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One among the many things that have become clear in the course of this seminar is that the church does not exist in a vacuum. Throughout its history, the fact that it is God's special possession has not prevented it from also being a creature of its time. In each period we studied, there was a noticeable--perhaps even determinative--effect on the hermeneutics by wider societal forces: the reigning or recently reigning philosophies, worldviews, and ideologies; major historical events; state and church politics; and different religious movements whose influence competed with orthodoxy from within and without the church. The hermeneutic of each period reacted against, responded to, and/or was directly influenced by these external forces. For example, the early teachers developed their allegorical method under the influence of the current Greek philosophy and the fashionable way of interpreting pagan classics. St. Thomas and his contemporaries developed their more natural and literal approach in reaction against the preceding emphasis on spiritual reading and under the influence of the newly-discovered writings of Aristotle. The evangelical deductivists developed their theories in response to the recent attacks on the reliability of scripture because of the Enlightenment stress on science and reason. The very development of the canon occurred in an effort to protect the apostolic church against the encroachments and attacks of the gnostics. Each of these different approaches to scripture and its interpretation has caused its proponents to be drawn toward different parts of scripture and to receive different messages from their reading of it.

These days, postmodernity is perhaps the societal force which most sets the terms for discussion about hermeneutics. One of the foundation stones for postmodern theory is the belief that in writing and reading texts we are inescapably bound by our preconditions--that is, our worldview, our place in society, and other components of our selfhood which predispose us to think the way we do. According to postmodern thought, the multiplicity of viewpoints found in the history of the church is indeed necessary; the unfortunate conclusion postmoderns derive from this fact is that the scriptures do not have discoverable, normative meanings. Each reader creates his or her own meaning. In their efforts to rescue the normative value of scripture, many respondents to and reactors against postmodernity return to a more purely rationalist position, claiming that it is indeed possible to leave behind our preconditions. However, their arguments are severely undercut by the undeniable existence of so many different current and historical interpretations which claim to be the true intended meaning. Even if one authoritative meaning exists, it is of little use if it has not yet been determined and agreed upon. In the end, it might be that modernism and postmodernism so effectively critique one another that neither position is able to offer a satisfying positive solution.

One possible escape from the continuous volley between modernism and postmodernism is a position which accepts preconditions as positive contributors to the pursuit for normative but currently relevant meaning. Perhaps scripture was designed from the beginning to account for, accommodate, and speak to preconditions--while also limiting and even critiquing them. In this view, a passage of scripture states a standard, unshifting meaning, but it is not a monochromatic, easily captured meaning. Rather, it is so rich and multi-faceted that it speaks equally legitimately

to a variety of different perspectives. If this is the case, then our precondition can be a tool which helps us to capture one facet of the meaning of a particular text, a facet which is likely to speak to issues we face in the contemporary church.

The multi-faceted nature of biblical texts ought to be clear from the way we approach them in our personal study and devotion. At different points in our lives, a passage has different significance. In reading Psalm 22, sometimes we meditate on its description of Jesus' suffering; other times we contemplate the situation of the narrator of the psalm. Although we mostly associate with the priest, Levite, or Samaritan in the parable of the good Samaritan, it might sometimes be helpful to identify with the man on the side of the road, rescued and healed by Jesus, the ultimate good neighbor. If we were to try to determine the one true meaning of these texts, we might disagree. Based on some standard such as authorial intent or pertinence to the gospel, we might be able to agree that only one of the possible meanings of these two passages is the proper meaning of the passage. However, such an effort is unnecessary. These multiple meanings are not, I would argue, purely subjective or secondary to some actual meaning. They are intrinsic to the texts, products of their depth and richness and the grandness of the story they tell. It is our precondition which draws us toward one particular meaning at a particular time. If this process occurs within our own lives, how much more is it appropriate with different people across the centuries.

There is evidence in the development of the canon itself that a multiplicity of perspectives is expected and encouraged. For instance, there are two different canonical accounts of the history of the kings of Judah and Israel and four different accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. It's not so much that there are too many facts to be related in a single account. Rather, there is too much rich significance in the history to cogently fit into one story. For instance, if only one tradition of the history of the kings existed, we might read from it the theme "The temple was a good idea" or "The temple was a bad idea" or perhaps the thoroughly unsatisfying "The temple had its good points and its bad points." With two distinct traditions, we receive the two separate themes "The temple was a good idea" and "The temple was a bad idea." Since both traditions are available, it is possible and appropriate that one of them will speak to our current situation and the other will not. At the same time, as we read each individual tradition, our knowledge that the other tradition exists heightens our awareness that there might be more to this one tradition than is immediately apparent. We know that the story we are reading is part of a bigger story, and we begin to expect that parts of that bigger story may show through in the subtexts, nuances, and margins of the smaller one.

Indeed this interplay between texts which even goes so far as to shine light on different meanings within the individual texts need not be restricted to two traditions of the same history. To a certain extent, all of the books of the Bible enter into this interplay with one another. The Bible is neither a single book nor sixty-six independent books; it is sixty-six interdependent writings. They contain countless textual units which taken together tell one big story. All of the individual stories, because they are connected to the one big story, must necessarily interact with one another also. Moreover, each of the individual writings is co-authored by God and at least one human; all of the authors make their own contribution to the work. With so many influences on and connections with each passage, how can it help but have more than one intrinsic meaning--or, if you prefer, a single meaning which is so deep and complex that it can scarcely hope to be

communicated in a statement much longer than the passage itself. And the above description does not even take into account the normal techniques an author employs to create multiple meanings or depth of meaning: literal meaning, metaphor, analogy, allusion, double entendre, double scene, and more. The use of any number of these literary tools may be discerned in a particular biblical passage.

Since the scriptures contain such an abundance of meaning, it could be a completely overwhelming experience to approach them. It would be hard to know where to begin reading, what meaning to drawing from our reading, and whether what we find will be relevant to us. Thankfully, we have an automatic means of narrowing down our choices: namely, our precondition. Our precondition naturally draws us toward certain passages, themes, or genres which promise to be of interest. It also leads us toward interpretations and means of interpretations which are relevant to our individual circumstances and quite likely to our culture as well. Our precondition is a perspective or vantage point from which we view the text. It allows us to see a meaning of the text just like our point of view allows us to see one surface of a three-dimensional object. Without a particular point of view, it would be impossible for us to see the object at all. Nonetheless, at best our perspective gives us a two-dimensional understanding of the object. Other people might have perspectives which overlap with ours only slightly, or not at all, yet are true to the object. Similarly, a biblical text has sufficient depth that two individuals might find truly distinct but equally valid meanings.

Although our precondition is a necessary starting point in the search for a valid and relevant meaning in a text, it is not sufficient for the apprehension of that meaning. The vision which our precondition gives us may be blurry or narrow, and it is almost certainly shallow. In order to receive a reliable meaning from a biblical text, we need to first check our vision, because it is quite possible that our precondition causes us to see something which is simply not there, an interpretation which has more to do with the shape of our eyes than with the shape of the object. After checking that our vision is reasonably clear, we should attempt to widen our vision of the surface we are viewing. Clear vision only insures that we are making a legitimate connection with the text; widening of our sight allows us to see where that point of connection fits in the text, thereby unveiling a substantive meaning of the text which has implications for our life. The third step, optional but highly encouraged, is gaining knowledge of the other facets of the object--that is, discovering meanings of the text discernible from other viewpoints. Although we are only capable of actually seeing one facet of the text at a time, knowledge of other ones increases our appreciation of the text, nuances our understanding of our current perspective, and opens us to the possibility that there is more to be learned from the text than we will learn in this one encounter.

In looking at an object, our view is checked, widened, and deepened by more closely studying the object, walking around it, and comparing our observations with other observers'. The corresponding activities in reading a text are devoting time and effort to close study of the passage, thinking about it from other perspectives as much as we are able, and hearing or reading other people's interpretations.

Studying the text more closely is helpful in finding meaning because our minds are, after all, not

completely and totally limited to our precondition. From the words and context of a passage, we are able to piece together enough of an idea of its meaning external to ourselves that we can check our own perspective against it. This process is like when scrutinizing an object more extensively we notice details which contradict our original notions of the nature of the object.

However, we cannot get far enough outside of ourselves to sufficiently critique ourselves, nor are we capable of extendedly sustaining a wide enough perspective by ourselves. We need to collaborate with other people in order to grasp a true and sufficiently rich meaning of a text. Those other people include people we know, contemporaries we do not know, and church tradition. People we know are helpful in gaining that original glimpse of relevance and in correcting particularly strong personal biases; however, they are likely to have similar preconditions and, therefore, similar blind spots. We need to be hearing from the perspective of people different from us in order to help us clarify and widen our vision by more blatantly exposing our precondition by contrast with their own. They also add depth to our perception by giving us insight into perspectives radically different from our own. The role of other people is not to help us narrow down the meaning to the one true meaning which passes the test of endurance over time and distance. Instead, it is to aid us in dismissing illegitimate readings and adding to the depth and breadth of our knowledge of legitimate meanings.

The final meaning we receive from a text on any given reading after this process of checking, widening, and deepening our vision will probably be one which is not in complete harmony with our precondition. Our choices at this point are to dismiss the meaning, to alter it so that it once again fits our precondition, or to allow it to shift our perspective from its original precondition. In doing the first two, we would merely be using our reading of the scriptures as an opportunity for self-expression. By doing the third, we would be allowing the scriptures to take us from where we were to a new understanding of God and our relationship to him. Our precondition will be transformed. However, this new perspective will have proceeded from the interaction between our precondition and the text in such a way that it still relates to that precondition. It reacts against, responds to, and/or is influenced by the external forces which have shaped us. It has given us a message relevant to our times.