

## Body-piercing, the natural sense, and the task of theological interpretation: a hermeneutical homily on John 19:34

Kevin J. Vanhoozer  
Research Professor of Systematic Theology  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
Deerfield, IL (USA)

[*Note:* this is a much-condensed version of a paper originally delivered at a symposium on 'The Task of Interpreting Scripture Theologically' at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois 29 September – 1 October 2000. The complete version will be published in the spring 2001 issue of the journal *Ex Auditu*.]

### I. Introduction: two types of theological interpretation of Scripture

Paul Tillich once distinguished two types of philosophy of religion by comparing the experience of meeting a stranger with the experience of overcoming estrangement. How does the distinction between 'meeting a stranger' and 'overcoming estrangement' bear on our consideration of the task of theological interpretation? In the former case, the stranger (read: 'text') retains a certain individuality, a degree of over-againstness with regard to the community. A stranger can say things that shock us, things that lead us to view our own community in a different way. In the latter case, a person (read: 'text') is defined and identified in terms of his designated role and contributes, by performing his designated function, to the good of the whole community. At issue is whether the text of Scripture has a 'meaning' independent of the community's own culture and language – whether Scripture has a 'voice' of its own, and the power to shock and disturb us.

Now this is an over-simplified picture of the contemporary options in theological interpretation. Its purpose is not to give a comprehensive survey, however, so much as to highlight one important area of disagreement, concerning the aims and the norms of theological interpretation of Scripture. One approach lays stress on the priority of the aims and purposes of the reading community. On this view, theological interpretation is a church practice governed by the end of building up the body of Christ in worship and spiritual formation. This contemporary approach is significantly strengthened by an appeal to the ancient Rule of Faith, which acts as a hermeneutical rule – a rule for reading. According to this position, the chief purpose of theological interpretation is building up the body of Christ.

The other approach continues to speak of the 'meaning' of the text, however difficult a notion it is to define. While it is commonplace to see the search for meaning presented as a conflicting ultimate aim, it is perhaps more accurate to see it only as a *proximate* aim. More precisely: the concept of meaning serves as an interpretative norm. Theological interpretation, on this view, is a matter of discovering the divine message in Scripture. This approach draws upon church history too, particularly upon the wide consensus concerning the authority, and priority, of the literal sense. The concern for interpretative norms does not have to lead to a neglect of interpretative aims, but proponents of this view argue that the latter must be tested by the former.

What is needed is a *via media* that includes both aims and norms, an approach that attends both to edification *and* to meaning. One promising way forward is to focus on what I shall call 'the *theological* natural sense' of Scripture. By 'natural sense' I refer to what authors are doing with just *these* words in using them in just *this* way in just *this* literary

context.<sup>1</sup> By 'theological' I refer to what God, as divine author, is doing with just these human words in just this canonical context. The category of the 'natural' is, of course, a much-disputed topic in postmodernity. For it is a common postmodern reflex to demythologize talk about the 'natural' into talk about the 'social'. For better or for worse, then, the term 'natural' highlight the specific area of disagreement over the theological interpretation of Scripture in a postmodern, community-oriented context, namely, whose aims will have the upper-hand: authors' or readers'?

The goal of this paper is to put forward a strategy for the postcritical retrieval of something like the classic theological interpretation of Scripture. Crucial to this attempt will be the rehabilitation of the natural sense, as well as a correction of certain distortions that have crept into this notion. I begin by examining certain analogies between 'bodies' and 'texts' and suggest that the 'natural' itself is susceptible of theological interpretation. I then return to a consideration of the two types of theological interpretation: the one which relies primarily on the Rule of Faith, the other which relies primarily on a reconstituted concept of the natural sense. I then examine Jn 19:31-37 as a practical example of what is involved in theological interpretation. Finally, using vss. 35 and 36 as a springboard, I make some summary suggestions as to the nature, necessity, and norms of theological interpretation of Scripture. The conclusion draws some implications of my thesis for the church as the community of theological interpreters. And the metaphorical red thread running through it all is, improbably enough, body piercing.

## II. The postmodern challenge: 'natural' bodies?

### 'Natural' as an essentially disputed concept

In contemporary ethics and hermeneutics alike, appeals to categories such as the 'natural' or the 'proper' often evoke suspicion and distrust. Such suspicion can be either mild or radical. The more radical postmodern version of this suspicion, however, insists that what passes as 'natural' is never anything *but* a social convention.

. . . Many postmoderns are happy to deny the text/commentary distinction. There is no natural sense of words or texts, only senses that have been socially constructed. 'There simply is no 'real meaning' of Paul's letters to the Corinthians once we understand that they are no longer Paul's letters but rather the Church's Scripture'.<sup>2</sup> Interpretation, like knowledge more generally, has become a thoroughly political affair, a matter of power, a matter of what individuals or interpretative communities *will* texts to mean. With regard to postmodern Biblical interpretation, nurture is a clear winner over nature

Postmodernity stands for the crisis of legitimation in interpretation, for the suspicion of hermeneutics, and for the rejection of the very concept of 'correct interpretation'. Once one abandons the concept of the natural sense the question of criteria for legitimate interpretation immediately arises. Postmoderns want to know whose reading counts, and why. It has been said that 'As there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of'.<sup>3</sup> Christians can find much to agree with in this statement. Human interpreters are finite and fallen; what we presently know we know as through a glass, darkly (1 Cor 13:12). . . . It is an open question, however, whether one should infer from the fact that Christians sometimes pervert the natural sense that the very concept of the 'natural sense' has nothing to commend it.

### Heavenly bodies

---

<sup>1</sup> Meaning is 'determinate' (e.g., fixed, definite) just because of the specificity of the text and context.

<sup>2</sup> Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Remark by Althusser, cited in *The Postmodern Bible*, p 5.

Gen 1:14 'and let them be for signs. . . .'

'Nature' includes both the heavens and the earth. Let us begin with the heavens. It would be reasonable to think that there could be little dispute over the category 'natural' when applied to phenomena such as the stars and planets. Not only are they far removed from human life and culture, but their movements, as Galileo discovered, are susceptible to mathematical explanation and objective measurement. Surely if there is a candidate for a non-socialized natural, it would be these heavenly bodies?

In fact, the conflict of interpretations is all too apparent with regard to heavenly bodies. One has only to contrast the approaches of astronomy and astrology. The astronomer searches for 'the meaning' of the movements of these celestial bodies. The astronomer (like the historical critic!) wants to distinguish reality from appearance, to state 'what actually happens'.

Astrologers, on the other hand, provide 'edifying' interpretations of the celestial bodies. Horoscopes represent ample evidence that it is all too easy to read more into bodies (e.g., into the positions and alignment of the stars) than is really there. From the perspective of the astronomer, astrology is an example of gross eisegesis. . . . Calvin's objections to astrology are virtually identical to his objections to allegory: both interpret 'signs of certain things' to be whatever their fancy dictates. When Moses composed Genesis 1, however, he was writing about the order of nature. Calvin concludes that both astrology and allegory read signs 'unnaturally'.

While a Christian theological interpretation of celestial bodies will need to include a good dose of demythologizing, it would be a mistake to depict Moses as a naturalist. For it is a mistake to confuse the natural with the naturalistic (i.e., with the *only* natural), just as it is to confuse the literal with the literalistic.<sup>4</sup> Christians may reject astrology, but it does not follow that the sun, moon, and stars have *no* semiotic value. On the contrary, according to the Bible, 'the heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1). Nature is God's work, and a complete description of nature requires not only scientific laws, but the doctrine of creation. A 'theological natural' interpretation, then, is one that evokes God as an explanatory hypothesis or factor.

### **The human body**

While disputes over how to interpret heavenly bodies preoccupied a good number of precritical theologians, the real interpretative disagreements have shifted in recent times to the something altogether more earthly, namely, the human body. The current craze for body-piercing is, I submit, an apt metaphor for how texts, including the Bible, are often treated in the postmodern world.

#### *What does body piercing mean?*

The body is the physical link between our deepest selves and the outside world, the medium through which we project ourselves into social life. Perhaps nowhere else does the body more clearly appear as the site of identity construction than in the contemporary craze for body-piercing. To be sure, body piercing is a global phenomenon that has been practised for millennia. In many non-western societies, for instance, tattoos and piercings define one's social status, to 'mark' people in long established social positions. In these tribal contexts, body piercing serves an integrative purpose. In the social context of the early twenty-first century in the post-industrial West, however, the practice of body-piercing may well be of an entirely different order than its function in tribal or primitive societies.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I treat this latter confusion in more detail in my *Is There a Meaning in this Text? the Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1998) pp. 310-12.

<sup>5</sup> For a general study of body modification practices in the non-Western world, see Rubin, *Marks of Civilization* (1988).

If there is a language of the body, then body piercing is a peculiarly graphic speech act. Anthony Giddens argues that, as the dominant discourses of religion and family lose their currency, people are attempting to construct a 'narrative of self' upon the only tangible material left: their physical bodies.<sup>6</sup> The body is an unfinished biological phenomenon that is transformed as a result of its participation in certain social practices.<sup>7</sup> Body piercing can be viewed as an attempt to 'write the meaning' of the body over and above its biology.

Postmoderns see the human body not only as the site of identity construction, the canvas with which one expresses one's individuality, but as the site of a power struggle. Whose interpretative community will be allowed to determine the body's meaning? Whose reading of sexuality, for instance, will prevail? In our present situation, marked as it is by the conflict of interpretations, body-piercing represents an assault on the very notion of a 'natural' sense. The postmodern assumption, again, is that human identity is not received but achieved, and body piercing is viewed as a strategy for 'augmenting' body-language. Sex-change operations, the most radical form of body piercing, go far beyond commentary and would be better construed as radical attempts to 'rewrite' the body. Such manipulative operations, I suggest, are wholesale rejections of a person's particular bodily 'text'.

#### *A theological interpretation of the body*

... From a theological perspective, the natural is precisely that which accords with the creator's intention, with what Plantinga calls the 'design plan'. Our embodied identity as male or female, for instance, is something we are to receive with gratitude, not something arbitrary that can be made into something else. A complete theological interpretation of our natural bodies would include the following points: that they are created by God, members of Christ (1 Cor 6:15), and finally, temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). These theological indicatives lead to a theological imperative: to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1).

#### **The body of the text**

The body, then, is like a text. Whereas postmoderns seek to legitimate the project of writing one's own meaning onto the body, Christians, I have suggested, should see the body as already inscribed with meaning by the triune God. This is the lesson we need to apply to the theological interpretation of Scripture, for the Biblical text is, conversely, like a body.

The 'body' of the text refers, in common parlance, to the main part of a text. In contemporary hermeneutical theory, however, the text often appears as an inert, lifeless body, on which the interpreter performs various operations. 'Texts, like dead men and women, have no rights, no aims, no interests. They can be used in whatever way readers or interpreters choose'.<sup>8</sup> Dead bodies make no gestures. They do nothing. They are passive, not active. To the extent that the text has no aims or life of its own, it is at the mercy of the reader. It would appear that there is only one active agent in interpretation: the reader. Mark Taylor therefore only slightly exaggerates when he characterizes interpretation as 'a hostile act in which interpreter victimizes text'.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the notion of body-piercing, in the context of text interpretation, can be applied in two very different ways. On the one hand, one can look at the text, like the body, as the site of identity construction. *This predilection for identity construction is precisely what contemporary body piercers and postmodern interpreters have in common.* There are two problems, however, with viewing interpretation as a means of identity construction: (1) if what gets constructed depends less on the nature of the text or the natural sense than the sense

---

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, London, Sage, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Morgan, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Mark C. Taylor, 'Text as Victim', in Thomas Altizer, ed. *Deconstruction and Theology*, NY, Crossroad, 1982, p. 65.

nurtured in the interpreting community, how can what the interpretative community does to the text be defended as something more than an arbitrary social convention? (2) to the extent that the community uses the text to construct or reinforce its identity, how can it avoid the charge that its interpretation is nothing more than an imposition, perhaps even a violent one, onto the body of the text?

On the other hand, one can pierce the body (or the text) in the sense of getting beneath the surface and discerning what lies beneath (e.g., its message). As we shall see, this latter sense of body piercing views the body of the text not merely as a passive object but also as something active – a communicative act, to be precise.

### III. What is theological interpretation?

What is the force of the qualifying adjective 'theological' when it comes to Biblical interpretation? Obviously, such interpretation has something to do with God, but what? There are several possibilities, but I will consider only the two options mentioned above in my introductory remarks. The one view sees *theological* as qualifying the *object* of interpretation (viz., Scripture as God's, the wholly other's, Word); the other sees it as qualifying the *process* of interpretation (viz., the socialization or identity construction of the people of God). For the first, what makes Biblical interpretation theological is the appeal to God as in some sense Scripture's author; according to the latter view, what makes Biblical interpretation theological is more a matter of the aim and outcome, namely, living faithfully with others before God. . . .

#### **Between general and special hermeneutics**

##### *Theological interpretation and hermeneutics in general: the meaning of meaning*

General hermeneutics concerns the principles of text interpretation as such. Benjamin Jowett speaks for many historical-critics when he exhorts interpreters to read the Bible 'like any other book', namely, for 'the meaning', which has traditionally been associated with the sense the historical author intended. However, numerous studies have documented how historical critics became side-tracked by attempts to reconstruct either the history of the text's composition (i.e., the text's 'pre-history' in source, form, and tradition criticism) or the real rather than the apparent historical events referred to, or thus spending more energy on what lay *behind* the text than in what lay *in* it.

##### *Theological interpretation and Scripture in particular: ecclesial interests*

This preoccupation with the history *behind* the text has led other Biblical interpreters to relegate the question of authorial intention to secondary status. They argue that textual meaning should not be equated with authorial intention, nor should the quest for 'the meaning' define the project of theological interpretation. On the contrary, what makes Biblical interpretation *theological* is the specific interpretative interest in using the Bible to build up the community in faith, hope, and love.

##### *Theological hermeneutics: towards a Christian theory of interpretation*

Is it enough to know the ends of theological interpretation? There is an alternative, often overlooked, to general, often secular theories of meaning on the one hand and the notion that Christian communities read the Bible in their own way on the other. A number of recent writers, myself included, argue for a theological hermeneutics, that is, a theory of interpretation – of the Bible and of texts in general – that is itself formed, informed, and reformed by Christian doctrine.<sup>10</sup> This strategy combines the concerns of both general and special hermeneutics by offering a properly *theological* account of 'the meaning' of a text.

---

<sup>10</sup> See especially Craig Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, and the recent work of Anthony Thiselton.

### **Interpretative aims: the Rule of Faith as a hermeneutical rule**

Proponents of what we might term 'ruled reading' contend that classic Christian hermeneutics never approached the text with methods only, but always with certain rules, rules that ultimately function to aid Christian formation. Such 'ruled reading' is the best means for arriving at the end of theological interpretation, namely, a deeper communion with God and others. The connection between ruled reading and 'socializing' interpretation (e.g., the type that seeks to overcome estrangement) should now be clear. Ruled reading – reading in communion for spiritual formation – is a matter of learning authorized community interpretative practices. The *telos* of these practices, we may recall, is to build up the community, not to discover something about the message of the text.

Those who commend Ruled Reading see theological interpretation of Scripture more in terms of politics than of epistemology. The point, they say, is not to develop general principles of for coming to know texts, but rather to foster a certain shape of community life. The Rule of Faith performs three hermeneutical functions in pursuit of this community end: (1) it helps determine the plain sense of the text (2) it unifies the Scriptures (3) it serves as a criterion for interpretation.

#### *The plain sense*

Proponents of Ruled Reading assert the priority of the plain sense of Scripture but then go on to deny that the plain sense is a property of the text. The plain sense is rather the sense the text has when read in the context of the believing community. This fits in with the general theme that texts have no intrinsic aims nor interests, and with the idea that theological interpretation is primarily a matter of the aims and interests of the interpretative community. The Rule of Faith functions as the sanctioned 'preunderstanding' of the subject matter of Scripture and basically sets forth the story of what God was doing in Christ. The Rule's shape is essentially narrative, its substance Trinitarian. This ecclesial preunderstanding of what the Bible is fundamentally about, based on the centrality of the narratives of Jesus, enables the church to 'rule in' some interpretations and 'rule out' others. What is noteworthy is that the plain sense may or may not coincide with the explicit *verbal* sense of the text.

Similarly, the unity of Scripture is less a matter of the coherence of its parts than the by-product of a habit of reading. Finally, the Rule of Faith functions as a criterion with which to determine which readings are appropriate for the Christian community. as the interpretations are finally tested not by the text but by the Rule. This is precisely what one would expect of those who follow Stanley Fish, for whom authority in interpretation is vested in the practices of the interpretative community, not in some alleged inherent textual properties. To the cry 'Exegesis! Exegesis! Exegesis!', one wonders whether Ruled Readers might rejoin 'Tradition! Tradition! Tradition!'.

#### *Whose use? Which grammar? A catholic rule*

The suggestion that theological interpretation of Scripture take the form of Ruled Reading is a powerful one. It carries the venerable weight of ancient tradition and appeals to postmodern sensibilities (e.g., the authority of interpretative communities; interpretation as a mode of identity construction) besides. The main thrust of the proposal is that one view the aims of the interpretative community, that is, the church's interest in spiritual formation, is constitutive of the practice of theological interpretation of Scripture. Yet what should we make of the eclipse, at least the partial eclipse, of the natural sense in favour of the aims and rules for reading Scripture?

To begin with, we may note a certain irony in the claim that Ruled Reading caters to the specific aims of the believing community to the detriment of general theories of meaning. In fact, the notion that one should look 'not to the meaning but to the use', is easily traced back to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is neither Fish nor Fowl, but the philosophical presence

behind both. Let us assume that Wittgenstein is correct in his assumption that we need to attend to the particular uses of words. The question then becomes: to *whose* use should theological interpreters of Scripture look? Possible answers to this query fall into three types: (1) to the persons (authors, redactors, canonizers) responsible for producing the final form of the text (2) to readers seeking to use Scripture for the sake of edification in accordance with the Rule of Faith (3) to God as the ultimate author or appropriator of the Biblical text.

According to Ruled Reading approach, the aims of the Biblical text are subordinate to the aims of the present interpretative community. The church canonized certain texts 'because (when used and used properly) these writings agree with the Rule of Faith in content and consequence'.<sup>11</sup> Ruled Readers apparently agree with Wittgenstein that 'interpretation' is a matter of making grammatical remarks about the ways in which texts are used. The Rule of Faith, on this view, is the 'grammar' implicit in the community's interpretative practice (e.g., read the two testaments as a single book; read the story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the story of Israel). The inevitable conclusion: 'the canon that measures the legitimacy and efficacy of the Bible's interpretation is the church's Rule of Faith'.<sup>12</sup> What is Christianly adequate is measured by the Rule of Faith, not by Scripture. The point is that the Rule of Faith becomes a 'canonical' rule, the chief criterion for adjudicating between legitimate and illegitimate theological interpretation.

Is it not somewhat disingenuous both to claim that the Christian community reads Scripture in a manner that is *sui generis* and to rely (at least tacitly) on a general theory in support of this claim? Ruled Readers say they are not interested in theories of meaning, yet current formulations of Ruled Reading fit in perfectly with the contemporary turn to reader-oriented approaches in secular criticism. To say that the interpretation of texts is inseparable from the history of their reception just *is* to take sides in contemporary debates about textual meaning.

The pressing question is just this: *whose* Rule is it? Ruled Readers invariably answer: the rule of the church catholic: 'A critical theological hermeneutic requires that every rule of faith must bear close family resemblance to the catholic Rule of Faith'.<sup>13</sup> The Rule of Faith is hence a catholic rule, a summary of how the ecumenical church has, through its history, read the Biblical texts. This catholic rule thus affords an anchor in the sea of interpretative possibilities.

At this point we must pose two further critical questions: first, just how catholic is the Rule? Is it simply a contingency of church history that the Rule is Trinitarian rather than Unitarian? How do we know the church got the doctrine of God right, or should we simply accept that might, in this case relative catholicity, makes right?

Second, quite apart from the all too obvious present problem of there being a plurality of ecclesial communities, the Ruled Reading approach fails to ascribe supreme authority to the Scriptures because it fails adequately to recognize Scripture as the result of divine authorship. Authority is vested in reading practices, and therefore in reading communities. Francis Watson argues that this hermeneutic actually works against theology by substituting the being of the community for the communicative agency of God. The community must not become the basic principle in hermeneutics. I submit, therefore, that we must recognize the priority of God, specifically, the priority of his speech agency or 'authorship' of Scripture. To interpret the Bible theologically is to interpret it as the verbal communicative action of God that bears witness to God's historical communicative action in the history of Israel and of

---

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Wall, 'Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The "Rule of Faith" in Theological Hermeneutics', in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, 'Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions', p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Jesus Christ. There are indeed many possible interpretative aims and interests, but the people of God must above all concern themselves with what God is saying, and doing, in and through the Scriptures.

### **Interpretative norms: the natural sense**

In his important article on postcritical canonical interpretation, George Lindbeck describes the contemporary options for Biblical interpretation: 'The choices tend to range between the three poles of ecclesiastical magisterium, unchanging communal tradition, and private interpretation or, more concretely and inaccurately expressed, Rome, Constantinople, and Wittenberg/Geneva'.<sup>14</sup> The first two approaches are unable to lodge an appeal to the text as a basis for preferring one interpretation to another: 'For both, choices between alternative patterns of canonical construal are intratextually arbitrary; one must exit the text in order to find grounds for decision; and as to how one does that they seem to have no hermeneutically usable answers'.<sup>15</sup>

What Lindbeck's comments bring to light is the need, not for another interpretative aim, but rather for an interpretative *norm*: . . . This leads me to privilege not Wittenberg but *Gutenberg*, for this norm reflects not some community interest but the texts', or rather, their *authors*' – human and divine – communicative interest which the written discourse enacts.

#### *Five theses on theological interpretation of Scripture: the role of communicative action*

I have argued elsewhere for the cogency of the following theses. Here I will limit myself to a short exposition, in order then to turn to an extended exegetical example. It is worth observing, however, that I have sought to derive these theses from Christian doctrine; the use of speech act philosophy is merely ancillary to my theological purpose.

##### *1. The ultimate authority for Christian theology is the triune God in communicative action.*

Theology is a human response to a divine initiative: communicative action. God makes himself known in word and deed. God is the initiator of this action (agent), the Word or content of this action (act), and the Spirit or power of its reception (consequence). It is imperative, insofar as we seek to preserve the integrity of the gospel, to respect the difference between the Word of God embodied and enacted in Scripture on the one hand, and human commentary on the other. This fundamental intuition – that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not change at the behest of our interpretations – requires nothing less than a distinction between true and false religion, as well as a distinction between right worship and idolatry.

##### *2. A text's 'plain meaning' or 'natural sense' is the result of a person's communicative action (e.g., what an author has done in tending to his or her words in this way rather than another).*

It is the *author's* use of words in communicative action that determines their particular sense. True, words have a range of verbal or conventional senses, but the way in which authors employ linguistic and literary conventions usually indicates which of the many conventional senses (and there may be more than one) are intended. The natural sense, in short, is the authorially *intended* sense: the sense the words bear when used in *this* context by *this* author. While it is possible to say what readers make of a text, this is not the same as interpreting it. To say what I would have meant had I authored, say, *Galatians*, is to engage in composition, not commentary.

---

<sup>14</sup> Lindbeck, 'Postcritical Canonical Interpretation', in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honour of Brevard S. Childs*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

3. *To call the Bible 'Scripture' is to acknowledge a divine intention that does not contravene, but supervenes on, the communicative intentions of its human authors.*

Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently shown how God could be said to 'appropriate' human discourse. That is one way to associate a divine communicative intention with one that is human. There are two other ways: the traditional insistence on the dual-authorship of Scripture, an insistence that ultimately presupposes a doctrine of providence; and the more recent insistence that the divine intention comes into its own when the parts of the text are read in light of the canonical context.

4. *The theological interpretation of Scripture requires us to give 'thick descriptions' of the canonical acts in the Bible performed by both the human and the divine authors.*

The task of literal interpretation is to say what authors have done with their words. If one takes divine authorship of Scripture seriously, then literal interpretation must have recourse to the canonical context, for the meaning of the parts is related to the whole of Scripture. The literal sense of Scripture as intended by God is the sense of the canonical act (e.g., of the communicative act when seen in the context of the canon). We may recall that the norm of interpretation – the natural sense – is a matter of an author's intentional action. What is important to remember is that some features of an action only emerge against a certain context of description. There are many ways to describe what someone has done: we may say that a person moved his index finger, fired a gun, killed someone, assassinated a political figure, and precipitated the First World War. All of these descriptions are true as far as they go. But the higher level description – 'he precipitated the First World War' – gives a 'fuller' sense of the act than 'he moved his index finger'. It is only against the larger canonical backdrop that we can discern what God may have intended in particular Biblical texts.<sup>16</sup>

5. *The norm of theological interpretation (viz., what an author has intentionally said/done), also generates an aim of interpretation: to bear competent witness to what an author has said/done.*

A certain interpretative imperative follows from the above indicative – from, that is, the notion that the text just *is* an intentional communicative act. 'Thou shalt not bear false witness' is only the negative version of this interpretative imperative. The positive version is 'Do unto others' texts as you would have them do unto yours'.

#### *A canonical rule*

'The aim of reading Scripture, to build up Christian faith and practice, should always order decisions about which methods and approaches to adopt'.<sup>17</sup> This is a laudable aim. I have argued, however, that this aim needs a norm. There is indeed a rule or norm for theological interpretation, but it is *canonical*, not (at least, not primarily) catholic.

What constitutes a theological interpretation of celestial bodies, of the human body, and of the body of the text? A theological interpretation, if it is to be authoritative, not to mention true, must involve more than the church's say-so, more than a set of community conventions. It is God's say-so that enables the Church's say-so to be properly theological. To give a theological interpretation of celestial, human, and textual bodies, therefore, is a matter of articulating the Creator's intention, an intention realized preeminently in the life and fate of Jesus Christ as attested in the Old and New Testaments.

It is important not to overdraw the distinction between the catholic and canonical rules. The Rule of Faith – that prior understanding as to what the Biblical texts are fundamentally about – is taken from Scripture itself. The *catholic* Rule of Faith makes explicit what is already *implicit* in the Scriptures. In this regard, we may note in passing that

---

<sup>16</sup> Note that this account of 'thick description' supersedes the notion of *sensus plenior*.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, '(Mis)reading the face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church', *Theological Studies*, 60 (1999), p. 528.

each of the rules of 'traditional hermeneutics' often cited by proponents of Ruled Reading is already implied by Paul's use of the Old Testament Scriptures. The rules for theological tradition, I submit, have their origin not in the 'Great Tradition' but rather in the *apostolic* tradition embodied in the Scriptures.

#### IV. Body piercing and the body of Jesus: interpreting Jn. 19:31-34

'But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spike, and at once there came out blood and water' (Jn. 19:34). The account of the piercing of Jesus' side is an appropriate case study for several reasons: (1) it occurs at a climactic place in the most theological of gospels, and it is the only part of the passion narrative that has no parallel in the Synoptics (2) it involves the relation of both testaments (3) it raises questions about the extent, and the complexity, of the author's intention, about how determinate it is, and about how definite we can be about its determinacy (4) it touches on a number of theological doctrines, including incarnation, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and divine providence (5) historically, it has generated a rich tradition of theological interpretation (6) it touches on the postmodern concern for the textuality of the body and the bodiliness of the text.

Of the many aspects of the text that could be examined, I wish to focus on just one: how to interpret the natural sense of the result of Jesus' body-piercing, namely, the flow of blood and water. What does the task of theological interpretation mean when it comes to making (natural!) sense of the blood and water?

#### **History of interpretation: the catholic rule**

A number of church fathers understood the blood and water to refer to the two chief sacraments of the church: Baptism and Eucharist. Clearly, there is nothing *contrary* to the Rule of Faith in interpreting the blood and water as an anticipation of the sacraments that nourish and give life to the church. On the contrary, such a reading admirably serves the goal of community formation (e.g., social identity construction). The issue, however, is whether this 'socialized' reading may legitimately claim the authority of Scripture. Or, does the interpretative aim of the community (*viz.*, the interest in ecclesial edification) trump the interpretative norm (*viz.*, the natural sense)? Just what is the Word of God for the church in John 19:31-37?

#### *Augustine*

Augustine's interpretation was based on a Latin mistranslation of the Greek. Augustine read 19:34 as 'One of the soldiers with a spear *opened* his side'. To compound matters, Augustine chose to focus on the significance of this errant term, commenting that the Evangelist used a 'wide awake' or suggestive word. Augustine even makes a special point of saying that the Evangelist did *not* say 'pierced' or 'wounded'! No, the Evangelist said 'opened' in order to speak of the door of life that was flung open and from which the sacraments of the church flow. Augustine saw a foretelling of this in the Noah narrative, for Noah was ordered to make a door *in the side of the ark* where those animals that were not going to perish in the flood could enter. (These animals, we may note, prefigured the church).

The idea of an opening in the side suggests another episode from Genesis to Augustine as well: Eve, the mother of the living, also came forth from an opening in Adam's side. The crucified Christ is indeed a second Adam who 'slept on the cross in order that from there might be found for him a wife – that one who flowed from the side of the One sleeping'.<sup>18</sup> Other church fathers work the analogy even more: since sin came from man's side, it was necessary that from the side should flow the source of salvation – a side for a side.

...

---

<sup>18</sup> *Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 112-24, tr. John W. Rettig, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, p. 51.

*Raymond Brown*

Modern scholars disagree over the question of 'sacramentalism' in the Fourth Gospel. On the one hand, the Evangelist omits an account of the Eucharistic action of Jesus at the Last Supper. On the other hand, some see symbolic references to baptism in passages that mention water, and to the Eucharist in passages that mention bread (e.g., Jn. 6). Raymond Brown nevertheless questions the hermeneutic principle that 'since a passage can be understood sacramentally, it was intended sacramentally'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Thin description: the critical rule and the physical natural**

Reading according to the catholic rule stretches the natural sense of Jn 19:34 to the breaking point. Yet reading with modern Biblical scholars according to the critical rule ('what actually happened?') tends to evacuate the text of theological significance. Such the result when one understands the natural sense to refer to the text's ostensive, empirical reference only. There is a parallel here with approaches that describe human action in terms of bodily movements only, instead of in terms of intentional action. In both cases, the result is a reduced, if not reductionistic, or 'thin' description.

By 'thin' description I mean one that offers a minimal interpretation only, one that confines itself, say, to lexical issues or to issues of historical reference. What gets lost is precisely the dimension of the author's communicative action: what one is doing in using just these words in just this way. The problem with thin interpretation is that it fails to penetrate (to pierce!) the text deeply enough to reach the theological dimension. Jn 19:34 has prompted more than one medical doctor to try his hand at Biblical interpretation, but most of these readings get no farther than blood-thinning. . . .

The title of Stroud's 1871 work promises much: *Treatise on the Physical Cause of the Death of Christ and Its Relation to the Principles and Practice of Christianity*.<sup>20</sup> He argued that Jesus' heart ruptured violently, that Jesus literally died of a 'broken heart'! Blood from the ruptured heart flowed into the pericardial sac, and after clotting, it separated from the serum. The piercing by the lance opened the pericardial sac, releasing both substances. An interesting explanatory hypothesis, except that medical science today rejects the possibility of spontaneous cardiac ruptures.

Pierre Barbet, *A Doctor At Calvary: the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ as Described by a Surgeon* puts forward a slightly different hypothesis.<sup>21</sup> The watery fluid flowed from the pericardial sac, while the blood flowed from the heart itself (rather than from the pericardial sac). This interpretation received the approval of an article that appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1986 that was authored by consultants from the Mayo Clinic together with a pastor.

What is fascinating about these varied descriptions is the fact of their disagreements. Even at the most basic level of a purely physical description, we find a conflict of interpretations! The other thing to be said, of course, is that these descriptions are not really *interpretations* at all; they do not really help us to understand the Evangelist's communicative intent and action.

### **Thick description: the canonical rule and the theological natural**

The catholic rule orients us as to an important aim of theological interpretation: the building up of the church. Yet it is the natural sense that regulates this aim by providing the norm for acceptable interpretations: a *canonical* rule. Theological interpretations of Scripture

---

<sup>19</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XI (The Anchor Bible, vol. 29)*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1970, p. cxii.

<sup>20</sup> London: Hamilton & Adams, first published in 1847.

<sup>21</sup> Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1953.

that view the Bible as divine discourse will assign priority to the communicative aims of the Scriptures over the interpretative aims of the community of readers. We now turn to a 'thick description' of Jn. 19:34 that aims to describe what the author is doing in this text (e.g., the intentional action).

What the Evangelist is doing, I suggest, is narrating the history of Jesus in a broader canonical and theological framework (that the Evangelist is composing history rather than fiction follows from the appeal to eyewitness testimony in 19:35). The Evangelist's text is a 'thick description' of the event of Jesus Christ, and our interpretations must, similarly, be thick descriptions of the Evangelist's communicative act.

There are three ways of describing what the author of the Fourth Gospel is doing in this passage. As we have seen, it is possible to offer more than one correct description of an action (e.g., moving one's index finger, pulling a trigger, etc.). Everything depends on the context in which the action, or in this case, the communicative action, is described. I list below what I think the Evangelist is doing in this passage, beginning with the least obvious and proceeding to what, in context, is arguably the natural sense of the text.

1. *The Evangelist asserts the reality of Jesus' death, and hence his genuine humanity.* According to Beasley-Murray, the Evangelist 'almost certainly' wanted his readers to recognize the reality of Jesus' death, and hence the reality of his humanity as a man of flesh and blood.<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus proposed a similar anti-docetic interpretation in his *Against Heresies*: '[if he had not been truly man] when his side was pierced, would there have come forth blood and water'.<sup>23</sup> Brown is less certain than Beasley-Murray about the Evangelist's communicative intent because first-century Docetism is not well documented; nor does Brown believe that the intent to assert the reality of Jesus' death explains the flow of water.

2. *The Evangelist views the significance of Jesus' death as a 'new Passover' and a 'new Exodus'.* With this description of the Evangelist's communicative action we adopt a wide-angle lens – one that encompasses Old Testament testimony. For the stage on which the scene of Jesus' body-piercing takes place is set for Passover. . . . Unless one is canonically tone-deaf, it is virtually impossible not to hear a number of echoes from the Passover ritual in this passage. The Evangelist has already told us that Jesus is the lamb of God (1:29). He also tells us that Jesus was handed over to Pilate at noon (19:14), the time at which the Passover lambs were slain in the temple. . . . Further, the narrator explicitly tells us that these things took place so that scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of him shall be broken'; and 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced' (19:36, 37). The Evangelist's purpose is to strengthen the reader's faith that Jesus in his death fulfils the significance of the Passover as well as the eschatological hope for a second Exodus.

3. *The Evangelist believes that Jesus' death or 'exodus' is the condition, now fulfilled, for a new coming of the Spirit, the giver of eternal life.* We find what is perhaps the most important textual clue as to the Evangelist's communicative intent in 19:34, however, in Jn 7:38-39, where Jesus quotes the following passage of Scripture: 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'. Some interpreters also hear echoes of Num 20:11, where water flows from the rock struck (not pierced, however) by Moses.

The Evangelist interrupts his own narrative flow at this point to make sure the reader is following the speech action: 'Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believe in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (7:39). Jesus is here promising that following his glorification, living water (the Spirit) would be available to those who believe in his glorification (i.e., his bloody death on behalf of sinners).

---

<sup>22</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 356.

<sup>23</sup> Adv. Haer. 3.22.2.

Now the Evangelist has already associated Jesus' body with the Temple in Jerusalem (2:19-21), and he assumes that his readers will be familiar with the passage that speaks of the flow of living water from Jerusalem and the temple at the triumphant day of the Lord (Ezek 47:1-9). We know, moreover, that for the Fourth Evangelist, Jesus is glorified in his being 'lifted up' on the cross. By calling our attention to the flow of blood and water, then, The Evangelist demonstrates that the promised new life, and more particularly, the gift of the Holy Spirit, has now arrived and is available. Passover, we might say, passes over into pneumatology. What the Evangelist is doing in speaking of the flow of blood and water, then, is assuring his readers that the new life of the Holy Spirit flows from the slain body of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

## V. The nature of theological interpretation and the theological interpretation of the natural sense

Theological exegesis is best construed as a 'thick description' of the natural (viz., the literal-literary, authorially-intended) sense. The Rule of Faith works best when viewed as the explicit formulation of a grammar that is implicit in (and intrinsic to) Scripture. The canon is only allowed to be itself – respected as a stranger, as an other – if one follows the hermeneutical rule to read for its natural (e.g., authorially intended) sense.

Theological interpretation is neither merely reading with a particular community interest nor is it *merely* a matter of individuals describing, but not appropriating, authorial discourse. Each approach needs the other. To have interpretative aims without norms exposes readers to the danger of inaccurate exegesis; to have interpretative norms without aims exposes them to the danger of incomplete application.

What finally keeps the aim and the norm together, I believe, is a vision of the task of theological interpretation of Scripture in terms of giving *true witness*. Let us return to our passage once more, not to solve the problem of the meaning of the blood and water but rather to reflect on the lessons it holds for the project of theological interpretation as such.

### **The necessity of theological interpretation: reading for true witness (vs. 35)**

Why is it necessary to read the Bible for its communicative action, and for whom is such reading necessary? The answer to both questions, I believe, is implicit in vs. 35: 'He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth – that you also may believe'. The Evangelist is a paradigmatic theological interpreter of Scripture, and the passage we have been examining is not simply an illustration of an interpretative approach, but an implicit demand to embody it.

According to B. F. Westcott, vs. 35 is not simply saying that the witness has given an accurate (e.g., factually true) testimony, but rather that his witness is *alethine*, 'true to the idea of what a witness should be'.<sup>25</sup> The author is not only correct, but *competent*. He has seen all that there is to be seen – the whole truth. In my terms, he is a competent and true witness because he gives a sufficiently thick description of the event. The prime interpretative imperative finally amounts to a familiar command: 'Do not bear false witness' (Ex 20:16).<sup>26</sup>

If interpreters are likewise to be competent witnesses to the subject matter of the text, our testimony, like that of the narrator, must be sufficiently thick so as to discern the theological significance both of the events reported and of the report (e.g., the communicative act). After all, testimony is important because of its aim: 'that you may believe'. The best

<sup>24</sup> For an extended treatment of this point, see Larry Paul Jones, 'The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement*, series 145, p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> Westcott, p.liv.

<sup>26</sup> Who is my neighbour? Can a text be a neighbour? Why not? As I indicated in my opening illustration, the text represents a voice that is not our own – the voice of a stranger, the voice of an other. The ethical task of the interpreter is to welcome and respect this voice.

theological interpreter of Scripture, then, is the competent witness to what the author has said/done.

### **The normativity of theological interpretation: reading for God's canonical action (vs. 36)**

'For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled. . . .'

The competent witness to what the Evangelist is doing in 19:31-37 would be remiss not to take account of the significance of the appeal to fulfilled Scripture. For what the Evangelist is doing in this text is ultimately unintelligible apart from a consideration of his entire Gospel, not to mention the Scriptures of the Old Testament as well. From Jesus' 'I thirst' in 19:28 to 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced' (19:37), the Evangelist has woven a thoroughly Biblical framework within which to describe the piercing of Jesus' side. The concept of *canonical* action – that is, communicative action described in canonical context – ultimately calls for an acknowledgement of divine authorship.

What about the natural sense of the Old Testament texts cited in our passage (e.g., Ps 69:18; Ex 12:46; Zech. 12:10)? Does the Evangelist's use distort their natural sense? No, but it does recontextualize it. With regard to Old Testament prophecy, we would do well to amend Michael Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge: it is not so much that the prophets 'know more than they can tell', but rather that they *tell more than they can know*. The prophets' testimony, when appropriated by the Evangelist, is disambiguated. To place these Old Testament testimonies in the larger canonical context of the story of Jesus Christ functions to specify their true referents: the body of Jesus (the Messiah); the body of Christ (the Church). *To describe the natural sense theologically is to discern the divine intention enacted in and by the canonical Scriptures*. The theological-natural sense thus refers to the way the words and texts go in their divinely appointed canonical context.<sup>27</sup>

We only pierce beyond the physical to the theological (i.e., beyond the human author's intent to that of the divine author) if we describe what is done and what is said against the broader canonical context. Yet this is our role as theological interpreters: to examine the body of the text with piercing discernment. Theological interpretation of Scripture is nothing less than a kind of body piercing, though one that does not absolve but acknowledges the theological-natural (e.g., divinely intended) sense: what *God* is saying/doing in this text.

The fact that the events surrounding the piercing of Jesus' side fulfil not one but two Scriptures is itself a claim about the divine authorship of the course of *events*. In citing Scripture as he has, the narrator puts the passion events in the broader context of divine providence. God has authored both the discourse and the course of events. As Christopher Seitz has recently observed, 'The crisis in hermeneutics is in reality a crisis involving God's providence, proper ecclesiology and doctrine of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>28</sup> Providence is what has perhaps been in view throughout this essay, inasmuch as Scripture, viewed as divine communicative action, is but 'providence put into writing'.<sup>29</sup>

## IV. Conclusion

### Body-piercing the body of Christ: how to read Scripture for a blessing

'For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,  
piercing to the division of soul and spirit' (Heb 4:12)

---

<sup>27</sup> It may be that to speak of 'divinely appointed' rather than 'divinely appropriated' discourse might, or might not, distinguish this approach from that of Wolterstorff.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Seitz, in Craig Bartholomew, ed., *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> This is my counterclaim to radical postmodernity's anti-hermeneutic, with its 'death of God put into writing'.

The Bible is a complex, multifaceted, but ultimately unified witness to what God was doing in Jesus Christ. Yet it is not enough to equate theological interpretation with 'reading for the witness', for this witness is mediated by a variety of literary forms. The contributing act of narrative, for example, is to display a world. Fully to describe texts as narrative witnesses or as witnessing narratives finally requires the concept of the author as communicative agent and of the text as communicative action, with their own intrinsic aims and intentions. One of these aims is to elicit the response of the reader. Theological interpretation of Scripture, therefore, involves not only describing but responding to and participating in the various forms of communicative intentions enacted in the text.

How, then, can the church read Scripture in order to obtain a blessing? By reading in communion (i.e., in agreement about the aims and norms of interpretation) in order (1) to discover the divine communication therein and (2) to be its faithful witnesses. To bear true witness to the text is both an aim and a norm. The best interpreters, to the extent that they become witnesses, participate in the event of meaning and thus become part of the (communicative) action. The author of the Fourth Gospel thus becomes a paradigm for the contemporary Biblical interpreter. We too are to testify to 'what we have seen and heard' in Scripture. We too are to be true and competent witnesses, able to hear the music, the echoes, of previous Scripture, able to understand the event of Jesus Christ in the context of the larger story of salvation of which it is the climax and interpretative key.

If the church is to be transformed by Scripture – if the body of Christ is to be 'pierced' by the Word-wielding Spirit – then we must read so as to open ourselves to its communicative and transformative intent. Theological interpreters of Scripture will not only read in communion with one another, but will seek deeper communion with God by laying themselves open to the effects of God's word-acts. The church, as an obedient and competent interpretative community, strives to be a faithful witnesses to what God is doing in Scripture. Theological interpretation of Scripture involves reading for communion (the aim) *and* for communication (the norm). Reading in communion is a matter of our corporate response to God's communication for the sake of deeper communion with God.