Lessons from the Reformation for Hermeneutics Today

HENK VAN DEN BELT

Abstract

Recent views of the hermeneutical process, including philosophical speech-act theories, challenge Scripture's authority and emphasize the author's intention rather than a historical-grammatical view. Relating theological issues to philosophical views is legitimate, provided that the results do not contradict the spiritual authority of Scripture. The following hermeneutical principles of the Reformation can help maintain this adherence: 1) Scripture is the first principle and ultimate norm for all theology; 2) Scripture is the living and powerful Word of God; 3) the sovereign Spirit binds himself to the Word; and 4) the Spirit-breathed Word begs for a spiritual and clear explanation. In the (post)modern context, we need to approach hermeneutics from pneumatology and test it by God's Word.

There are many definitions of hermeneutics, but in essence, they all imply that hermeneutics describes the way in which the Bible is read, interpreted, and applied in a specific cultural context. It is the analysis of the interaction between the text and its meaning in its original context and the way it is understood by its readers in present contexts. Hermeneutics not only describes the process but also prescribes how Scripture should be read, interpreted, and applied.

The main question for this article is how reflection on the hermeneutical principles and rules of the Reformation can help evangelical Christians today. After a discussion of a recent hermeneutical development and an example of application, this article summarizes the hermeneutics of the early Reformation in four aspects that are still relevant and concludes with a discussion of their usefulness for today.

I. *From Modern Propositions to Postmodern Locutions*

The way in which texts are interpreted is always related to the cultural context. The earliest Christian theologians, like Justin Martyr, reveal a Hellenistic influence in their understanding of Scripture. During the Middle Ages, the influence of Aristotelian philosophy led to scholastic theology. It is striking today to see how Christians in different cultural contexts understand and interpret the Scriptures in different ways. This historical and cultural diversity is inevitable and is not problematic as long as Scripture remains normative in all these historical and cultural contexts.

In the context of modernity, the orthodox Protestant view of the authority of Scripture was often phrased in the categories of propositional truths. Exemplary of this position is the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982): "We affirm that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute" (Article 6).[1] This statement follows the previous *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978): "Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching."[2] Both statements reveal a rather "modern" understanding of biblical truth and were prompted by the debate on the historical-critical exegesis so typical in modernity. These statements are far less popular among evangelicals than formerly. The switch from the modern to a so-called postmodern context offers new challenges to evangelicals. While modernity was characterized by rationality and the autonomy of the individual, postmodernity is highly relativistic.[3]

---

[1] Cf., e.g., Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, "Articles of Affirmations and Denial," *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*, www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-hermeneutics.

[2] Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, "A Short Statement," Article 4, *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy.

[3] On the challenges for the authority of Scripture in a postmodern context, see also Henk van den Belt, "Scripture as the Voice of God: The Continuing Importance of *Autopistia*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13.4 (2011): 434–47.

1. *Speech-Act Theory*

During the past decades, an important hermeneutical development has taken place among many evangelicals worldwide. This development can be characterized as a moderate application of postmodern language philosophy to the understanding and interpretation of Scripture.

In the so-called linguistic turn, philosophy switched to an emphasis on language as a construction of reality. Evangelicals who integrate this turn generally reject the relativistic consequences of postmodern philosophy.[4] Instead of referring to the Chicago statements, many evangelicals today rather speak of the authority of Scripture in terms of the speech-act theory.

The founder of this linguistic theory was the British language philosopher John Langshaw Austin (1911–1960). According to this theory, the *locution* is the production of sound or the writing of a sentence, the *illocution* is what the speaker or writer is doing in this act, and the *perlocution* is the intended effect of the language act.[5]

The speech-act theory exemplifies an important philosophical switch in the 1960s, which has been incorporated in theological reflection since the 1990s. For orthodox Protestant theologians, it is an attractive way to replace the modern propositional view of revelation by a moderate postmodern understanding of revelation as a continual act of God without having to take over the relativism of postmodernism.[6]

---

[4] Illustrative of this rejection is Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). The positive answer opposes postmodern relativism exemplified by the book of Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[5] "A locution is an act of saying something, an illocution is an act done in saying something, a perlocution is an act done by saying something." Ted Cohen, "Illocutions and Perlocutions," *Foundations of Language* 9.4 (1973): 493.

[6] Anthony Thiselton and Nicolas Wolterstorf were among the first who applied the theory to theology. For a short survey, see Anthony C. Thiselton, "Speech-Act Theory and the Claim That God Speaks: Nicholas Wolterstorff's Divine Discourse," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50.1 (1997): 97–110. The speech-act theory is also important for the Lutheran systematic theologian Oswald Bayer, who claims that the divine promise is a performative utterance that creates the new reality of justification. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 50–51. John Walton uses the theory to combine a theistic evolutionary view of creation with a form of inerrancy. E. Jerome Van Kuiken, "John Walton's *Lost Worlds* and God's Loosed Word: Implications for Inerrancy, Canon, and Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58.4 (2015): 679–91. Even in the study of church history, Austin's theory is influential through the school of Richard A. Muller, who leans methodologically on the work of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School of intellectual history. Richard A. Muller, "Scholasticism Revisited: Methodological Reflections on the Study of Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought," in *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 134–53.

According to Kevin Vanhoozer, the development of the speech-act theory is "the great discovery of twentieth-century philosophy of language."[7] The turn to language philosophy—Vanhoozer calls his own approach "canonical-linguistic"—is a turn away from a propositional approach to truth and from foundationalism.[8] He applies the speech-act theory not only to the level of exegesis, but also to the canon as a whole: the text is the locution, what the authors intend the illocution, and the work of the Spirit is the perlocution. The intention of the author must be distinguished from the literal meaning. We should interpret the text in a way that is congenial with the author's intention. But the text can also be understood continually in new ways due to changing cultural contexts. That is the freedom of the Spirit. The perlocution takes place where the message of Scripture is effective. "The Spirit is active not in producing new illocutions but rather in ministering the illocutions that are already in the text, making them efficacious."[9]

It is rather understandable and praiseworthy that contemporary evangelical theologians try to relate hermeneutics positively and carefully to contemporary philosophical positions. It is also essential, however, to think about the implications. Some evangelical Protestants use the speech-act theory to stress the distinction between the text of Scripture and its meaning. The text of the Bible is the locution, the intention of the authors in writing the text is the illocution, and the effect of the Word is the perlocution. This approach potentially leads to a shift of the normativity from the text to the intention of the author and the effect of his writings. Not what Paul or Peter claim, but what they intended with their claims and what the Spirit says through them today is normative.

It is not the intention of this article to generalize regarding the position of all who refer to or incorporate linguistic philosophy in their theology nor to point to speech-act theory as a kind of dangerous Trojan horse. To the contrary, the use of contemporary philosophical reflections like those of Austin shows that theology in general follows philosophical trends—trends that often reflect more general cultural developments—from a distance and that theologians often try to use them very carefully and consciously.

But it is important to consider how the new hermeneutical approach that fits the postmodern context relates to previous understandings of Scripture's

---

[7] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 63.

[8] Ibid., 293.

[9] Ibid., 67. He also states, "The effectual call is the Spirit's ministering the word in such a way that hearers freely and willingly answer God by responding with faith." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 374–75.

authority. Before turning to the Reformation as a useful point of reference, one example of the consequences of a new hermeneutical approach may be illuminating.

2. *Women in Ecclesiastical Offices*

A recent example of the switch of the normativity from the text is the decision to accept women in all ecclesiastical offices in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt*). These churches formerly were fierce opponents of this acceptance. How can the rapid change in this confessional Reformed church be explained?

The report to the synod of Meppel (2017) says the texts in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy that contain instructions to women to be silent and not to teach do not intend to impede admitting women to the offices. Paul's instruction encourages us to understand how we may not dominate the other sex.[10] According to a previous report (2014), in these texts, Paul stays in line with the contemporary social norms by confirming the subordinate position of women so that the progress of the gospel will not be hindered. Because the church in Paul's days ought not to give offense, we should not give offense today either.[11]

Although this change does not exclusively depend on new hermeneutical insights—and there is no mention in the official documents of the speech-act theory—the switch in normativity from the meaning of the text to its intention in the original context is a vital aspect of the way in which the change is related to the authority of Scripture.

Admittedly, the way the New Testament speaks about the diversity of functions and callings in the body of Christ and about the essential role women play within the church stands in contrast to an absolute and strict prohibition of any task or responsibility in today's church. Moreover, the way in which the ecclesiastical offices were shaped in the Reformed tradition is influenced by the context of the sixteenth century, although the general message of the New Testament seems to be clear on the fact that men and women have different callings and that the proclamation of the gospel with the specific authority that pertains to the ordained ministry of the Word does not belong to the calling of women. This article does not leave

---

[10] "Report of Deputies Male/Female and the Office: Serving Together," [written for the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) to be held at Meppel 2017], 66, *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt*, www.gkv.nl/download/14681.

[11] "Report of deputies Male/Female in the Church: Men and Women in the Service of the Gospel," [written for the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) to be held at Ede 2014], 22, *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt*, www.gkv.nl/download/6489.

room for a nuanced discussion of the whole issue but only intends to use the rapid and radical change in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) as an example of the influence of new and postmodern hermeneutical approaches to Scripture.

It illustrates that the shift from the modern propositional statements to the postmodern locutions begs for theological reflection. We will now turn to the hermeneutics of the premodern Reformation with the question, what we possibly can learn from the Reformers.

II. *The Reformation: Word and Spirit in a Hermeneutical Circle*

The view of Scripture at the time of the Reformation can be characterized as a verbal–spiritual hermeneutical circle. There are at least four key aspects of the Reformation's hermeneutics, or spokes of the hermeneutical wheel. For the sake of brevity, this article sticks to the views of Martin Luther and John Calvin—not because they were the only Reformers or because their views are normative, but because they generally agree but also slightly differ on the issue of the relationship between Word and Spirit that is so essential for Protestant theology.

1. *The Word Is the Final Norm for Theology*

The Reformation in Wittenberg was the result of intensive study of the Scriptures, but the Lutheran Reformation did not start with a formal concept of the authority of Scripture. The Ninety-Five Theses arose from a rediscovery of Augustinian soteriology. The authority of Scripture was first discussed in 1519 in Leipzig, when Johan Eck accused Luther of holding positions that corresponded to those of Jan Hus, who was condemned by the Council of Constance. Luther affirmed that he agreed with Hus and therefore that he could no longer appeal to a church council to reform the church; all that remained was Scripture.

The Lutheran Reformation, in general, moves from *gratia* through *fides* to *Scriptura* as the ultimate foundation of Reformation theology. Luther's rejection of the authority of the pope and the councils, however, is not a renunciation of tradition as such. For example, in his defense of infant baptism, Luther refers explicitly to the tradition of the church: "If infant baptism were wrong, God certainly would not have let it go for so long and so generally in the whole Christianity."[12]

---

[12] Martin Luther, *Writings* (1528), *D. Martin Luther Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993 [henceforth WA]), 26:167. The issue of infant baptism illustrates that the slogan *sola Scriptura*,

In response to his excommunication bull, Luther writes that Scripture "itself is of itself certain, simple, and intelligible; it is its own interpreter, testing, judging, and illuminating everything."[13] Referring to Psalm 119:130, where the poet speaks about the "opening of God's words," and verse 160, "the beginning of God's word," Luther states that Scripture is the primary principle of knowledge. The Spirit illuminates the mind by *sola verbi Dei.* God's Word is as "an opened door or first principle (as they say), from which we must begin in order to move towards the light of understanding."[14] The expression "as they say" is a reference to medieval theology. With his view of the ultimate primacy of Scripture, Luther is in line with those medieval theologians who saw tradition principally as the transmission of Scripture and not as extrabiblical revelation. Medieval theology saw Scripture as a *principium*, a principle of knowledge that is self-convincing and the basis for all our theological knowledge. Scripture is a queen that

> must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges or arbiters, but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God.[15]

Calvin's specific contribution to the concept of Scripture as absolute norm and first principle of theology lies in the connection he establishes with the witness of the Spirit. In the second edition of the *Institutes* Calvin radically develops the notion of the independent authority of Scriptures. He joins Luther and declares that Scripture is independent of the authority of the church but does this more systematically than Luther. He places Scripture as the formal principle of theology in the prolegomena. He explains that believers are ultimately certain only by the Spirit's testimony to the divine authority of Scripture. He emphasizes that Scripture is authoritative as such, but that this self-convincing authority or *autopistia* can only be recognized through faith, that is through the witness of the Spirit. In a sentence in the final edition of the *Institutes* he concisely writes,

---

understood in an exclusive way, is not adequate to characterize the Reformation. On this issue, see Henk van den Belt, "The Problematic Character of Sola Scriptura," in *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hans Burger, Arnold Huijgen, and Eric Peels, Studies in Reformed Theology 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 38–55.

[13] Martin Luther, *Writings* (1520/21), WA 7:97.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Martin Luther, *Lecture on Galatians (cap. 1-4)* (1531), WA 40I:120.

> Let this therefore stand: those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly find rest in Scripture. It is indeed *autopistos*; it should not be submitted to demonstration by proofs. Still, it owes the certainty that it deserves among us to the testimony of the Spirit.[16]

Thus, the first aspect of the hermeneutics of the Reformation lies in the Word as principle from which all doctrines are to be derived or as final norm for theology. It is the special work of the Spirit to lead Christians to belief in the authority of Scripture. Though the Spirit works in a diversity of cultural contexts and helps the church translate Scripture in different languages and communicate the gospel in diverse times and cultures, the Spirit of the Father and the Son, who has spoken through the prophets, always leads Christians to a high esteem for the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the first principle and ultimate authority for all theological statements.

2. *The Word Is Living and Powerful Through the Spirit*

There is a certain development in Luther's thought with regard to the relationship between Word and Spirit. Initially, he was fond of medieval mysticism, for instance, as is expressed in the *Theologia Deutsch*, a German mystic tract, published by him in 1516 and 1518. This mysticism teaches the self-abrogation of the soul that loses itself and is swallowed up by the love of God. The subtitle of *Theologia Deutsch* reads, "How Adam Must Die in Us and How Christ Must Rise in Us."[17] Inspired by Johannes Tauler, Luther taught that "all salvation is resignation of the will in all things … and pure faith in God."[18] Later Luther understood this mystical self-resignation or *Gelassenheit* explicitly as a result of the divine law. The whole scriptural theology hinges on the correct understanding of the distinction between law and gospel, between commandments and promises.[19]

In his *On Christian Liberty*, he divides the entire content of Scripture into commandments and promises. The law humbles the human heart and brings it to despair, but the gospel says,

---

[16] Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.5., translation mine. Cf. Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 53. For the Latin text, cf. Jean Calvin, *Opera Selecta* [hereafter *OS*], 3rd ed., ed. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1967), 3:70.

[17] Martin Luther, *Writings, Including Sermons and Disputations* (1512/18), WA 1:153.

[18] Ibid., 9:102.

[19] Luther, *Writings* (1520/21), WA 7:502; Martin Luther, *Sermons* (1532), WA 36:9.

> If you want to fulfill all the commandments and as they require, be freed from your bad desires and sins, and be saved, then believe in Christ, in whom I give you all grace, righteousness, peace, and liberty. If you believe, then you receive, if you do not believe, you will not receive.[20]

In his lectures on Galatians (1535), he states that the law not only reveals that we are sinful but also drives us to Christ. The law, however, can only do this through the power of the Spirit and in conjunction with the gospel. In his book *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), Luther distinguishes between the salvation won and salvation distributed. Christ gained forgiveness on the cross, but he did not distribute it there. Rather, he distributes it through the proclamation of the gospel and through the sacraments. Christ on the cross would be useless to us if we did not have the Word that brings it to us as a gift. When Christians receive absolution through the Word or in the sacrament, they can say that they saw and heard God himself preaching and baptizing.[21] In his Large Catechism, Luther states that the Word of God will be lost unless the Holy Spirit proclaims it and raises hearts to accept it.

Calvin does not make such a sharp distinction between law and gospel. His hermeneutical approach underlines the unity of the one covenant of God in the various dispensations of salvation history. In Calvin's work, however, one finds a similar view on the effect of the Word of God in law and gospel. In the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536), he compares the law with a mirror "wherein we may discern and contemplate our sin and curse."[22] Later he nuances that pedagogical function of the law by stressing that the law remains a rule for the life of sanctification.

The spiritual power of the Word comes to the fore when Calvin in Strasbourg places the absolution in the liturgy. At the beginning of the service, he calls the members of the congregation to repentance and leads them in a prayer of humiliation before God. Then the absolution follows: "To all those that repent in this way, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation, I declare that the absolution of sins is effected in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."[23] After that, the congregation sings the Ten Commandments, with a prayer between the first and the second table of the law. In other words, when the law and the gospel are proclaimed,

---

[20] Luther, *Writings* (1520/21), WA 7:24.

[21] Martin Luther, *Writings* (1525), WA 18:202–3.

[22] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 17. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.7.

[23] John Calvin, *Form of Church Prayers* (1542), *OS* 2:19. For the English translation, see J. Dudley Weaver, *Presbyterian Worship: A Guide for Clergy* (Louisville: Geneva, 2002), 17.

something really happens to those who hear with a believing heart. Humiliation and true faith are worked by the Spirit through and with the Word.

Thus, a second aspect of, or spoke in the verbal-spiritual hermeneutical wheel is what would later be called the application of the Word to the heart of the believer through the Spirit. Perhaps the term *application* suggests too much of a distance between the content of the Word and what happens in the heart. It is rather the enlivening of the Word—with its message of the condemning law and comforting gospel—through the Spirit that takes effect in the life of those who faithfully hear the Word. The Word of God is creative. Here the postmodern speech-act theory can be helpful to underline the power that the premodern Reformers ascribed to the Word of God. Human beings say many empty things, but when God speaks, he always acts.

The power that the Reformers assigned to the creative Word of God became problematic in the context of modernity because the focus shifted from the redeeming Word to the objective content and subjective experience of the believer. The Word of God does not share bits of objective information in the first place, but it reveals the truth and therefore always confronts us with a moral choice. We can only reject its message because of our sinful hearts. Our primary problem with the Bible is not an epistemological problem; it is a moral problem. It can only be overcome by the power of the Spirit through and with the Word.

3. *The Spirit Binds Himself to the Word*

As to the precise relationship between Word and Spirit, the Lutheran and Reformed traditions differ. Does the Spirit always work through the Word or does the sovereign Spirit join the Word to work with it? Luther strongly bound the Spirit to the outward Word. This view was partially a reaction against the radicalization and the spiritualism of some of his contemporaries. He thus moved toward a more external understanding of the work of the Spirit. In 1518, he could still write to his friend Georg Spalatin (1484–1545):

> Pray that God will reveal the true knowledge of his Word to you by grace. For there is no other Teacher of the divine Word than the writer of the Word himself, as he says: they will all be taught by God. Therefore, do not trust your study and your mind, but trust God alone and under the influence of his Spirit.

It is debated whether Luther would have formulated that in the same way later in his life, after he was confronted with the appeal to the Spirit by his radical colleagues and students, especially Andreas Carlstadt and Thomas

Müntzer. While they emphasized the necessity of the inner work of the Spirit, Luther emphasized the objective Word, the Word outside of us. Against the so-called enthusiasts he emphatically states that God gives no one the Holy Spirit without the preceding outward Word.

Luther was afraid that the Spirit would, as it were, start to lead a life of his own. He did not oppose the sovereignty of the Spirit as such, but he wanted to discern the spirits and distinguish the Spirit of God from evil spirits and spiritual self-deception. He says in a sermon on the gospel of John, "God has decreed that no one can or will believe or receive the Holy Spirit without that gospel which is preached or taught orally."[24]

Calvin and the Reformed tradition agree on the close connection between Word and Spirit, but there is a shift from the outward Word to the inner workings of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the inner teacher who, through faith, connects the elect to Christ. While Luther binds the effective work of the Spirit to the Word, Calvin binds the effective functioning of the audible Word—and of the visible Word in the sacraments—to the Spirit. Reformed theology later also emphasizes the sovereignty of the Spirit, who can also work without the Word. We are bound to the Word, but the Holy Spirit is free. Despite these different emphases, the agreement is of course the inseparable connection of Spirit and Word. We know the Word through the Spirit—the first spoke of the hermeneutical wheel discussed above—but we also recognize the Spirit through the Word to which he has sovereignly bound himself.

The Spirit in the church as a whole and the Spirit in the heart of the individual believer will not lead them contrary to Scripture. That was the claim of the Reformers over against Roman Catholic and spiritualist hermeneutics. This is an especially helpful aspect of the Reformation understanding of hermeneutics with which we test modern and postmodern approaches to the authority of Scripture. If the Spirit leads Christians in a modern context to underline the propositional character of the truth over against relativizing tendencies, this might be one-sided, but sometimes one-sidedness is necessary in theology. The question is whether this emphasis hinders the message of Scripture to be clearly communicated. This hermeneutical view can be overemphasized and absolutized. Scripture does not always present itself in propositional forms nor does it have to be cast into these forms.

That the Spirit never leads Christians in a direction contrary to Scripture is also helpful in the present postmodern context and the popularity of

[24] Martin Luther, *Commentary on John 1–4* (1540), WA 46:582.

speech-act theory. For the understanding of some texts—especially those containing a proclamation or kerygma—the concept of the Word as perlocutionary act is beneficial. However, Scripture does not always take this form; there are also meditative Psalms and historical narratives. Casting everything into one frame does not in most cases do justice to the diversity of genres in Scripture.

4. *The Spirit-Breathed Word Requires a Spiritual and Clear Explanation*

The hermeneutical relationship between Word and Spirit, in the fourth place, also has consequences for the interpretation of Scripture. Because Scripture is spiritual, the interpreter also needs the guidance of the Spirit to understand the Word in its spiritual sense. Nevertheless, the meaning of Scripture is clear and unambiguous. Partly inspired by biblical humanism, the Reformation rejected the ancient practice of allegorical explanation. This is a complicated issue in Reformation studies, especially in Luther's theology.

The famous saying that "the letter teaches what has happened, the allegory what to believe, the moral meaning what to do, and the anagogical what to hope for"—including the well-known example of the four meanings of Jerusalem—perhaps became so famous because Luther mentions it.[25] Luther, however, only gradually replaces the fourfold exegesis of Scripture —the *quadriga*—with a historical-grammatical reading of the text, though always interpreting the texts christologically. Although Luther continues to draw all kinds of allegorical lessons from Scripture, he holds that the most important and authoritative meaning of the text is the literal and historical meaning. In his introductory sermon of a series on Genesis (1523), Luther states that the Holy Spirit has revealed his wisdom in the Word and that God himself speaks to us in the Bible.

> Therefore, when Moses writes that God created heaven and the earth and all that is in them in six days, then let it be six days. You cannot find a gloss that turns those six days into one day. If you do not understand how it could be in six days, then honor the Holy Ghost that he is more learned than you are. You have to deal with the Scriptures in such a way that you realize that God himself is speaking. Because God speaks, you are not allowed to twist his Word in which way you want, because you do not agree.[26]

---

[25] Martin Luther, WA 57II:95.
[26] Martin Luther, *Sermons* (1523), WA 12:440.

Luther, of course, is not rejecting an evolutionistic interpretation but writes this against the view of Augustine, that God's work must have taken place at once. According to Luther, that is speculative. However, he does make an exception from the rule of faith. Sometimes you are forced to understand a text differently from the literal meaning, namely, when faith cannot tolerate the literal meaning of the words. The confession "grace alone through faith alone" is a hermeneutical key in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

Calvin was stricter in his rejection of medieval allegories than Luther. He was particularly concerned that Scripture would become a wax nose. (In the sixteenth century, some people carried a wax nose to hide a mutilation. The owner could give such a nose any shape he wanted.) Calvin was educated as a humanist lawyer and not as a theologian. For him only the literal and grammatical meaning of the Bible was authoritative. Still, Calvin read the Psalms from a christological perspective, and sometimes he even refers to the allegorical or anagogical sense of Scripture to make a particular application.

If the Spirit-breathed Word requires a spiritual and clear explanation, this means for hermeneutics that any exegesis that leads to ambiguity must be rejected, especially if the explanation—for example, according to the supposed intention of the author—is clearly opposed to the grammatical sense of Scripture, as in the case of the silence of women meaning the opposite today because the "real" intention of the author was "to avoid offense." On the other hand, the Christian practice of the allegorical interpretation—as a spiritual and christological reading of Scripture—requires further reflection. The way in which the New Testament refers to the Old Testament does not always immediately follow the lines that historical and grammatical rules seem to require. In the subsequent context of modernity, the Reformation's emphasis on the literal and historical meaning of Scripture was twisted into a historical-critical approach to the Bible.

III. *The Verbal-Spiritual Hermeneutical Circle and the Postmodern Context*

Radical postmodern philosophy teaches that there is no unambiguous Bible but only endless different interpretations and views of the Bible. Evangelicals deny this relativism and hold that the text of the Bible does have a meaning, although it might be difficult to find that meaning and there might be some ambiguity in Scripture due to the diversity of writers and contexts. This reality does not contradict the fact that there is also a unity in Scripture: as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states, "the Holy Spirit, the Lord

and Giver of life," also "spoke through the prophets" of the Old Testament. Evangelicals today differ in their opinions regarding the best strategy to avoid postmodern relativism. Some stick to the modern propositional approach to Scripture, whereas others incorporate aspects of postmodern linguistic philosophy into their theologies.

Whereas the modern approach to hermeneutics easily led to an objectivization of scriptural authority, the present cultural context has a relativizing impact on the authority of Scripture because in this context any understanding or interpretation of Scripture springs from a cultural context completely different from that of Scripture and is therefore arbitrary. The hermeneutical position that takes the linguistic turn into account by approaching Scripture as a divine speech act can help us explain how the authority of Scripture works. This approach even lines up with some of the aspects of the way in which the spiritual authority of Scripture and the proclamation of its message of law and gospel was understood in the Reformation.

The linguistic turn, however, can also lead to an unintentional and sometimes unnoticed relativization of the content of the Word. The claim "thus says the Lord ..." then is too easily replaced by "Paul thought that the Lord said so, but now we know more or better...." The solution is not a return to a modern defense of propositional statements, but a radical theological reconsideration of hermeneutics. In our context the Reformation insight that all spirits, and all hermeneutical views, must be tried by Scripture because the Spirit binds himself to Scripture, is crucial.

It might be helpful to illustrate my point by summarizing how the four aspects or spokes can be helpful today and by carefully applying them to the issue of women in office.

Firstly, realizing that Scripture is the first principle and ultimate norm for all theology helps us to relativize the contextual differences among Christians. There is far more in Scripture that unites them than what divides them culturally. Therefore, the voice of the church of all ages and places is important and might lead to a careful suspicion about radical and rapid changes. Only in cases in which the church clearly departs from Scripture do changes have to be advocated. The Reformation itself was such a radical change, whereas the new views on the calling of women appear to be prompted by cultural changes.

Secondly, if Scripture is the living and powerful Word of God, it should not be cast into a forced and exclusive form of propositional statements. This is where the speech-act theory lines up with the Reformation's hermeneutics. Applied to the issue of women in office, this character of the Word of God pleads against a static view of what an office is scripturally and

against the indiscriminate exclusion of women from all ecclesiastical tasks in all places.

Thirdly, that the sovereign Spirit binds himself to the Word is vital to the assessment of the influence of diverse philosophical theories and systems on hermeneutics, be it the Hellenistic on early Christianity, Aristotelianism on scholastic theology, the objectivization of truth, or the linguistic turn of postmodernity. The same Spirit has led the church in these different historical contexts and leads the worldwide body of Christ today in a diversity of contexts. Nevertheless, the Spirit, who has spoken through the prophets, guides them all in accordance with the one and only Word of God, that is, by the Scriptures that testify of Christ. Applied to the place and role of men and women there can be a legitimate variety in specific applications of the biblical message, but the Spirit will not lead the church in a direction opposite from Scripture.

Finally, if the Spirit-breathed Word begs for a spiritual and clear explanation, the appeal to the intention of the author in the original cultural context or to the ongoing guidance of the Spirit in the history of the church may never lead to ambiguous interpretations that contradict the message of the historical-grammatical meaning of Scripture. If the apostles tell women to be silent in certain circumstances, this needs to be applied today—however difficult that may be in a culture hostile to biblical principles regarding "gender"—and cannot be countered by a hermeneutics that explains the real meaning as an objection against giving offense.

In sum, there is truth in the statement that our understandings of Scripture are colored by our cultural position. However, we must resist the temptation to take our starting point in postmodern hermeneutics or any other cultural context. We should start theologically with the confession that the same Spirit who inspired the authors of the Bible is given to the church in all these different historical and cultural contexts to lead the church through the Word into the whole truth. In other words, we should approach hermeneutics pneumatologically and understand the different interpretations of Scripture as forms in which the Spirit leads the church into all truth. The norm of this guidance through the Spirit is always the Spirit-breathed Word of God.