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Speech-act theory and biblical interpretation

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Abstract

This essay seeks to explore speech-act theory in its relation to biblical interpretation. Its initial focus falls on the application of N. Wolterstorff whose book *Divine Discourse* provided the decisive catalyst for the recent debates. Building on the different kinds of action involved when speaking (locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary) Wolterstorff draws two important hermeneutical implications. First, the theory affords a way of understanding the unity of scripture in its entirety as God's book; second, it enables the reader to acknowledge the infallibility of God's Word as divine discourse without ascribing infallibility to the human words of scripture.

The second part attempts to offer a critical assessment of Wolterstorff's application of his theory, especially in its failure to deal adequately with the function of the Christian canon which shaped the church's traditions in such a way as to provide a rule-of-faith for the theological guidance of subsequent generations of readers. By abandoning the hermeneutical understanding of scripture developed by Irenaeus and Calvin, Wolterstorff flounders in his inability to overcome the threat of scripture's becoming a 'wax nose' in which the noematic content of what God now says in divine discourse is not identical with the meaning of the biblical sentence itself.

The final section examines the exegesis of the well-known scholar A. Thiselton, whose work has done much in developing a speech-act theory. The conclusion reached is that Thiselton's application of the theory is far different from that of Wolterstorff's and avoids many of the problems which plague Wolterstorff's exegesis. The implication of this analysis is to argue that speech-act theory cannot be indiscriminately lumped together, because various forms of the theory often reflect different hermeneutical theories of biblical interpretation.

Within the last decade there has been an explosion of interest in speech-act theory as a means of developing a new understanding of biblical hermeneutics. The philosophical basis for the theory is well known and usually assigned to the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle in the 1920s. What is new in the recent development is the application of this philosophical theory to the interpretation of the Bible. Initial work in this fresh application

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had begun some years ago by A. C. Thiselton, but the catalyst for the recent interest derives, above all, from N. Wolterstorff's Wilde Lectures of 1993, published in 1995.[1] The remarkable interest sparked in theological circles is evident by the sheer number of books and essays addressing the subject.[2]

My concern in this essay is to focus somewhat narrowly on the application of the philosophical theory to biblical interpretation. I am aware that this focus may present problems. Most of the essays in developing the theory have been written by scholars largely trained in philosophy and not in biblical exegesis. Conversely, my training has been the opposite. There is the danger of scholars with different skills simply speaking past one another. I am also cognizant that there are many continuing differences among philosophers regarding details of speech-act theory. I shall not attempt to enter into debate with Austin, Searle, Derrida or Ricoeur, which obviously lies outside my competence. Rather, I shall focus on Wolterstorff's highly influential formulation of the theory and try critically to pursue its implications for biblical interpretation.

The context of the debate

It is necessary at first to identify the nature of the problem at issue and to establish the genre of the debate. Wolterstorff immediately specifies the aim of his *Divine Discourse*: 'to reflect philosophically on the claim that God speaks' (1). Why is this a problem and for whom? The Christian Bible, both Old and New Testaments, from beginning to end, simply assumes that God speaks. 'When in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . God said . . . ' (Gen 1:1–3). Or again, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God' (Rev 1:8). In sum, the issue of God's speaking is not a problem that emerges from within the Bible itself.

[1] *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[2] A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology. God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002); Vanhoozer, 'God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today', in P. E. Sutterwaite and D. F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 143–81; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning to This Text?* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); M. Levine, 'God Speak', *Religious Studies* 34 (1998), 1–16; W. P. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); C. Bartholomew, C. Greene and K. Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); N. Wolterstorff, 'The Promise of Speech-Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation', in Bartholomew *etal.* (eds.), *After Pentecost*, 73–90; T. Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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Whence then does the problem arise of God's speaking that so exercises Wolterstorff? Although there were sporadic attacks on the biblical assumption occasionally mounted by Greek philosophers, the major assault clearly derives from the Enlightenment. First it was judged irrational by the Deists for the deity literally to speak, and thus it was to be treated at best metaphorically. Soon thereafter it was reckoned to be a primitive, mythical mindset that portrayed the deity as possessing human features (Heyne, Strauss, Baur). Still later the content of God's speaking in the OT was deemed offensive and unworthy of God. Accordingly, Gen 22:1 was rendered: Abraham *thought* that God said 'take your son . . . ', but obviously he was mistaken.

To summarize, it is fully evident that Wolterstorff's attempt to resuscitate God's speaking falls within the genre of being an apologetic effort to refute the objections of the Enlightenment. To be sure, this characterization of Wolterstorff's book does not in itself affect the truth or falsity of his philosophical arguments, but it is important to establish the context from which his speech-act argument proceeds. Its significance for the nature of the debate will shortly become evident.

Speech-act theory applied to biblical hermeneutics

Wolterstorff begins his hermeneutical reflections by affirming that a biblical text has no one sense, but rather has the potential for multiple meanings (*Divine Discourse*, 171). Thereby he rejects both the Romantic hermeneutics, say, of Schleiermacher which sought to recover the writer's actual intention, and also the textual-sense theory of the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s which stressed the text's autonomy from its author. However, Wolterstorff immediately departs from any perceived kinship with the deconstruction of Derrida by turning to speech-act theory.

Central to this theory is the understanding that to say something is not merely to communicate knowledge; rather to say something is to do something. He then distinguishes different kinds of action involved when speaking. A locutionary act is the uttering or writing of words with a certain sense and reference. An illocutionary act is what one does by means of these words, such as promising or warning. A perlocutionary act is the effect which the speaker wishes to accomplish by means of an illocutionary act. By focusing on the illocutionary act of speech, meaning is perceived not in what the speaker intended to perform, but in what he or she actually does.

How does this relate to biblical interpretation? Wolterstorff proposes to interpret scripture as God's divine speech by means of illocutionary acts. To make this transition he appeals to what he names 'double-agency discourse' (38) by which he means that one person performs some illocutionary

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act by way of another person's prior locutionary or illocutionary speech. Accordingly, scripture can now be understood as God's appropriation of human speech into divine discourse. The speech-act theory as applied to double-agency discourse enables the reader to understand how God speaks literally by way of scripture. The resulting effect is to see the Bible as the performative speech of God to Israel and the church.

In his essay, 'The Promise of Speech-Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation'[3], Wolterstorff draws out two important implications of his theory. First, it affords a way of understanding the unity of scripture by rendering it in its entirety as God's book. The Bible is no longer sixty-six individual books by different human authors, but by means of its illocutionary appropriation becomes a single book spoken by God in the mode of performative speech. Second, it enables the reader to acknowledge the infallibility of God's Word as divine discourse without ascribing similar infallibility to the human words. Wolterstorff reasons that one can accept someone else's speaking for his own without accepting everything that the other person says. The fact that the human authors of scripture expressed various erroneous beliefs does not prevent God from speaking infallibly by way of what they said (85).

I am aware that this brief presentation of Wolterstorff's speech-act theory has been greatly simplified and much of his argumentation has been omitted, especially his formulation of 'normative standings' which implies rights and duties requisite to speaking even for God. He also speaks at length of the role of 'performance interpretation' as a way of exiting the text according to a holistic reading. However, the broad lines of his theory in its relation to interpreting the Bible should be adequate for the moment.

The divine appropriation of human speech

According to Wolterstorff the basic hermeneutical shift involved in biblical interpretation lies in recognizing that God has appropriated the human writings of the Bible to form the illocutionary speech of God. The diverse collection of human authors has been transformed into the divine speech through the means of a double-agency appropriation.

At the outset it should be noted that this interpretation is strikingly different from the traditional Christian understanding of the claim that scripture has a divine source. For example, in classic Reformed and Lutheran dogmatics,[4] it was argued that God had communicated his will to Israel and the church by means of the witness of human agents (prophets and

[3] *After Pentecost*, 84ff.

[4] H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ET 1950 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 12–46.

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apostles) who bore testimony in their writings that their message had been inspired by God. The claim to be delivering the message from God was made in different ways. At times a narrative described a theophany in which the divine words were received and transmitted to the people (Exod 19:1–20. 26; Isa 6:1–13). At other times, introductory formulae were used such as 'the vision that Isaiah saw' (Isa 1:1), or 'this is the word YHWH has spoken' (Isa 37:22), or 'the revelation (*apocalypsis*) which God gave him to show his servants' (Rev 1:1). The frequent formula common to all the prophets: 'thus saith the Lord', reflects the same understanding. The continuity of God's speaking is best formulated in Heb 1.1–2: 'In many and various ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.'

There is further indication in both testaments that the divine message through different mediating agents was written, collected, and treasured (Deut 31:19–29; Josh 24:26–7; 2 Kings 22:8–19; Prov 25:1; Luke 1:1–4; Gal 6:11; 2 Tim 3:15–17; 2 Peter 3:15). Moreover, in two of the later books of the NT, instructions were given to the readers of these sacred writings as to how they were to be interpreted. First, the reason for their sacred property is given: 'all Scripture is inspired by God' (2 Tim 3:16); 'no prophecy ever came from human impulse, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God' (2 Peter 1:20). Second, hermeneutical rules for understanding the content, goals and approach of the writings were offered: 'Understand that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own (private) interpretation' (2 Peter 1:20–1). These writings are able 'to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus . . . and are profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:15–16).

It is fully clear from these verses that these words mediated by human agents (lawgivers, prophets, apostles) were regarded as inspired by God. But how was it possible that fallible human words could have been received as words from God? They were so regarded not only because of their divine source, but also by their assigned role as medium of God's continuing communication. The NT writers make clear that their human words were not confined to the past or limited to their original recipients. The ability of the scriptures continually to evoke new and fresh undertakings was commensurate with the promised Spirit of the resurrected Christ to illuminate and guide his church through his living word.

Paul assures the Corinthian church that the admonishing words of Moses addressed to the Israelites in the desert were 'written down for our instruction' (1 Cor 10:11), and 1 Peter 1:12 announces that 'the prophets were serving not themselves but you'. The crucial agent for rendering the human words of the past as the continuing divine message – the rendering

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of human speech into divine speech – was achieved by the promise of the Holy Spirit. For John, the promise of the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, was to illuminate the words of Christ (14:26). The office of Christ's true witnesses was linked to their receiving power from the Spirit (Acts 1:8), and demonstrated by Peter's interpreting of Israel's scripture (1:16). Paul never tires of emphasizing that Israel's scriptures have been unlocked through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:10–13).

In sum, the movement by which scripture becomes the vehicle of divine revelation was by means of the Holy Spirit. Human words in all their time-conditioned form were received thereby as the divine voice addressing an expectant recipient. It is to be noted that the human words were not altered into another form of speech, but as the Written Word became the Word of God for them. The human words were not transformed into a new form of illocutionary divine discourse, but were now understood and made alive through a divine activity. The human words were not appropriated, changed or semantically filtered, but illuminated in their original temporal form as a divine vehicle.

The canonical context of scripture and church

There is another important element that distinguishes traditional Christian understanding of biblical interpretation from the speech-act theory of Wolterstorff and his followers. Up to now we have talked about scripture's role without the needed precision as to what is meant by the term. In my judgement, the most fundamental flaw in the new hermeneutical theory arises from the failure to understand the role of the church in collecting, shaping and interpreting the Bible, which is the issue of canon. To be sure, the concept of canon is a far more complex historical, literary and theological phenomenon than usually recognized. However, to suggest with some that the theological importance of the canon has recently been overemphasized is a gross misunderstanding. The opposite is nearer the truth.

The terms scripture and canon are closely related and often indeed synonymous. Yet there are important functional nuances which have emerged particularly from the recent hermeneutical debates. Both scripture and canon refer to the authoritative collection of sacred writings as the vehicle for communicating the will of God. The term scripture refers, above all, to the divine authority of these writings. The scriptures derive from the inspiration of God's Spirit in the revelation of God to his people. The scriptures not only are inspired in their origin, but are continuously infused with the promise of divine illumination. Depending on its particular context, scripture can be described both as being the Word of God and as becoming the Word of God.

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The term canon also refers to the authoritative collection of sacred writings, but it has accrued other theological nuances to describe a variety of other functions. First, canon refers to the scope of the collection. This determination extended over a lengthy period. In the OT the canonical collection was described as the Law and the Prophets, but by the time of its final canonization it was divided by the Jewish synagogue into Torah, Prophets and Writings. The exact history of this development is not fully clear.

Second, the fixing of the scope of the canon was not derived from a divine decree, nor was it ever so claimed within the sacred literature itself. Rather, canon designated a series of decisions made first by the Jewish synagogue respecting the Hebrew Bible, and later by the Christian church respecting the range of the apostolic tradition. In the earliest period of the church the rule-of-faith (*regula fidei*) offered an authorized oral formulation of the faith which was not identical with the scriptures, but increasingly apostolic tradition and scripture were joined by the formation of a New Testament in the second century AD.

Third, crucial to the concept of the Christian canon is that the apostolic church never claimed to have created its canon of scripture, but understood its formation as a response to the divine coercion of the living Word of God. Thus the concept of canon was a corollary of inspiration. It set the boundaries within which God's voice was heard. Only in this sense is the formation of the canon the work of the church. Nevertheless, scripture did not fall from heaven, but arose within the bosom of the community of faith, shaped by its usage in worship, preaching, and catechesis. Even though the exact range of books designated canonical was never fully settled within the Christian church – tension between a larger and a shorter canon remained– there was full agreement in all the branches of the church that sacred scripture consisted of two testaments, the Old and the New, both of which bore witness to Jesus Christ in different ways.

The battle to set limits to sacred scripture was often carried on in an ongoing struggle with competing claims of divine truth, especially from the gnostics. In the early church Word and tradition were inseparable, as shown especially in the writings of Irenaeus. One of the unfortunate effects of the sixteenth-century controversy between Catholics and Protestants was that the Word and tradition became separated, and were played against each other in heated polemics. Thus, when Calvin cited Augustine's famous words (*Institutes* I.VII.III): 'he would not have believed the gospel unless he were influenced by the authority of the church', Calvin's attention was so focused on refuting the Roman claim for the subordination of scripture to the authority of church tradition that he stressed the self-authenticity of scripture (I.VII.V) to such

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an extent as to understate the active role of the church in the reception and formation of the canon. Only later in book IV ('On the Church') does Calvin fully expound the central role of the church: 'that the preaching of the gospel might be maintained, he (God) has deposited this treasure with the church' (IV.I). Fortunately, within the last few decades, this controversy has been largely reconciled between both Christian parties by returning to the position of Irenaeus: Word and apostolic tradition belong together as part of the selfsame theological reality.

The hermeneutical significance of canon

Within the last generation the full hermeneutical significance of the Christian canon has become increasingly clear. The canon not only established the boundaries within which the Word of God was heard, but in addition it provided the context for its interpretation. The hermeneutical significance of this canonical role can be readily illustrated from both testaments.

The first five books of the Pentateuch constitute Israel's Torah. Genesis witnesses to God's salvific purpose for his entire creation. Exodus recounts the redemption of Israel from Egyptian captivity and the gracious giving of the Law to order the life of the redeemed people. Then Israel was disobedient and forced to wander in the wilderness until a new generation arose. The central question of Deuteronomy concerned the validity of the Torah for this new generation that had not experienced the giving of the Law at Sinai. The book of Deuteronomy, composed as the speech of Moses just before his death, offered an authoritative interpretation of the Torah for every successive generation of Israel: 'The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our fathers (only) did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here, alive, this day' (5:2–3). The book of Deuteronomy was then placed canonically at the end of the Pentateuch as a guide on how the preceding Law was to be heard for all later generations. Thus, when Wellhausen altered the canonical order of the OT by placing the prophets before the Torah, he seriously distorted its theological witness.

We turn now to the four gospels of the NT. It is widely agreed that by the end of the second century, if not before, the four gospels had been joined in a fixed corpus. The present structure of the gospels did not take place without a process of interpretation and controversy. Tatian's attempt to fuse the four gospels into one continuous narrative was finally rejected by the church. Similarly, Marcion's move critically to sift the material according to a single dogmatic ideology was also denied. Finally, numerous gnostic gospels that purported to contain esoteric teachings of Jesus were also rejected.

Rather, the four gospels which were deemed authoritative were interpreted, that is, canonically shaped, by assigning a title to each: 'the

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gospel according to (*kata*) so-and-so'. These titles did not form part of the original gospel, but stemmed from the editors of the gospels who used the titles to provide the evangelical material with a unified structure and content. Accordingly, there is only one gospel, but it has been truthfully rendered by four different evangelists. A new literary and theological context was provided which allowed for diversity while at the same time laying claim for its unity. The gospels function, not to instruct the reader in the ideology of its authors, but to bear faithful witness to its subject matter, the good news of Jesus Christ.[5]

The hermeneutical impact of this process of canonical shaping is of crucial importance for the interpretation of the Bible. The transmission and forming of the biblical material was not a haphazard growth, but was the product of theological reflection on the sacred writings. The effect of this canonical shaping was that a framework was given, often called a rule-of-faith within which the material was interpreted by and for the church. In other words, the biblical material in its larger structure has been rendered in a particular holistic fashion. Often this redaction, or 'ruled reading', has been termed 'kerygmatic', 'confessional' or 'canonical'. This means that there is a semantic *given*, a prescribed content to its intended sense which is commensurate with its role as sacred scripture.

Of course, there is another important hermeneutical distinction to be made between this overall canonical (confessional) shaping and the succeeding exegetical task of relating the individual parts which are often open to multiple meanings and interpretation. Biblical theologians frequently address this distinction between meaning as provided by the canonical shape, and meaning as an ongoing exegetical endeavour. The former has an 'objective' meaning provided by the larger theological structure; the latter a 'subjective' meaning arising from the exegetical enterprise. For example, the canonical shape of the fourfold gospel corpus identifies the common genre of the evangelical writings as gospel, all of which bear testimony to Jesus Christ, but nowhere has an exact historical, literary or theological relationship among the fourfold corpus been fixed canonically in its details. This interpretive activity has been assigned to the task of exegesis, a wrestling with the biblical text in order to hear the rich nuances of their multiple witnesses. The canonical shape provides the rule-of-faith within which the interpretive function of exegesis is guided. The canonical framework thus serves the interpreter both as a positive and a negative criterion for assessing

[5] For a fuller analysis, cf. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979) and *The New Testament as Canon* (London: SCM, 1984).

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those interpretations that fall outside of the theological restraints provided for its faithful reading.

In sum, a fundamental hermeneutical problem in interpreting the Bible lies in the decision whether or not the context for its authoritative interpretation is that rendered by its canonical (confessional) shape. To understand the Bible as sacred scripture means to reflect on the witnesses of the text transmitted through the testimony of the prophets and apostles. It involves an understanding of these writings as the salvific activity of God truthfully testified in the Bible. In contrast, a history-of-religions approach arising from the Enlightenment sets as its goal to reconstruct the literature, its content and its history according to the widely accepted categories of modernity, as a scientific, objective analysis according to the critical research prescribed by common human experience and reason.

Another way of describing the difference between interpreting the Bible as sacred scripture or in the history-of-religions categories of the Enlightenment has recently been freshly formulated by N. MacDonald.[6] He offers an important corrective to Hans Frei's explanation of the hermeneutical transition from the pre-critical to the critical era. The issue does not turn simply on a shift from history-like meaning to ostensive reference, but the hermeneutical change took place in the domain of belief, at the level of epistemic stance respecting 'truth-telling'. The shift from the Enlightenment occurred when belief in the biblical narrative was no longer held as a traditional hermeneutical assumption of truth, but now required critical evidentialist justification. To use my terminology, the hermeneutical change came about when the truth-telling role implicit in the concept of canon was replaced by the need for a critical context supported by external proof of its veracity.

In the light of this present crisis in biblical interpretation it is time to return to Wolterstorff's speech-act model which has been offered as a way out of the impasse.

Exegetical problems arising from Wolterstorff's speech-act theory

The double-agency discourse

Wolterstorff has proposed applying a speech-act theory to biblical hermeneutics. Unique to his proposal is his application of a double-agency discourse in his authorial reference. The form of double-agency or deputized discourse occurs infrequently in the Bible, but its occurrence has long been

[6] N. MacDonald, 'Illocutionary Stance in Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*: An Exercise in Conceptual Redescription and Normative Analysis', in Bartholomew *et al.* (eds.), *After Pentecost*, 312–28.

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noted by form critics. The messenger in the OT delivers his master's words in direct discourse within a first-person speech (Gen 32:3). Recently some OT scholars have argued that the messenger formula of appropriating speech may have once been an influence on the prophetic office, but the influence, if actually present, lies in the distant past and plays a minor role in prophetic speech which is rather characterized by its great freedom in rendering the office.

An initial problem in applying the double-agency theory in this larger hermeneutical role of divine discourse is that it remains, at best, an imaginative philosophical construct. There is no convincing evidence that such a move was ever operative in the actual interpretation of the Bible. In striking contrast, there are countless indications – historical, literary, theological – of how scripture was collected, shaped and interpreted by the synagogue and the church. In our previous discussion of the formation of the canon some of these factors were briefly outlined. What one finds is clear evidence of a hermeneutical process carried out by flesh and blood human recipients, first Jewish and then Christian, which affected the development and continuing interpretation of the biblical traditions. Double-agency discourse has never played a significant hermeneutical role.

The one divine author of all of scripture

There is a constant theme within Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse* (e.g. 51–4) that the Bible is the divine speech of its one author, namely God. Of course, the divine authorship of the Bible is a traditional confession of orthodox Christian theology (Calvin, *Institutes* I.VII.IV), and it correctly relates to the authority of scripture. Wolterstorff used the sole divine authorship as further warrant for his interpretation of divine speech as the illocutionary rendering of human speech into the divine.

However, there is another aspect to the issue of biblical authorship that offers an important corollary and indeed modification. Scripture has been assigned to various human authors. One of the lasting contributions of historical critical research has been in pointing out how different are the literary styles and theological content of the individual human authors. The Torah is attributed to Moses, the prophetic books to Isaiah, Jeremiah *etal.*, the Writings to various sages. Similar divisions of the parts of scripture were also evident in the NT. There is a fourfold gospel corpus, a history of the early church in Acts, and numerous apostolic letters. Crucial to this observation is the recognition that these divisions belong to the canonical process. In the growth of the literature often a beginning and ending of a particular collection have been registered.

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When one recalls the historical development of both the OT and NT canons, the hermeneutical significance of the literary divisions become clear. During the history of the growth of the canonical collections, there were conflicting claims of divine authority. These battles are better known from the NT period, but in both testaments controversy was involved. The divisions of the NT into canonical entities (gospels, history, letters, apocalypsis) recorded the distinct areas of debate. The fourfold gospel collection ruled out competing gnostic lives of Jesus. The Pauline letters were received, but shortly edited to become open letters directed to addressees beyond the original congregation (e.g. Ephesians). The Pastorals were retained as Pauline, but the *Acta Pauli* were rejected. The letter to the Hebrews remained contested for years because of different estimates by the Eastern and Western churches.

The hermeneutical significance of these canonical debates over different portions of the evolving collections shows how canonicity merged. The decisions turned on whether certain writings by human authors served as a truthful vehicle of the apostolic message for the entire Catholic church. There is no indication in this process of a single comprehensive hermeneutical shift by means of a double-agency transference by which human speech was rendered into divine discourse. Rather, according to a rule-of-faith the range of apostolic tradition was slowly established which was ecumenical enough to receive both Matthew and John, and both Paul and James. Their words were not filtered through an illocutionary transference, but only needed the promised illumination of the Holy Spirit to be heard as the voice of God to his church. It was a serious mistake in the past when some Christian expositors, reckoning with the single divine authorship of scripture, thought that they could ignore the particular stylistic features of the individual human authors. Is there a similar danger inherent in Wolterstorff's divine discourse?

Wolterstorff's two stages of interpretation

In chapters 11 and 12 of his *Divine Discourse* (183–222) Wolterstorff attempts to spell out in more detail two different stages in his speech-act, authorial discourse interpretation. These are named the 'first and second hermeneutic'.

In order to discern the divine discourse mediated by the appropriated human discourse, one begins by trying to understand the human author. 'We want to get to the noematic content of the discourse', that is, the meaning of the sentence (199, 211). He makes it clear that in the first hermeneutic the exegetical task of determining the sense of the human 'will have to be employed in pretty much the way that it is presently employed by its practitioners'.[7] The guild of academic biblical scholars

[7] *After Pentecost*, 87.

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has proven itself highly skilful. Wolterstorff is effusive in speaking of the dazzling contributions which biblical critics have made (202). Therefore for Wolterstorff it is part of the initial understanding of the human discourse to exegete the biblical text according to the common historical critical methodologies. There is no privileged canonical context, but the context for interpretation is the critical stance of modernity. He then illustrates his approach by interpreting Psalm 93: 'The Lord has established the world; it shall never be moved' (209f.). The biblical author in praising God assumes a geocentric cosmology shared by people of antiquity. Then Wolterstorff continues his interpretation (209–11). As moderns, we know that the earth moves; it rotates on its axis around the sun. Thus the biblical author is in error. But then surely God cannot be saying here that the earth is immobile. The modern interpreter must retain as true the praises of God, but discard the psalmist's particular way of making this point.

In order to resolve this apparent tension Wolterstorff employs his second hermeneutic. He mounts his case by appealing to an appropriation of the psalmist's human words as divine discourse. Whereas the noematic content of what the human author says is identical with the meaning of the sentence, the noematic content of what God now says in divine discourse is not identical with the meaning of the sentence. By performing an illocutionary act with the noematic content of the human discourse, God can say something entirely different.

Wolterstorff believes that there is no one system by which God's discourse relates to the human discourse which mediated the divine. He proceeds to offer a few 'patterns' to describe the relationship. There is a contrast between the literal and the topological speech, a 'transitive move' in which one act generates another, and a contrast between specificity and generality within divine discourse. However, these vague hints to interpret the relation between the first and second hermeneutic offer little help, and he is forced to return to the subject in the following chapter 13 (223–39).

Does scripture have a 'wax nose'?

This chapter which follows his discussion of the two stages of interpretation is concerned with overcoming the anxiety of the apparent arbitrariness of biblical interpretation according to his speech-act theory, the so-called 'wax nose' syndrome. After examining various attempts to avoid the difficulty, Wolterstorff concedes that there is no way fully to avoid the anxiety of knowing what God actually said or did not say in his divine discourse. At best one must try to cope with the problem. Then he offers a few suggestions to mitigate the anxiety. There are rational, interpretive principles valid for any literature, such as paying attention to the larger context, learning from the

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divergent opinions of others, and seeking to understand one's own biases. These suggestions are sane, rational and even wise, but they do not begin to touch on the problems of Christian belief in the role of scripture as the divinely appointed means of receiving the Spirit's communication of God's will.

Perhaps owing to a sense of the inadequacy of his interpretive guidelines Wolterstorff suddenly shifts into a confessional Christian mode: exegesis needs to 'be practices of the heart as well as the head' (239); 'to interpret God's discourse, we must come to know God better' (231). Such profound truths were long ago sounded by both Origen and Augustine, but as Christian confession, not as a rational demonstration to the secular world of sceptical philosophers, the persuasion of whom was the rationale of his entire project. Wolterstorff has every right to write an apologetic treatise to convince unbelievers of the faith, but he cannot then suddenly shift his mode of argumentation to confessional claims.

To summarize, Lessing's ugly ditch between faith and reason remains painfully unresolved in Wolterstorff's speech-act theory. Even the structure of his book is evidence of the breakdown in his argument. The first part is a brilliant demonstration of philosophical skill and learning as he proceeds in debate with his colleagues in an endless display of patience in pursuing every possible objection. However, in the second part, when dealing with biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, he seems largely unaware of the sheer scope and intensity of the Enlightenment's challenge to traditional Christian reading of the Bible. In addition, to suggest that the early church seemed little bothered with biblical contradictions is a vast underestimation of the problem.[8] In sum, Wolterstorff has not demonstrated how his philosophical approach can be of any serious aid in resolving the hermeneutical problems that have troubled biblical scholars for well over two hundred years.

Speech-act theory in A. Thiselton's Commentary on 1 Corinthians

Up to now I have stressed that speech-act theory has been largely developed by philosophers who are often brilliant in their own discipline, but less so in the hermeneutical problems of biblical interpretation. However, there is one obvious exception to be made to this generalization. For at least thirty years Anthony Thiselton has been a leading proponent of speech-act theory. He has now written a long and impressive NT commentary[9] on which he

[8] Cf. H. Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien: Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971).

[9] A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

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has obviously worked for decades with the aim, among other things, of illustrating the hermeneutical significance of speech-act theory for biblical interpretation. It is also significant that Thiselton has written a very positive review of Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse*,[10] and cites him in several instances in his commentary (266, 283, 357, etc.). Nevertheless, it appears somewhat ironical that Thiselton's review focuses largely on Wolterstorff's philosophical prowess and touches only tangentially on his biblical exegesis.

What is initially surprising in his NT commentary is how infrequently one finds explicit references to speech-act theory. To be sure, it is mentioned in his introduction (41–52), and occasionally in the commentary (e.g. 41, 50–2, 146, 455, 1188). However, in the great majority of cases the appeal to illocutionary speech-act is simply to emphasize that the biblical writers' speech is not primarily for transmitting information, but is an utterance having performative force (52). The proclamation of the cross is a speech-act to promote a new way of being in the world. To proclaim the gospel is an illocutionary speech-act which presupposes a call from God, the performance of a divine promise (146). Often the case for the performative force of Paul's speech is made without appeal to speech-act language, and then repeated in the language initiated by the British philosophers. Thiselton is also clear that the characteristic performative force of the gospel has long been recognized by commentators such as Barth and Bonhoeffer, among many others, without an appeal to speech-act theory.

In addition, there are a few cases in his commentary when Thiselton is able to show some broader hermeneutical implications in the use of speech-act terminology. For example, he is very persuasive in showing how Käsemann's theory of Holy Law failed to offer a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of language, later provided by speech-act theory, to be fully valid (399). Or again, he offers a powerful criticism of von Rad's interpretation of the curse as a mythical vestige when reference to the categories of illocutionary speech-act theory would have provided a far more convincing explanation.

However, the main point to make in reference to Thiselton is that the dominant exegetical approach in his commentary is very different indeed from that of Wolterstorff. His aim is to interpret the literal sense of the Apostle Paul's letter using all the modern critical tools available to an exegete including text-critical, philological, historical, literary, sociological and theological analysis. He has also frequently included a section on the post-theological reception of a text (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) which often extends from the patristic to the modern period. Accordingly, there are several

[10] 'Speech-Act Theory and the Claim that God Speaks: Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse*', *SJT* 50 (1997), 97–110.

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crucial exegetical moves of Thiselton that stand in striking contrast to the hermeneutical proposals developed by Wolterstorff in his *Divine Discourse*.

1. The first difference turns on Wolterstorff's appeal to the appropriated human discourse outlined in chapter 11, the so-called 'first hermeneutic' (182–201). He wishes to get to the noematic content of the human discourse, which he does by pursuing the historical critical methods of modern biblical scholars.[11] He reads the text from the secular context of a modern interpreter who often has much more scientific information of the world than did the original biblical author. Thus, Wolterstorff judges the writer of Ps 93 in error because of his geocentric cosmology. As a consequence, Wolterstorff shortly has to employ a 'second hermeneutic' to arrive at divine discourse which serves to overcome the frailty of the human discourse.

In contrast, Thiselton consistently works from within the given context of the Pauline epistle. He is, of course, aware of the time-conditionality of all human discourse, and so traces in great detail the influence on Paul's rhetoric of historical, social and literary features of first century Jewish-Hellenistic culture. Yet, as far as I can discern, never does he step outside of the 'canonical context' to pronounce the human discourse of the Apostle erroneous and in need of correction from the perspective of a modern secular reading. Thus, even in such a highly controversial passage as 1 Cor 14:33–6 ('women should keep quiet in the churches'), Thiselton never judges the statement to be unworthy of the Apostle Paul or unthinkable for a loving God. Rather, he explores carefully the full range of contextual interpretations of the passage before concluding that one definitive interpretation remains illusive. By assuming the 'truth-telling' content of Paul's letter (in my terminology, its canonical context), Thiselton avoids all the ensuing hermeneutical problems that plague Wolterstorff when he attempts to move to a sense beyond that of the original authors by an appeal to divine discourse.

2. A second major problem then arises for Wolterstorff when he applies his appropriation model in passing from the mediating human discourse to the mediated divine discourse. By positing God's illocutionary speech-act with its noematic content, Wolterstorff is confident in rendering a divine discourse which is no longer identical with the meaning of the human discourse. God can say something very different in meaning by selection, addition or semantic alteration into various figurative modes. Of course, this move of his second hermeneutic raises for him the massive problem of 'wax-nose anxiety', namely, the fear that scripture can be pushed into any shape. Earlier we pointed out the inadequacy of his attempts to mitigate the anxiety by means of several suggested patterns of interpretation.

[11] *After Pentecost*, 87; *Divine Discourse*, 202.

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In contrast, Thiselton's commentary shows no need for Wolterstorff's second hermeneutic. Paul's human discourse is not replaced by divine discourse through a technique of double-agency appropriation. Rather, the voice of Paul is received in faith as the voice of God through the promised activity of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle's words remain the inspired vehicle for divine communication to his church. For Thiselton, human discourse and God's speech are not pulled apart, which is a Christian exegetical tradition long since established by Thomas and Calvin, along with many other scholars of the church.

3. Finally, Wolterstorff was unable to overcome the ugly ditch separating human and divine discourse. This major problem arose from his initial starting point. His avowed aim was to mount a rational case for divine speech by means of philosophical arguments which he directed to the secular philosophical guild. Yet in the end, he was forced to abandon his initial, neutral stance and return to the confessional language of the Christian faith with an appeal to piety. The interpreter needs to know God better through the practices of the heart as well as the head. Hardly a convincing argument for the academy!

Once again, Thiselton's hermeneutical approach avoids the pitfall into which Wolterstorff fell because of his initial, secular apologetic stance. Thiselton consistently remains within the context of confessing Christian theology, employing Augustine's exegetical tradition of faith seeking knowledge. Within this confessional stance he makes use of every critical tool, but never in a way as to conceal his theological assumption of scripture's truth-telling.

Conclusion

The implication to be drawn from this essay is that speech-act theory cannot be indiscriminately lumped together, especially when addressing its application to biblical hermeneutics. We have sought to show that under the broad umbrella of speech-act theory fundamentally different hermeneutical applications to biblical interpretation can be defended. In my judgement, in spite of demonstrating brilliant philosophical agility, Wolterstorff's application of speech-act theory to biblical interpretation is deeply flawed. His book *Divine Discourse* cannot be deemed hermeneutically successful, nor does it point in a fruitful direction for the serious interpretation of sacred scripture.

I would also hope that it has become apparent just how high are the theological stakes in this debate. Many of us can recall, often with much pain, that generations of Reformed theologians, especially in North America, were

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led astray in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield of Princeton sought to defend Christian orthodoxy within the framework of Baconian philosophy. It would be sad indeed if a new generation of evangelicals would once again commit themselves uncritically to a new and untested philosophical model, allegedly designed for the twenty-first century.

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