between Christ and culture:

- 1 Christ *against* culture. This approach is intensely aware of how fallen cultures are and argues that Christians need to withdraw from secular cultures and witness to the world as an alternative group. Much anti-cultural Evangelicalism has been of this sort.
- 2 Christ *of* culture. In contrast to the above model this approach is so impressed with the cultures of our day that it thinks the Gospel can easily fit in with and develop all that is good in our cultures. This approach has little sense of the conflict between the Gospel and human culture and easily accommodates Christ to our culture.

Niebuhr recognises that few Christians nowadays would argue for either of these two extreme views. Most Christians try and understand the Christ–culture relationship in a more integrated way. Niebuhr calls these Christians 'Churches of the Centre'. Among them he discerns the following three approaches to the Christ–culture relationship.

- 3 Christ *above* culture. This approach thinks of nature as supplemented and fulfilled by grace. Aquinas and traditional Catholics represent this view.

- 4 Christ and culture *in paradox*. According to this view Christ and culture are a duality in which both have authority but in tension with each other. Luther is an example of this approach.
- 5 Christ *the transformer of culture* – this view argues that as a result of sin God's good creation has been corrupted by being misdirected, and that redemption leads to the healing/proper directing of culture.

Other categories that could be used to access this question are the relationship between nature and grace or the whole thorny problem of the relationship between faith and reason. The view we adopt of 'world' or of the Christ-culture relationship will deeply effect our understanding of the ecology involved in practical theology and thus of the role of Scripture in such an ecology. I will illustrate this, first, in relation to narrative theology and practical theology and, second, in relation to theological interpretation and practical theology.

Narrative, Scripture and practical theology

Recent decades have witnessed a renaissance of interest in narrative at a philosophical, biblical and theological level. Paul Ricoeur has written extensively on narrative and hermeneutics. For Ricoeur human beings are

inherently narratively shaped, or story-shaped, with narrative offering a way of configuring a discordant concordance of time. As with metaphor, rather than seeing narrative as ornamental and dispensable ... narrative is necessary. Human identity and existence cannot be understood apart from the way in which we 'story' our lives. (Stiver 2001, 115)

Central to this narrative turn is the recognition that humans interpret and make sense of reality through story: 'all things human are in some way rooted in, or find their deepest structural framework in, a narrative or story of some kind' (Gerkin 1986, 26). Lesslie Newbigin, who worked as a missionary in India for many years and has written extensively about the significance of narratives to our thinking, draws the connection between world view and understanding when he writes, 'The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is part?' (1989, 15). Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre agrees, affirming that our life decisions are shaped and ordered by our sense of how they fit within this larger context: 'I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story do I find myself a part?"' (MacIntyre, 216).

This type of emphasis on narrative has been appropriated in theology in different ways. The Yale, post-liberal school focuses on *the* biblical story as

that which Christians should allow to absorb the world rather than the other way around. The California school, represented by James McClendon, attends to 'your story and my story', that is, to biographies and autobiographies, and stresses that theological concepts cannot be understood apart from their story shape in people's lives. Then there is the Chicago school of theology, of which Ricoeur and Tracy are major figures, which connects theology to the broader cultural narrative of which we are part.

Scripture as grand narrative

One way in which a narrative approach to Scripture has been appropriated in practical theology has been along the lines of the post-liberal emphasis on Scripture as providing the grand narrative that should function as such for Christians. Lesslie Newbigin speaks in this respect of the imperative for Christians to indwell the story of the Bible (1995, 88–92). Gerkin (1984, 1986) appropriates this approach in his practical theology, using the evocative alternative metaphor of 'to nest/le':

This sense in which practical theological thinking is grounded in narrative is, of course, rooted in the faith that *the Bible provides us with an overarching narrative in which all other narratives of the world are nested*. The Bible is the story of God. The story of the world is first and foremost the story of God's activity in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world to fulfil God's purposes for it. The story of the world is the story of God's promises for the world. It is also the story of the vicissitudes of God's gracious effort to fulfil those promises ... Most important of all, the Bible contains the story of God's disclosure and redemptive activity in the coming of Jesus. (1986, 48, italics mine)

Gerkin qualifies the statement above in terms of the pluralism of the stories of God's activity that we find in the Bible so that the themes of the Bible are often in tension to one another. Nevertheless, he insists that 'the stories of the Bible taken together disclose a way of seeing the world and human life in the world as always held within the "plot" of God's intentional purposes and direction. Life in the world is life nested within that overarching narrative' (1986, 49). Consequently, human experience today becomes 'the present experience of occasions for faithful adherence to the central metaphorical meanings of the grounding story of human identity' (1986, 50).

Several comments are pertinent at this point. First, is it possible to read Scripture as a (grand) narrative? This is a controversial matter among biblical scholars let alone postmodern philosophers and theologians. Considerable and productive attention has been given by biblical scholars to individual narratives within the Bible, but far less attention has been paid to the possibility of reading Scripture *as a whole* as a narrative. Indeed it is far more

common for scholars from other theological disciplines such as missiology and practical theology to take such an approach seriously. Thus, Eugene Peterson, as a practical theologian, argues that the Bible is indeed a sprawling capacious narrative, and that a narrative or story approach to Scripture is illuminating because it helps us to see Scripture as the book which *tells us* about God and *invites us* to participate in his life. Within missiology Newbigin is well known for his story approach to the Bible (1995, 88–92).

A biblical scholar who has articulated a narrative approach to the Bible is Tom Wright (1991). Wright develops his narrative hermeneutic through reflection on his practice as a biblical scholar and through analysis of *how* – the hermeneutical question – the Bible is authoritative. Wright notes that Scripture is mostly narrative and he thus focuses the question of the authority of the Bible as follows:

Somehow, the authority which God has invested in this book is an authority that is wielded and exercised *through* the people of God telling and retelling *their* story as the story of the world, telling the covenant story as the true story of creation. Somehow, this authority is also wielded through his people singing psalms. Somehow, it is wielded (it seems) in particular through God's people telling the story of Jesus. We must look then at the question of stories. What sort of authority might they possess? (18)

To respond adequately to the Bible as Scripture we have to take its storied shape seriously. For Wright this includes taking the Bible *as a whole* as a story. He invokes the analogy of an imaginary play by Shakespeare, whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide such detail and such an intriguing plot that it is decided that the play must be staged. It is considered inappropriate to write up 'the fifth act'; rather the four acts are given to experienced Shakespearean actors who have to immerse themselves in the acts and then have to work out the fifth act for themselves. The first four acts are the authority for the fifth act; they constrain the variety possible in it. Wright suggests that we should think analogously of the Bible as a drama in five acts, namely: Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, the New Testament and the Church. The New Testament is the first scene in the fifth act, giving clues as to how the play is supposed to end. The Church would thus live under the authority of the story and be responsible for offering an improvisation and performance of the final act with sensitivity and creativity.

Wright argues that in all sorts of ways this dramatic narrative model is fertile hermeneutically. It helps us to see the relative authority of the Old Testament compared with the more immediate authority of the New Testament. It is Protestant in its insistence that the Bible is the real locus of authority, but Catholic in its recognition of the need for communal enactment

of the story. We have to tell the story in our communities and allow it to challenge our traditions, to 'stretch our reason back into shape' and to reform our world views that are always in danger of becoming like the world's world views. In respect of this last point Wright is clear that we need to allow Scripture to norm our world view:

When we tell the whole story of the Bible, and tell it ... by articulating it in a thousand different ways, improvising our own faithful version, we are inevitably challenging more than just one aspect of the world's way of looking at things ... We are undermining its entire view of what the world is ... We are articulating a viewpoint according to which there is one God, the creator of all that is, who not only made the world but is living and active within it ... who is also transcendent over it and deeply grieved by its fall away from goodness into sin ... The story ... will function as an invitation to participate in the story oneself, to make it one's own, and to do so by turning away from the idols which prevent the story becoming one's own ... Evangelism and the summons to justice and mercy in society are thus one and the same, and both are effected by the telling of the story, the authoritative story ... (1989, 28)

No doubt Christians of other traditions such as Yoder, Hauerwas and Hays, with their strong emphasis on story but in an Anabaptist, strongly pacifist context, would tell the scriptural story differently. Such differences remind us that we always access the biblical story in dialogue with our theological traditions. Wright's strength is his attempt in this article, and in his *The New Testament and the People of God*, to give sustained attention to how story and world view emerge from and relate to actual biblical interpretation. This is a much neglected area in biblical studies, but one of great consequence for the use of the Bible in practical theology.

Narrative reading and practical theology

Second, we do well to reflect on how such a narrative reading of the Bible would actually affect practical theology. As our references to Gerkin above indicate, it appears that such a reading of the Bible would yield the macro perspective or world view within which practical theology would operate. This is certainly Wright's primary emphasis. He rightly asserts that 'The Bible, clearly, is also to be used in a thousand different ways within the pastoral work of the church, the caring and building up of its members' (1989, 30), but his primary emphasis, as with Newbigin and Gerkin, is that Scripture provides the large story which we are to indwell. Thus, for example, within pastoral counselling, there may on occasion be no actual reference to the Bible, but the Bible would yield the story within which the understanding and practice of counselling operates. So, in effect, the main character in the

counselling situation would be God and not just two or more autonomous human beings, and the counselee/s would be thought of as a creature in the *imago dei*, and so on and so forth.

However, once we press this issue of the relationship between the Christian/biblical story and praxis, the situation becomes more complex. A major issue in relating the Bible to practical theology is the Bible's historicity and diversity. Historical criticism has relentlessly drawn attention to the historical 'situated-ness' of the Bible and to the diversity within the Bible. Postmodernism has regularly focused on the ideology/ies of the Bible. Practical theology is concerned with contemporary experience and culture so that it is not surprising that its relationship to the Bible is not straightforward. We live in very different cultures from those of the Bible, and we cannot and should not avoid the significant effect that modern developments have brought to bear on pastoral care. The existential insights of experience and contemporary culture, the insights of psychology and other sciences, have to be taken on board. As Stone (37) rightly observes, in practical theology we need a 'trenches hermeneutic' which enables the practitioner to relate the different components in practical theology intuitively to the 'trenches' in which he or she works. How do the Bible and the Christian tradition function in the context of such an interpretative ecology?

The answer that keeps cropping up in the literature of practical theology is that of *correlation*. Thus Gerkin, having argued for a story approach to the use of the Bible in practical theology, elaborates on this in relation to the variety of contexts which practical theology has to take into account and, alluding to Gadamer, he says that

Practical theology, seen from a narrative hermeneutical perspective, involves a process of the interpretive fusion of horizons of meaning embodied in the Christian narrative with other horizons that inform and shape perceptions in the various arenas of activity in which Christians participate. (1986, 61)

Gerkin speaks in this respect of the importance of 'a constant mutually critical correlation of perspectives' in an effort to fuse the horizon of a Christian perspective on the world and the other horizons in the pastoral activity. It is not easy to bring these different horizons into some kind of stable coherence but the task is essential:

The desire for coherence and fusion is confronted by the pluralism and contradiction of interpretations. In the crucible of mutual criticism and search for a way of seeing that makes sense, a new and more comprehensive way of seeing the activity under consideration may

emerge, though seldom are all the conflicts of differing perspectives resolved. (1986, 62)

Gerkin's articulation of correlation is helpful in alerting us to the sheer variety of horizons that intersect in the practice of pastoral care. What is less clear is just what he means by 'horizons' and exactly how critical dialogue might hope to solve the more fundamental horizon-al issues he has so clearly foregrounded. The potential tension in Gerkin's view (shared with Browning and Stone among others) is clear in Gerkin's *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (1997), in which he affirms Lindbeck's post-liberal cultural-linguistic or narrative approach to theology, *but* then seeks to retain in balance with it an apologetic or correlational approach. This manifests the crucial question of whether or not a modern/postmodern perspective on the world in which human autonomy is central, and God non-existent, can be fused with the Christian/biblical story. Against this tendency is that fact that for scholars like Wright the whole point of a basic story or grand narrative is to make sense of life as a whole, and such grand narratives cannot easily be mixed up with each other: 'the whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.' Basic stories are in principle *normative* – they define starting points, ways of seeing, what is 'normal' – and *comprehensive*, giving an account of the whole.

One could ask therefore, is not the danger of correlation that it commits practical theology to being irretrievably *liberal*, in the sense that it ends up granting excessive authority to modernity and undermining the overarching narrative role that Gerkin and others want Scripture to play? For Tracy this is decidedly not the case:

there is nothing in the 'revised correlational model' that demands a 'liberal' solution. There is only the demand ... that wherever and whoever the practical theologian is, she or he is bound by the very nature of the enterprise as theological to show how one interprets the tradition and how one interprets the present situation and how those two interpretations correlate: as either identities of meaning, analogies or radical nonidentities. (139, 140)

Once again this is helpful in alerting us to the challenges of practical theology, but the question remains as to whether or not the two interpretations can be kept as distinct as Tracy suggests. If the Christian/biblical story forms the grand story one indwells would it not be the context or paradigm within which one interprets the present situation? Such an approach, akin to what missiologists call contextualisation, would not remove tensions but it would ensure that the tensions are explored on a level playing field within the overarching framework of a single world view.

We noted earlier how the Christ-culture issue underlies the different ecologies of hermeneutics, and here, I suggest, is where we glimpse the truth of that statement again. According to Michalson (128–30) correlation derives from Kant's philosophy:

Kant's own moral hermeneutics is in many ways the model for the correlative enterprise, which animates the powerful tradition linking Schleiermacher and Tillich and establishes such concepts as the 'experience of absolute dependence' and 'ultimate concern' at the centre of the dialogue between theology and modern culture. (129)

Kant's philosophy places theology under the tutelage of philosophy and it yields a Christ of culture or Christ in paradox with culture perspective. One gets at truth through the exercise of human autonomy via reason, with theology and Scripture strictly excluded or in a tense, paradoxical relationship to philosophy. If Michalson is right then the advocacy of correlation in practical theology buys into a Kantian conception of the world and epistemology. From a modern, liberal perspective in theology this will be a good thing. However, as Gerkin recognises, horizons often conflict head on in pastoral care. A question for correlation is that if horizons conflict at root in terms of fundamental perspective upon the world, then perhaps rather than thinking in terms of fusion through dialogue one should think of a choice between exclusive options. The route one chooses here could, I suggest, make a significant difference to the practice of pastoral care. A correlationist approach might encourage one to interpret the present situation apart from Scripture and tradition and then try and relate one's interpretation to Scripture and tradition, whereas a more post-liberal approach would use Scripture and tradition to inform and shape its analysis.

Correlation has not received much attention from biblical scholars. An exception is Francis Watson who advocates correlation in his proposal for a theological interpretation of the Bible. Watson rightly asserts that a theological hermeneutic will not be unhappy to draw on secular insights. Because the Church operates in the world, even though a theological hermeneutic will be ecclesial, 'It follows that any correct apprehension of Christian truth or the praxis that must accompany it will occur only through the mediation of a discourse that is not in itself distinctively Christian' (1). Watson justifies this drinking at the secular well through the doctrine of the Spirit at work in the world.

Watson connects his correlationist approach to theological interpretation to a feminist critique of Scripture. Indeed the ideological critique of the Bible of feminist, liberationist and other kinds is deeply indebted to a strategy of correlation. Such an approach is evident, for example, in Elaine Graham's *Transforming Practice*. Graham's work builds on that of Browning but with a

stronger feminist agenda. Graham (2000, 108) articulates the hermeneutical challenge for practical theology succinctly when she says that her 'paramount concern is thus to remain true to the continuity of Christian witness whilst responding anew to the challenges of the present age'. The question is, how do we do this? Graham's strategy is very much that of correlation. She leans heavily on Habermas with his notion of ideal speech communities although she gives this a stronger gender orientation. Her proposal is that 'the key hermeneutical criterion for a reconstructed Christian practice is the "disclosure" of alterity' (2000, 106).

Watson refers to the way we understand 'world' as justification for his approach and as we noted earlier in relation to Tracy this is a central issue. Watson is right to invoke general revelation in this respect, but the crucial issue is how we read general revelation aright and whether or not such a reading operates independently of the Christian tradition as Watson suggests, particularly in our context of the pastoral situation. A theological epistemology such as that of O'Donovan's (1986) argues that although God's order in creation impinges on all, we can only read it aright in Christ. This would mean that practical theology needs a perspective shaped by Scripture and theology to provide the matrix within which the situation is interpreted rather than the situation being interpreted, as Tracy and Watson appear to suggest, apart from the tradition. At a practical level this will significantly affect the use of the Bible in practical theology. Thus, it is not surprising in my view that Scripture and Christian tradition play a negligible role in Graham's *Transforming Practice*. If Scripture and tradition are indispensable in interpreting situations then they will play a far more central role.

At stake in all of this is, of course, how we think about our culture today, which is generally labelled 'postmodern'. Most postmoderns would be deeply critical of a reading of the Bible along the lines of grand narrative as outlined above, because of their incredulity towards such narratives. How one reacts to this will depend largely upon one's analysis of postmodernism. Practical theologians such as Graham tend to be very sympathetic towards such a critique, albeit with a stronger feminist perspective, and this leads them away from a narrative approach such as that of Wright, or an approach with a strong biblical input. Tracy responds to contemporary pluralism by stressing the need to correlate a Christian perspective with that of other religions. An alternative approach to the pluralism of postmodernity would be to emphasise the need to allow particular traditions to flower more fully so that real comparison and dialogue can take place. Thus, for example, Wright's 'critical realism' opens him positively to some aspects of postmodernism but leaves him fiercely critical of other aspects, and he concentrates on allowing the Christian tradition to flower in his biblical interpretation.

Theological interpretation and practical theology

A development in biblical studies that may be most significant for the use of the Bible in practical theology is the minority renewal in so-called theological interpretation of the Bible. This renewal stems from a weariness of endless historical-critical endeavours which never seem to get on with reading the Bible as Scripture for the Church, and from the greater freedom in biblical studies that postmodernism has made possible. Theological interpretation is a broad church. It makes theology the immediate concern of exegesis and thereby opens up fruitful connections between biblical studies and the current concern in much practical theology to be theological. A particularly fertile example of theological interpretation and the way it may connect with contemporary praxis is O'Donovan's work in theological ethics and political theology. Ethics faces many of the same challenges as practical theology and it is illuminating to see how O'Donovan handles these challenges theologically.

O'Donovan's biblical, theological ethics and practical theology

We cannot here outline O'Donovan's approach to ethics and political theology in any detail. Suffice it to take note of the shape of the hermeneutical ecology in his work. O'Donovan respects historical criticism and draws on it in many different ways, but his work is driven by the possibility of a unified approach to Scripture. Particularly in *The Desire of the Nations* his commitment to the overarching narrative shape of the Bible is apparent. Scripture is like an iceberg, undergirding and informing in the most basic way all of O'Donovan's work.

However, his ethic is not only biblical but also theological; it recognises the need for concepts and models to mediate between Scripture and contemporary ethical issues:

If we are to form and justify opinions on specific questions in ethics, we must do so theologically; which means bringing the formal questions of ethics to theological interpretation and criticism. This by no means implies, of course, that we shall accept the current understanding of these questions unhesitatingly from the lips of philosophers, for theology has something to say about how the questions are formulated as well as about how they are answered. (1996, 182)

The Desire of the Nations, which O'Donovan describes as a work in political theology, is precisely an exploration of that which comes between Scripture and political ethics. We do, according to O'Donovan, have to make the jour-

ney from what God said to Abraham to how to handle Iraq after September 11, but O'Donovan insists that while faith at an intuitive level may make that journey instantly, or the preacher in half an hour, it may take a lifetime of scholarship. What is fascinating about O'Donovan's work, and unusual nowadays, is the way Scripture is never left behind as his theological concepts take hold. Not only do the concepts come from Scripture, they are set in motion in tandem with a willingness to return to scriptural exegesis at myriad points. The result is the blossoming of a thousand exegetical flowers amidst the emerging structure of a theological ethic that is nothing if not conceptually robust. *Resurrection and Moral Order* and *The Desire of the Nations* contain nuggets of refined, exegetical studies throughout, often in O'Donovan's distinctive small print. It is gloriously assumed that the development of theological concepts and the exegesis of Scripture will complement each other in a rich, overflowing ecology.

O'Donovan's commitment to a theological ethic is apparent from the start. A Christian ethic must be evangelical: it must arise from the Gospel itself. And for O'Donovan this means not just that it must be biblical, but that its concepts must express the inner logic of the Gospel:

We are not attempting to deny the richness of the New Testament's ethical appeal; but it is the task of theology to uncover the hidden relation of things that give the appeal force. We are driven to concentrate on the resurrection as our starting-point because it tells us of God's vindication of his creation, and so of our created life. (1986, 13)

Similarly in his quest for a political theology O'Donovan insists on the need for political concepts that will do the work of theory construction:

Our search, then, is for true political concepts. But if the notion of 'political theology' is not to be a chimera, they must be authorised, as any datum of theology must be, from Holy Scripture. (1996, 15)

He thus argues that the kingdom of God embodied in Israel and fulfilled in Jesus is the appropriate theme from which to develop political concepts for a political theology.

All of which alerts us unequivocally to the fact that the recipe for O'Donovan's ethic contains many ingredients, notably biblical exegesis, theology, philosophy and history – a profound awareness of the tradition in all these areas. O'Donovan's work is comparable to Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in the extent to which it utilises Scripture in its theological analysis. O'Donovan's approach is, of course, particular and can be typed as broadly Evangelical with a strong kinship to Barth's theology. Inevitably, different theologies of Scripture would lead to different uses of the Bible. Pattison's

(2000) more liberal view of Scripture as one dialogue partner among several rather than as an authority over us probably leads to a very different type of practical theology compared with O'Donovan's ethics. However, even here there is no reason why the Bible should not play a much bigger role in practical theology as such a dialogue partner. For our purposes, O'Donovan's work is useful as an indicator of how the renewal of interest in theological interpretation may help us in relating the Bible to practical theology. Even if we disagree strongly with O'Donovan his agenda alerts us to the sort of issues that require attention if the use of the Bible in practical theology is to be renewed, issues such as:

- 1 Is it possible, and if so how, to read the Bible as a whole?
- 2 What kind of conceptual apparatus is required to relate the Bible to practical theology? Clearly the way the first question is answered will have implications for this question. O'Donovan's strong sense of the unity of Scripture will lead in a different direction to Pattison's insistence that there is no one view or theology in the Bible but a plurality.
- 3 From where do we get such an apparatus? Can we, like O'Donovan, derive concepts from Scripture or do we require a theological *discrimen* from the tradition in order to read Scripture for practical theology?
- 4 In this context what are the varieties of ways in which the Bible can function in practical theology? O'Donovan's rich use of Scripture alerts us to the fact that in practical theology several of Pattison's five categories of the use of the Bible may be legitimate in the right context. This is similar to what Louw (369) refers to as an 'organic' use of the Bible. A more directive use of Scripture will have its place provided it is used with a proper understanding of general revelation and the broad ecology of pastoral care. So too will Capps' use of the psalms of lament for grief counselling. At other points Scripture may be used informatively, suggestively and certainly thematically. The possibilities are endless.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have foregrounded ways in which attention to hermeneutics can help us in thinking through and promoting the use of the Bible in practical theology. What we have shown is that attention to the ecology of interpretation, which is at the heart of hermeneutics, enables us to discern the hermeneutical matrix implicit in such use. There is no doubt that the use of the Bible in practical theology is complex, but the clearer we can be about that complexity, the easier it will be for us to see a way forward for the creative, relevant use of the Bible, for which practical theology is now ripe.

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