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# *What Does This Mean?: A Symposium*

## Introduction

William C. Weinrich

When the hermeneutics of Dr. James Voelz first appeared, the editorial staff of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* recognized that something rather unprecedented had occurred: a theologian from the Missouri Synod had written a monograph that presented hermeneutics as a theological task rather than a merely literary one. Moreover, the Voelz text was a timely and substantial effort to address the meaning of the Biblical text in the context of postmodern denials of an external truth and the relocation of truth in the individual or, as the case may be, in a society. In either case, truth is perspectival. But what does such a hermeneutical environment do to Biblical interpretation. How is the interpretation of the Bible to be thought and to be done. This is the formidable task that Dr. Voelz set for himself in *What Does This Mean?* Clearly this book, whatever its strengths and weaknesses may turn out to be, deserved notice—and it deserved informed response. This little symposium of reviews is an attempt to give, at least in part, such a response. The symposium was intended to be larger than it is. However, for various reasons some invited to participate did not, and Dr. Voelz determined to allow his book to stand as its own defense rather than write a response to these responses. Significant issues are raised by Voelz in his book and by the three reviewers. Hopefully in some small way these reactions, along with an ongoing dialogue with Dr. Voelz, may serve to further the task of hermeneutics within the church.

Despite the friendly interchange between these exegetes, it is clear that there is a gulf of difference in approach and hermeneutical perspective among these authors. It is not simply that there is agreement on some particulars of scriptural prologomena (inspiration and clarity, among others). It is that there is considerable difference in the overall conceptual context for understanding and articulating those particulars. Take the issue of Biblical clarity for example. Voelz locates that clarity within a context: interpretation is done by “a believing Christian

within a Christian community in accordance with the creedal understanding of those Scriptures by the historic Christian church" (228-229). Yet, Lockwood and especially Maier are not convinced that the Bible is kept clear by the hermeneutics of Voelz. They appeal to intention, to the objective priority of text, to *autopistia* in a way which asserts at times that the Bible is its own context, external to the church and receiving its meaning apart from the church. Here Maier is especially vocal about the role of the Holy Spirit. Luther in a church "that held to the historic creeds did not initially have a proper understanding of the Bible." However, Luther "essentially in isolation was led by the Holy Spirit through the Word to interpret properly that Word." But, was Luther truly isolated? Was he in no way guided by the creed of the church, by its liturgy, by its history, by its dogmatic heritage? Or does the notion of inspiration already denote the creed because the inspiring Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity and the Spirit of Christ? Is there a context in which the Bible is to be read and expounded that results in a corporate/ecclesial understanding of the text? If Voelz has not clarified the clarity of Scripture, has Maier explained why the canon exists, or why the very reality of canon should exist? If, on the other hand, there is no context for the exposition of Scripture that brings forth a common, corporate confession of its meaning, what prevents the Bible from merely private and individual understandings ("what the Bible means to me"). At this point, I think Lockwood has a point in reminding us that the hearing of Scripture is more "Biblical" than is its reading. And this points us, does it not, in the direction of a context, one in which the Scripture was in fact read, the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments. Here perhaps Wenthe has his contribution. Is it exclusively true that Biblical interpretation is about interpretation, that is, about extracting meaning from a text whose meaning is not known? Or is there a nexus between text and ecclesial reality so that the meaningful referent of the text is precisely the life of the church, exercised most decisively and densely in her worship? Does meaning therefore derive "from several levels of signifiers," as Voelz says (156)? Or, to put it another way, is the "real" meaning of the text external to the text, in the reality of faith and life created by the Word and

Spirit, that is, by Christ and the Spirit. Or, yet again, is meaning literary and linguistic, or existential and fleshly? Or, finally, will heaven be more like communing at the altar or more like hearing the gospel text read?

I believe Voelz is more open to such probings than others in this little symposium. Nonetheless, they are not his probings; they are mine. In any case, it is clear that if Voelz is interested in reader response criticism (of his book, not the Bible!), here is a slice of it. Whether their response corresponds to his intention, is another question. Since neither side can claim *autopistia* for themselves, the issue is who has *claritas* on their side. This small symposium intends to provide no answer to that, but the discussion between good and thoughtful exegetes will, we hope and intend, advance the dialogue.

## A Hermeneutics Text for the Advanced Student

Walter A. Maier III

James Voelz's *What Does This Mean?* is a thought provoking, scholarly work that shows the author's acquaintance with, and grasp of, issues pertaining to the interpretation of Scripture. Voelz is to be commended for tackling the complex subject of hermeneutics, adding his insightful work to the growing list of books dealing with the same topic. As with any other book (except the Bible), the present reviewer had both positive and negative reactions to *What Does This Mean?* The positive will be outlined first.

### Positive Reactions

The scope of this study is admirable. Treating both the Old and the New Testaments, Voelz discusses textual criticism, linguistics, and the Lutheran approach to interpreting Scripture. The second part of his work—"Linguistics"—embraces over two-thirds of the book. This part analyzes linguistic theories, Hebrew poetic structure, the canon in hermeneutical

perspective, and the various semantic dimensions of a text; examines pragmatics (the practical purpose and results of linguistic utterances); and considers the application of biblical texts to readers and communities today.

There are other aspects of the book that are commendable. Among these, for example, are Voelz's clear statements, toward the beginning, that he is a "believing Christian," who fully subscribes to the Book of Concord, who has a "high" view of Scripture, and who embraces traditional (conservative) Christian assumptions concerning God and Scripture (19-20). Appreciated is Voelz's emphasis on the Christocentricity of Scripture, the importance of context in interpreting, and the fact that Scripture interprets Scripture. Biblical examples (that is, specific passages) he uses throughout the book to illustrate his explanations are appropriate and interesting. For the most part this reviewer agreed with his handling of textual criticism, though he could have given a bit more weight to external evidence in the making of text critical decisions. His Addendum 7-A, "Language about God/'God Talk,'" is helpful in responding to feminists who want to change some of the language of Scripture. In Addendum 11-A he has a good discussion of inerrancy.<sup>1</sup> Voelz explains well in Addendum 11-B that "in the Christ-event, all was fulfilled *in principle*, but not all was fulfilled without remainder. . . . Or, the new aeon came, but not so exhaustively that the old aeon was totally gone" (251; one may see a somewhat different viewpoint on 255). His last chapter, which explains the Lutheran confessional approach, is one of the best parts of the book.

In addition to these points, several other fine features in *What Does This Mean?* could be presented. However, at this point the review will turn to the present writer's negative reactions to the book.

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<sup>1</sup>He might, however, have stated that many conservative interpreters hold to the inerrancy of the *autographs*.

### Other Reactions

It must be noted, in the first place, that these negative reactions are recorded for the sake of brotherly, and hopefully beneficial, dialogue. They fall into two basic categories: those concerning a) lack of clarity, and b) points of disagreement.

#### Lack of Clarity

With regard to this category the comments will pertain to format, individual shorter sections, and longer sections/lengthier discussions. First, the book's format is not the easiest with which to work. Since a person probably will not read the book in one sitting, and since a number of the chapters begin as does chapter 11, with simply the number 11, followed by (after a listing of important resources) the heading "7. Further Critical Issues (Continued)," and then the subheading "c. Valid Interpreters/Interpretations," he may find himself frequently backtracking in the book, trying to pick up the beginning of the discussion of a particular topic. Numerous addenda (which appear as separate chapters) to "main" chapters add to the sense of the book's being somewhat like a labyrinth. The reader could check the table of contents (at the beginning) to try to find out where he is in a discussion, but this is not convenient. A suggestion: include the addenda as subunits in the "main" chapters (perhaps with different formatting) and provide the "main" chapters with summarizing titles.

Another "complaint" concerning format: when a reference is made to a different section of the book, the page number(s) of that section is (are) not always given. This can make the process of locating somewhat tedious. An example is in chapter 8, page 184, which has this reference: "(cf. chapter 5, section 3 c iii (B) (1) (B), above)." Additionally, the lack of an index does not ease the challenge of working with the book's format.

Concerning lack of clarity in individual shorter sections, only two will be cited. In chapter 2 (which deals with New Testament textual criticism), Voelz, describing followers of the "type"-of-text theory, writes in paragraph (B) that "those who adopt this theory will seek to *establish* one recension/text-type which

seems to preserve a 'strict' text. Such a recension is *selected* on the basis of 'the one great rule'" (49, emphasis added). "Establishing" a text-type is not exactly the same as "selecting" one. This passage could prove confusing to certain readers. A little more explanation would be helpful, particularly since Voelz concludes the paragraph by writing, "It is important to note that one *selects* among competing variant readings within the chosen recension by applying 'the one great rule'" (emphasis added). Secondly, Voelz's contention that the "implied" reader of a text, for whom the text's author writes, corresponds to no actual reader of the text, needs further clarification (219).

The following comments pertain to the lack of clarity in longer sections/lengthier discussions.

1) Voelz's language of "signifiers," "conceptual signifieds," "referent," and related terminology (especially in chapter 4, but throughout the book) is highly technical and difficult. The diagram of the communications model in chapter 4 is hard to understand (95). If this book is "to be a basic hermeneutics textbook" (11), it would be advisable for Voelz to communicate in certain sections in a way which is simpler and more readily understood. That would entail less of the following kind of writing: "Therefore, the meaning of the larger whole is the meaning of a matrix of signifiers with interrelated meanings, with the meanings of all signifiers being understood in every respect in relation to the meanings of all other signifiers." It would lead to more of this kind of writing: "In other words, nothing (no word/signifier) has individual meaning apart from context, including the larger context . . . and the entire package itself conveys a total meaning." The preceding quotations stand side-by-side on 102-103!

2) That Voelz at different places in *What Does This Mean?* writes in a general way about interpreting a text, and not with a specifically Lutheran slant, could cause some misunderstanding, as far as this reviewer is concerned. For example, it would have been better for Voelz to have placed the last part of the book ("The Lutheran Confessional Approach"),



which is chapter 14, before chapters 10 and 11. In other words, before the latter two chapters he could have stated in a clear way that the believer, following sound (Lutheran), biblically-sanctioned hermeneutical principles, and guided by the Holy Spirit through the Word, would correctly interpret that Word. Then the reader would have the proper perspective when Voelz in chapter 10 describes the interpreter as a “second text,” “against” which the first or “target” text (for example, Galatians) is interpreted (209), and when he states that “because of the presence and activity of the interpreter’s own person/self as text . . . there is no possibility of ‘objective’ textual interpretation” (210). The reader would not conclude, incorrectly, that it is impossible to derive objective truth from Scripture, or that every interpreter’s interpretation of Scripture is equally valid.

Likewise, the reader would also have in proper perspective Voelz’s assertion in Addendum 12-D that “the very experience one has while reading – which is itself a reaction to the meaning one perceives – can itself be read as a signifier and interpreted for its meaning” (319). Voelz in addition should have stated plainly that one’s own reading experience as text is secondary to the biblical text, and that the truth the Holy Spirit intended to convey in a biblical passage remains the same – regardless of a reader’s “experience.”

In chapter 11 Voelz reaches the general conclusion “that valid interpretation of the sacred Scriptures can be done only by a believing Christian within a Christian community in accordance with the creedal understanding of those Scriptures by the historic Christian church” ( 228-229). Again, Voelz needs to include the fact that this “believing Christian” must also follow sound (Lutheran) hermeneutical principles. Having added this pertinent information, Voelz undoubtedly would have omitted two footnotes, 17 and 29, which are connected to his general conclusion, and which could be confusing to the reader. Footnote 17 reads, “Ambiguities and difficulties, of course, remain in this position [quoted above]. Who is a Christian, which texts are canonical, which creeds are normative, etc. – all such questions must be explored and are impossible to answer

clearly" (223). In footnote 29 Voelz refers to "a Roman Catholic interpretation along similar lines" (228-229).

Indeed, a Roman Catholic could agree with Voelz's general conclusion. Yet one recalls that Luther, though he was in a church that held to the historic creeds did not initially have a proper understanding of the Bible. Moreover, Voelz holds that a valid interpreter of the New Testament must be taught to read by the Christian community (chapter 11, 221); yet Luther, essentially in isolation, was led by the Holy Spirit through the Word to interpret that Word properly.

3) In chapter 10, when Voelz explains that the intentional meaning of an author does not exhaust the meaning of his text (213-216), I would urge him to distinguish in a clearer way between the human author of a biblical text, who may see only a limited meaning, and the "actual" author, God the Holy Spirit. While his assertion may be true in some instances for the human author, it is not with regard to the Spirit. Further, in light of this assertion in chapter 10, footnote 19 of chapter 11 (224) could raise a question in the reader's mind. Here Voelz explains that the only one who has absolute competency to interpret a text "can only be the very author of the text."

4) Voelz states that "what happened in the OT . . . happened because of the future . . . what happened in Israel's history was determined by the future" (259; one may see also the following pages). To a certain extent Voelz is correct (but see below for a disagreement with Voelz's expansion upon this point). For the sake of clarity, however, Voelz could have mentioned the parallel consideration, namely, that what happened in the New Testament occurred because of what God had foretold/promised in the Old ("This happened, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet . . .").

### **Points of Disagreement**

The second category of negative reactions involves this reviewer's points of disagreement with parts of *What Does This Mean?* That there are such points of disagreement is not

surprising, of course, for students of Scripture do not all agree on every matter of interpretation.

1) Voelz describes story parables as narratives which are nonliteral and, in effect, extended metaphors (303-304). I would argue that some parables may be accounts of actual historical events, and that a parable is, strictly speaking, an extended simile or an extended hypocatastasis. An allegory is an extended metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

2) Voelz approvingly quotes Brevard Childs (153; 263-264):

The New Testament is not just an extension of the Old, nor a last chapter in an epic tale. Something totally new has entered in the gospel. Yet the complexity of the problem arises because the New Testament bears its totally new witness in terms of the old, and thereby transforms the Old Testament. Frequently the Old Testament is heard on a different level from its original or literal sense, and in countless figurative ways it reinterprets the Old to testify to Jesus Christ. . . . There is no one overarching hermeneutical theory by which to resolve the tension between the testimony of the Old Testament in its own right and that of the New Testament with its transformed Old Testament.

This reviewer rejects the notion that the New Testament tells "something totally new," "transforms" the Old Testament, and "reinterprets the Old to testify to Jesus Christ." The New Testament builds on and presumes the Old. Frequently the Old Testament in "its original or literal sense" points directly to people and events of the New Testament. There is no "tension between the testimony of the Old Testament in its own right and that of the New Testament."

3) This reviewer disagrees with Voelz's apparent contention that all of Old Testament history is a type: ". . . the entire history of Israel is, in a very real sense, prophetic" (262; one may compare 259-261). Only certain Old Testament people, events,

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<sup>2</sup>One may see, for example, Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 276-277.

offices, and institutions are types, and it is best to look for specific identification of these by Scripture itself. The Old Testament history is salvation history (God working out His plan of salvation); yet not all aspects/parts of that history are typical.

4) While briefly mentioning the rectilinear approach to Old Testament Messianic prophecies (for example, 268, 271), Voelz in essence strongly advocates the typological position (260, n. 17; 268-274). The present reviewer holds to the rectilinear understanding of these prophecies, which is really their only certain interpretation, based on the evidence of Scripture. Voelz uses Psalm 2 as his key example, yet he does not adequately explain why he chooses the typological interpretation for this psalm. This is noteworthy, since previously he has argued forcefully for letting the New Testament guide our interpretation of the Old (the New Testament connects the psalm directly to Christ). Indeed, he notes Peter's denial (Acts 2:25-32) of a typological interpretation of Psalm 16:8-11; Voelz's explanation for this "problem" is unconvincing (273-274, n. 14).

Before leaving the typological-rectilinear debate, this reviewer cites Voelz's proposal that

It is . . . especially the move from nonliteral meaning to literal—which is quite possibly the key to the OT interpretation which was given by our Lord . . . (Luke 24:45) . . . the essential 'hermeneutical move' when interpreting the OT and finding Christ therein is from nonliteral to literal, from understanding a passage in its historical context nonliterally . . . to an understanding that a literal meaning is also intended by the author. . . (273).

A well-known passage from Luther, with which the present writer agrees, stands in marked contrast:

The Holy Spirit is the plainest Writer and Speaker in heaven and on earth. Therefore His words can have no more than one, and that the most obvious, sense. This we call the literal or natural sense . . . we should not say that

Scripture . . . has more than one meaning. . . . Scripture does not . . . have a twofold sense.<sup>3</sup>

While Voelz is, again, to be commended for his scholarly, well-researched study of a complex subject, in my opinion *What Does This Mean?* is a textbook for the advanced hermeneutics student, and not for the beginner, for two principal reasons. First, in parts of the book the language and concepts are too technical and difficult for the beginning student. Second, for this to have been a basic hermeneutics textbook, Voelz ought to have discussed in an orderly manner additional basic hermeneutical principles and other matters of biblical interpretation (for example, figures of speech, dreams, symbolic language, allegories, quotations in Scripture, and other subjects). In fact, one could argue that his book is more a text on linguistics, rather than hermeneutics.

In conclusion, *What Does This Mean?* presents the advanced student of hermeneutics with new insights, challenges him to reexamine various aspects of the interpretation process, and encourages him to continue "wrestling" with the biblical text.

## **A Valuable Service in Addressing Hermeneutical Issues of the 1990s**

**Gregory J. Lockwood**

This reading of Dr Voelz's *Hermeneutics* has inevitably been influenced by the reviewer's own "baggage." What Voelz says of the Scriptures will certainly apply to his own book: None of us will be able to approach it with total objectivity; each reviewer will bring to the interpretive task his own "horizon," his own set of "prejudgments, prior constructs, etc." (343).

To begin to sketch one's own exegetical background and presuppositions, however, would be a complex undertaking,

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<sup>3</sup> *What Luther Says*, edited by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 91-92.

and consume more space than is warranted here. Suffice it to say that part of what attracted this reviewer to LCMS hermeneutics was the esteem in which Martin Franzmann was held by my New Testament professors in South Australia, an esteem shared by the Old Testament professor, Erich Renner, who deeply appreciated Franzmann's treatment of Romans 9-11. Then, in the 1970s, the Roehrs/Franzmann *Concordia Self-Study Commentary* appeared, a volume to which Franzmann contributed comments on the Minor Prophets and the whole New Testament. Again I found myself reading Franzmann with delight, and trying to absorb his approach to exegesis and hermeneutical issues.

Having drunk deeply of the old wine, one does not immediately take to the new. It is inevitable that we measure new approaches by what we have found tried and true. New times and challenges, however, demand new responses. The last couple of decades have seen so many new books on hermeneutics from post-modern and other perspectives that we urgently need scholars who are willing to engage contemporary issues. To that task Dr Voelz, with his long experience in New Testament teaching and his close acquaintance with recent scholarship, has given much needed attention.

I must say I found most of the reading a pleasant experience. The book itself is attractively bound and presented. Its first major section (Part 1) offers a useful overview of the "state of the art" in modern textual criticism. Part 2 leads the reader through the difficult terrain of linguistics and its relevance for Biblical interpretation. Concepts like "signifier" and "conceptual signified," "meaning" and "referent," "external entailment" and many others are clearly and helpfully explained. There are useful and balanced discussions of issues like the hazards of an uncritical appeal to etymology, and the importance of taxonomic hierarchies of meaning. Some of the discussion may be difficult for the average first-year seminary student, but it will not be beyond more gifted beginners, upper level, and graduate students.

Gradually Part 2 opens out onto more familiar theological terrain. From the importance of extensive reading of Scripture in order to appreciate "the meaning of the larger whole" (136), we come to fine sections like those on Hebrew poetry, the canon, literal and non-literal language, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, its harmony and efficacy, its Christocentric nature, its great themes ("Kingdom of God," "justification"), the role of creeds, confessions and the believing community, the nature of parables, and prophecy and fulfilment.

The author's addendum on prophecy, with its use of terminology like "double entendre," may be controversial. But our debate on the issue should at least recognize (1) that Voelz sees "double entendre" as part of the literal sense, expressly disavowing any multiple-sense interpretation; (2) his approach seeks to do justice both to the immediate and the wider context; (3) in setting forth his own approach to "prophecies with two foci," he warns that the term "typology is not always the most helpful because of abuses in the past" (271). His discussion at this point deserves careful reading.

This may be the place to observe that what at first seems to be a "double entendre" sometimes, on closer inspection, turns out not to be so. For example, consider Voelz's illustration from John 1:5 (186-87), where he says the verb *κατέλαβεν* may mean both "overcome" and "comprehend." To this reader it seems evident from the only other significant parallel in John (12:35, where the same "light/darkness" terminology is used, and it makes no sense to translate *καταλαμβάνω* as "comprehend") that the verb also means "overcome" in 1:5. Another interesting example (not used by Voelz) is the use of *ἄνωθεν* in 3:3,5, often understood to mean both "again" and "from above." It may be asked, however, whether this assessment is entirely accurate. John consistently uses *ἄνω* and *ἄνωθεν* to mean simply "from above." I suspect that in chapter 3 that is where Jesus' accent falls; however, Nicodemus, with his thinking stuck on the earthly plane, only hears him saying "born again" (*δεύτερον* - 3:4). This is a case where Voelz's distinction between primary meaning and external entailment may come into play. To some

extent, however, my quibbles about these Johannine passages are peripheral to Voelz's major concern, the interpretation of Christological prophecies.

Apart from the merits of his argument, another welcome feature is the felicitous use of illustrations to clarify complex issues—the analogy of D-Day and V-E Day to clarify Christian eschatology (252); a map to clarify the Confessions' role as a guide to Scripture (358-60); a Saturday morning incident in the (Voelz?) home to clarify the perlocutionary use of language; paintings to illustrate the process of inspiration and the relationship of prophecy to fulfillment (235-6, 266, 269).

My questions to Dr. Voelz concern four closely related areas. First, there is the issue of *objectivity* in the sense of the givenness, the priority, the independence of the Biblical revelation ("in the beginning was the Word"), before it is addressed by any reader. On page 343 we find the interesting footnote derived from Gadamer, "Neither (the text nor the interpreter) exists 'objectively' in and of itself." Is this not, however, only part of the picture, at least when speaking of the Biblical text? Granted that while we reject the anthropocentric view that exegesis is the objective assessment of data, carried out in a cold, scientific manner, is it not still true that the Biblical text possesses an unchanging, unchangeable reality (as witnessed by the extraordinary stability of the Hebrew and Greek texts in comparison with the ever-changing world of our English versions)? Furthermore, granted that no reader comes to the text without some baggage, what place is there in this scheme of things for the traditional Lutheran insistence on the absolute priority of "the bare text" of Scripture? Pieper's powerful conclusion to his locus on Scripture speaks of "Luther's oft-repeated admonition never to substitute a human interpretation for the 'text,' i.e., for the words of Scripture themselves."<sup>1</sup> Is that no longer possible, because we all come with our own interpretations? I realize that what Voelz says on this subject is complex (there is much that is valuable

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, four volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-1957), 1:366



concerning the "ideal reader," among others), and his carefully enunciated approach tries to avoid the subjectivism inherent in extreme reader-response criticism. But the concern about Scripture's "objectivity" remains.

A second and closely related issue is Scripture's intended sense. On the one hand, Voelz clearly affirms that "texts have meaning which is intended" (213), and that "the meaning of 'Level 1' signifiers is normally intended" (214). A Scriptural text is not a "waxen nose," but can in fact "rise up on its hind legs" (221, note 9). On the other hand, he states that "one can never appeal to it (i.e. the intentionality of the author) as a hermeneutical key to the interpretation of a given text" (213).

Why can we not appeal to the intended sense of the Biblical text? Voelz's answer is that people often do not agree about the author's intentions, and therefore we must look to criteria other than intentionality to determine his meaning. But while it is true that the history of exegesis is replete with examples of conflicting interpretations, it also true that striving to ascertain the author's intentions is the first and most vital part of what we cultivate in exegesis. Certainly in daily life people constantly (and rightly) appeal to the intended sense of all kinds of statements and written documents. The intended sense of the speed warnings on our highways is clear and unmistakable; police officers, for example, are generally not impressed by motorists arguing that the posted restrictions allow the reader a certain latitude.

Voelz would affirm this, of course—and here his excellent treatment of linguistic conventions comes into play. He emphatically rejects the position that you can read anything you like into the text. At the same time, this reader is left with the impression that in trying to steer a course between the subjectivism of much reader-response criticism and the approaches of traditional realism, Voelz has not been able to find a stable middle ground.

It seems to this reviewer that it would be helpful to distinguish more clearly and cleanly between questions that concern linguists and missionaries, and the primary concerns of

an exegete. Missionaries are vitally concerned with the communication process and communication models: "What is the receptor hearing? How well are we communicating what we intend to communicate?" But for the exegete the first and most important question will always be the Biblical author's original meaning. That meaning, ascertained as precisely as possible by careful use of the tools at his disposal, will always have final authority for the exegete; it should, of course, also be the first concern of the missionary and Bible translator before he turns to the communication process.

Admittedly there may sometimes be great difficulties in ascertaining the author's original sense. But we may ask whether our difficulties in reaching the ideal should lead us to abandon the ideal itself. This reviewer is not convinced Voelz has demonstrated that intentionality cannot be used as a hermeneutical key. There are too many passages where the Biblical author's intentions are crystal clear.

Bound up, then, with the issue of Scripture's intentionality is the question of its clarity. Again, Voelz affirms that the meaning of Level 1 signifiers "is often clear" (214). He has some fine observations on the Lutheran attitude to harmonization, including a full citation of Luther's passage on the cleansing of the temple in John 2, a passage often misused in the interests of historical criticism (one may see 238). He also has fine things to say on the "coherence principle" (that Scripture is a coherent whole, with Scripture interpreting Scripture, 356-357) and "Luther's . . . insistence upon the plain meaning of the literal sense of the Biblical text" (358). At the same time, as valid as observations concerning the "deliberate ambiguity" of a portion of Psalm 7 may be (316-319), we need to keep a proper perspective. Lutheran theology has traditionally insisted that Scripture is essentially clear. Voelz's book lacks the ringing affirmation of Scripture's clarity found, for example, in Wilhelm Löhe: "If the Old Testament was called by Peter a lamp shining in a dark place [II Pet. 1:19], what shall we now call the New Testament which drives every shadow out of the Old? If the Old Testament was a moon, the New Testament is the sun; if the

former was a rosy dawn, the latter is the brightness of noonday."<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, Voelz's "Conclusions and Concluding Observations" begin: "Interpretation is an inordinately complex matter. Very little is 'obvious.' The procedure is unbelievably complex, but it can and is done very quickly in actual life. This fact as much as any other testifies to the greatness of *homo sapiens* as God's own crown of creation" (339).

Certainly, the art of exegesis involves the acquisition of skills and experience in reading the Scriptures, and some become more adept than others. But we should be careful not to give the impression that their treasures are accessible above all to the specialist and the highly gifted. As Voelz acknowledges, interpretation "can and is done very quickly in actual life." And does not this testify above all to the greatness of God rather than the greatness of the interpreter, the greatness of God the Spirit who gave us His Word in a form that is essentially clear and accessible? "The Word is near you" was a favorite text of our dogmaticians.

Fourthly, I would ask if enough emphasis has been given to the life-giving power and *autopistia* of the Scriptures. By no means does Voelz overlook this theme – as mentioned above, he has a fine section on the efficacy of Scripture (one may see 288, and the preceding discussion, together with Addendum 12-A on "Performative Speech Acts"). My question is whether the impact of these sections is later weakened by considerations from the field of linguistics, for example, by Gadamer's use of the term "dialog" for the engagement between a text and its interpreter. We may take some comfort from the way the "dialog" is explained (344) "in particular" to lead to "the broadening and modification of the interpreter's present understanding of himself," rather than to the modification of the text (especially when that text is Scripture!). However, the section on Gadamer (Addendum 13-A) sits somewhat

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<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books About the Church*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 66-67.

awkwardly on the threshold of the final chapter, "The Lutheran Confessional Approach." No doubt the term "dialog" can be appropriately explained and used, and Voelz has shown how the reader does not come to the text as *tabula rasa*, but with his questions and concerns. I would ask, however, whether more emphasis should be given to the reader's passive role, his humble reception of God's gifts leading to passive contrition and passive righteousness (1 Samuel 3:10; Romans 10:17; Galatians 3:2). Voelz does touch on this on at least one occasion (213, note 6), where he refers to Thiselton's distinction between "understanding" and "reading." Does this aspect of his book need further development? More specifically, does more attention need to be given to the (more passive?) biblical concept of "hearing" rather than "reading."<sup>3</sup> When we—and Scripture—speak of "hearing," we mean an attentive focusing on the words of the speaker, rather than what the hearer may be contributing to the equation by his own reflections as "second text."

In this connection, does there need to be more emphasis on the Spirit's role in enabling the hearer/reader of the Scriptures to grasp their true meaning (one may compare Luther's emphasis on *oratio* [for the gift of the Spirit!], *meditatio* [on the Spirit's book!], and *tentatio*)?

In posing these questions, I am well aware that a textbook intended as a beginning hermeneutics cannot provide a full coverage of the doctrine of Scripture. For more comprehensive treatments we must look elsewhere. But Voelz provides a valuable service in addressing hermeneutical issues of the 1990s, especially the issues placed before the church by modern linguistic analysis, and so not addressed in the older books. For that service, and his fresh and stimulating presentation, we can be grateful.

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<sup>3</sup>It is noteworthy that while "reading" words [ἀναγινώσκω, and others] occur only thirty-two times in the New Testament, "hearing" words [ἀκούω, ἀκουή] occur 454 times.

## A Strikingly Theological Hermeneutics

Dean O. Wenthe

The extraordinary state of affairs in current Biblical hermeneutics is an expression of the larger epistemological and philosophical landscape of Western culture. The distance from the academy's assumptions and interests to the exegetical guild is frequently short and direct. Whether it be feminism, deconstructionism, or other movements, what is fashionable in universities and divinity schools soon can become the direction of seminary writing and research. One of the more balanced efforts to describe the connections between the broader thought of the academy and Biblical interpretation is the trilogy by Anthony C. Thiselton: *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Eerdmans, 1980); *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Zondervan, 1992); and *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Eerdmans, 1995). So vast is the literature and so diverse the approaches that a recent study is entitled *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, edited by Roger Lundin (Eerdmans, 1997).

In such a setting, Dr. James Voelz's *What Does This Mean?* (Concordia, 1995) is a welcome engagement of current questions. His subtitle, "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World," indicates such a focus. By using the catechetical formula "What does this mean?" Voelz particularly invites the Lutheran community to explore the question of how the biblical text renders its claim and meaning.

An initial accolade must be offered to Voelz for taking up such a task. It is striking that his is the first *book-length* hermeneutics to be produced by a professor at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in a number of decades. While biblical authority and interpretation have been at the center of the Missouri Synod's theological agenda and many articles and papers have been written on them, it is refreshing to have a rigorous and coherent treatment of this breadth and depth.

A second cause for commendation is Voelz's clear commitment to engage in critical evaluation of the contemporary hermeneutical scene. The positions that he describes and the bibliographies he provides attest the author's familiarity with the literature. His balance and accuracy in representing those perspectives is commendable. The reader will not find simplistic formulas or tidy repetition of traditional answers in this hermeneutics. Rather, there is a fresh engagement of complex questions. This means that this text asks more of the reader. However, it thereby delivers more, for Voelz clearly articulates how the details of exegesis entail larger interpretive moves, which themselves require analysis and exposition. The way in which worship or primary theology shapes the understanding of sacred Scripture (*lectio continua*), with its convictions about the Incarnation as present in the Eucharist and baptismal union with Christ, is an expression of Voelz's attentiveness to a context that is broader than vocabulary and grammar.

Voelz titles Part 1 "Textual Criticism" (23-82). Here his years of teaching are transparent in the aptness of his examples and the concise character of his descriptions. If a pastor were asked to explain "textual criticism" to his adult Bible class, he could hardly do better than draw on Voelz's treatment. Also welcome is the concluding accent on variants as the first *commentary* on the text for, as the author indicates, the variants are some of the earliest expressions of what the tradents or the community regarded as its *real*/meaning.

Part 2, the substance of this study, is entitled simply "Linguistics." Again, it must be noted that the author is adept at drawing upon classic categories of biblical interpretation and placing them in conversation with newer terminology as he advances his description and analysis. The dense character of this section with distinctions such as "Words/Signifiers" and "Meanings/Conceptual Signified" should not discourage the reader for the text is punctuated with helpful and often biblical examples. Even the semantic charts (95, 107, 212) which at first appear abstract and technical will reward the student who follows the argument. Among many jewels that might be

recommended are the sections on “controlling metaphors” (179-182) and “prophecy and fulfillment” (267-274).

If there are future editions (and hopefully so), the author might consider placing addenda 11 A-D at the beginning of Part 2. Experience suggests that many seminarians move more easily through the “Linguistics” section if these addenda are positioned as a gateway. While the *logic* of the present order is compelling, the *pedagogical purpose* suggests consideration of the alternative—particularly since many students come to seminary with minimal backgrounds in linguistics. The author might also prevail on the publisher to provide several indices—scriptural, topical, and authorial. This simple process would make the text much more accessible for reference and review.

Two aspects of Voelz’s analysis invite further conversation. The appeal to “double entendre” (273) may be a promising way to expound prophecies with “two foci.” At the same time, to weight the linguistic dimension of the text so heavily may not permit the sort of incarnational unity of God’s promise to receive its full expression. For example, Abraham’s seed entails the Messiah’s birth not by virtue of a double referent, but by the organic unity of the blood which flowed—in the Biblical claim—from Abraham to Jesus of Nazareth. This “in, with, and under” character of Israel’s history provides a fleshly continuity that deserves attention in a fuller fashion.

A second query concerns the compatibility of post-modern hermeneutics with confessional, biblical interpretation. While it is certainly true that post-modernism has shed light on the way texts are never interpreted apart from a group of assumptions and communal and social positions, this is not quite the same as saying that “only believers can truly interpret the sacred books of God” (12). The deconstructionist context in which “all truth is tribal” is the very opposite of the radical scriptural claim to an inclusive narrative, namely, that it is true for all times, for all places, and for all people. Voelz would be the first to agree with the inclusiveness of Scripture’s vision, so perhaps a more critical description of “postmodern” compatibility would be in order.

To conclude, Dr. Voelz is to be congratulated on a major achievement. The guild of exegetes within the Missouri-Synod and beyond must engage a rigorous and informed reflection as they position themselves along the road that Voelz has constructed. More than even its academic eminence, a debt is owed to the author for not separating technical material from theological inferences. This is a strikingly theological hermeneutics that remains grounded in the actual data and detail of the texts. As one who has benefitted from years of dialogue and debate on these very topics, it is a pleasure to recommend Dr. Voelz's work to every reader who seeks to know *"What Does This Mean?"*