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Leah Shelton

Senior Inquiry

Inspiration, Interpretation, and Authority: Laying Down the Law

In *Homily 26*, John Chrysostom, writing in the late 4th century C.E.¹, interprets 1 Corinthians 11:10: “It follows that being covered is a mark of subjection and authority. For it induces her to look down and be ashamed and preserve entire her proper virtue. For the virtue and honor of the governed is to abide in his obedience.”² Chrysostom overtly relegates the woman’s role as one of shame and obedience toward the male in order to remain virtuous. While Chrysostom’s commentary is a product of his social context in which the female gender was subsumed under the category of “not-male,”³ this does not take away from the fact that the interpretation reinforces the idea of feminine inferiority. This ancient interpretation demonstrates one snapshot of the interpretive history this passage.

John Calvin, a French theologian and pastor in the Protestant Reformation writing twelve centuries after Chrysostom,⁴ also included an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:10 in his works. Calvin states, “On this account all women are born, that they may acknowledge themselves inferior in consequence of the superiority of the male sex.”⁵ Like Chrysostom, Calvin propagates the idea that women are by nature inferior to men, adding to the oppressive interpretive tradition of this verse.

Even though their work is twelve centuries apart, Chrysostom and Calvin interpret 1 Corinthians 11:10 in the same manner: females are subordinate to males. The

¹ “CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: St. John Chrysostom.”

² “CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 26 on First Corinthians (Chrysostom),” 11.10.

³ Vander Stichele and Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse*, 61.

⁴ “John Calvin, Theopedia.”

⁵ John Pringle, “1 Corinthians 11 Calvin’s Commentaries.”

two write from contexts far removed from each other yet come to the same conclusion. Although much time had passed and they were in different sociopolitical and cultural situations, changing the context did not change the interpretation. As we will see later, the context of the interpretation plays a powerful role in how a text is interpreted. In turning to a modern gender-related biblical interpretation, we continue to encounter issues with the oppression of females via biblical interpretation.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) is in the process of writing a social statement concerning "Justice for Women." In a paper outlining the background for the statement, Dr. Erik Heen includes a section on different methods for studying the Bible, including the "proof text model" which sees some verses as "clear statement[s] of doctrine." Such verses include 1 Timothy 2:12: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent," which, similarly to 1 Corinthians 11:10, deals with gender hierarchy in the church. Heen recognizes that this method has been problematic for women by preventing them from "full participation in the church."⁶ He then provides background on how the ELCA came to ordain women by transferring their proof text from 1 Timothy 2:12 to Galatians 3:27-28,⁷ which reads, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁸ In the conclusion, Heen addresses that the social statement on justice for women must be grounded in the appropriate use of scripture, and the

⁶ Heen, "A Background Paper for 'Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice,'" 6.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ "Galatians 3:27-28 NRSV - Bible Gateway."

purpose of his paper is to begin the conversation of how that might be possible.⁹ All in all, by working toward a social statement on justice for women, the ELCA recognizes the need for making its space inclusive and uplifting for women.

While the ELCA has taken a step toward liberating the female role in the church through allowing them to be ordained, Heen overlooks the underlying problem with the ELCA's interpretative process: the fact that in order to lift women out of the mire of servility which prohibited female ordination, the ELCA must use a more liberating verse to soften the blow of an oppressive verse. The ELCA sees 1 Timothy 2:12 as a barrier in substantiating its doctrine of female ordination, and therefore finds a different verse which can liberate women. This demonstrates that 1 Timothy 2:12, interpreted without using other verses, cannot be salvaged to fit into the new doctrine. The ELCA sees 1 Timothy 2:12 as incompatible with female leadership in church and irremediably misogynistic. In using one verse to interpret another verse (which fit previous doctrine), the ELCA shows that the original verse, alone, cannot be used to support its liberating cause. This interpretive move demonstrates the continuation of the interpretive history encountered in Chrysostom's work. While Chrysostom was interpreting 1 Corinthians 2:10, the verses address the same topic: the female role in the church. The ELCA uses Galatians 2:27-28 to interpret 1 Timothy 2:12 because it sees the oppressive implication of 1 Timothy 2:12, but this does not disregard the fact that the latter verse propagates oppression. While the ELCA finds a way around this oppressive interpretation which subjugates female authority in churches, the verse is still oppressive; therefore, the ELCA must use one verse to interpret the other.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

While this interpretive method is the basis for the Lutheran¹⁰ understanding of the Bible.¹¹ I disagree that this method should be accepted as a valid way to make meaning from the texts. I argue that this method has the potential to ignore the verses that oppress, while putting more interpretive weight on other verses in order to sugarcoat the oppressive verses. This is clearly evident in the fact that the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church still uses 1 Timothy 2:12 to prohibit female ordination.¹²

With the recognition that the biblical texts contain oppressive content comes this question: if the church does not ignore the verses, can it counteract the oppression that the verses can instigate? Deeper, still, lies the root issue. Christians deem the entire Bible to be inspired. For many Christians, inspired means that the texts come from God, in some form or fashion. Because of this, they can justify oppressive actions by saying that God, vis-à-vis the Bible, has justified their actions through biblical messages. In this argument, Christians not only assume that the Bible is inspired, but that inspiration is a well-known, fully established concept that can simply be accepted as factual. This is simply not the case.

☼ **Inspiration** ☼

In his book, *Inspiration*, David Law teaches his readers about many different theories of inspiration. He touches on how the inconsistencies, contradictions, and historical elements of the text degrade certain theories of inspiration, such as the instrumental and dictation theories which rely on God directly using humans to write

¹⁰ “Word and World - A Canon within the Canon? No: Proclaim the Whole Counsel of God.”

¹¹ But dating back to Origen. “The School of Alexandria - Origen - Ch 3 - Origen and The Holy Scriptures.”

¹² A.L. Barry, “Pastors.”

God's message. Law delineates two general categories: word-centered and nonverbal inspiration.

Word-Centered Inspiration

Word-centered theories include types of inspiration that focus on how the specific words of the Bible came into being. The four main theories Law includes in this section are instrumental, dictation, verbal, and plenary inspiration. Instrumental inspiration uses the simile of God using a human as a passive "piece of chalk" through which God can dictate.¹³ Law finds two issues with this: it removes all personality from the human, and it does not account for the different writing styles found in the text. Dictation theory means that God spoke the words of the Bible to the authors using God's voice. The same problems encompass both the instrumental and dictation theories; however, Law deems God's role as a puppeteer in the author's lives as the biggest problem since it ignores the distinct personalities evident in the texts.¹⁴

Verbal inspiration still maintains that each word is inspired, but is not dictated by God. God's role is like a master planner: God forms the authors' lives into circumstances in which they can receive and dictate the appropriate words from God.¹⁵ Law finds a glaring hole in this argument: it assumes biblical inerrancy which Law sees as highly problematic given the inconsistencies, contradictions, and grammatical errors in the Bible.¹⁶ The final version of word-centered inspiration is plenary inspiration and contains three premises: the entire Bible is inspired (instead of only specific sections relating to doctrine), all of the writings are inspired in the same way, and they were all

¹³ Law, *Inspiration*, 2001, 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58–60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64–66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

verbally inspired.¹⁷ Law addresses how supporters of this theory rely on 1 Thessalonians 2:13 to support their claim, but Law discredits this saying that Paul (assuming he wrote 1 Thessalonians) could not have been referring to the Bible as it exists today because the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters from Peter were not yet in their final form.¹⁸ Law ultimately rejects the word-center theories of inspiration.¹⁹

Nonverbal Inspiration

Nonverbal inspiration focuses on how individuals in the past and present have interacted with biblical texts, such as how the authors and readers might connect through the text. Here, Law provides five main theories: teacher model, moral/spiritual, selection, biblical images, and social conception.²⁰ With each theory, Law finds strengths and weaknesses, but does not absolutely reject any of them. The teacher model suggests that individuals were inspired by God's revelatory acts in history and chose to live their lives in light of these acts; therefore all biblical authors and all Christians are inspired. Law finds some merits to this theory, but ultimately sees it as unhelpful in defining what inspiration is because it equates God's mysterious action to inspiration.²¹ Moral/spiritual interpretation places the duty in the hands of the reader to find moral and spiritual messages, and therefore inspired sections in the text, rather than the other material.²² Law critiques this theory saying it does not provide criteria for distinguishing which sections of the text belong to each category. He sees this as a broad critique of many nonverbal theories. Selection theory sees the books of law and the prophets as

¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹⁹ Ibid., 97.

²⁰ Ibid., 108.

²¹ Ibid., 124-129.

²² Ibid., 100.

fully inspired: God used the prophets as “channels to communicate His Will to men.”²³ As the texts become further removed from the law and prophets, they become less inspired—implying a gradation of inspiration—and contain more errors. While not entirely rejecting the idea of gradation, Law responds asking how the inspiration occurs and what justifications exist for describing the law and prophets as inspired.²⁴ The biblical image idea states that there are images in the Bible which move souls supernaturally. Only when the soul is moved can the reader see the inspiration. Law finds strengths in this theory, but points out that this assumes the objective reality of the images.²⁵ The social conception theory relies on three elements: tradition, situation, and respondent. The tradition maintains past events in the community which become useful when the community must make meaning from a new situation. Those who help reshape the tradition in light of the situation are respondents (biblical authors). Law’s counterargument is that this theory removes all need for divine interaction because inspiration lies in the community’s consciousness.²⁶

The main strength he finds in nonverbal theories is that they place more responsibility on the reader to find meaning in the text. The reader must be open to finding and receiving messages from the text. “The biblical ciphers [messages], then, cannot be ‘proved’ objectively,” Law argues, “but are intelligible and meaningful only when the individual human being receives them with the correct existential response.”²⁷ Essentially, meaning exists in the texts, but the reader must have the appropriate

²³ Ibid., 110.

²⁴ Ibid., 111-114.

²⁵ Ibid., 114-122.

²⁶ Ibid., 129-135.

²⁷ Ibid., 190.

(Christian) viewpoint in order to find the meaning. The openness of the reader is the crucial building block for Law's conclusion.

Law's Conclusion

In the end, Law argues that inspiration is located in the relationship between the text and the interpreter. The texts of the Bible "can open up deeper levels of existence to the individual and provide an insight into Being."²⁸ The reader must be open to finding and receiving messages from the texts. Neither the text nor the reader alone can be inspired.²⁹ The texts and the reader work together in order to access the deeper meaning held within the texts. After describing this relationship, Law adds a third component: the reader "ascribes the existential coherence acquired through such engagement not to his or her own powers, but to the power of Transcendent Being."³⁰ Law offers a lengthy explanation for what he considers Transcendent, but, given his requirement that the reader must have the "correct existential response" which he then labels as the "operation of the [Holy] Spirit,"³¹ it is not a stretch to summarize Transcendence in a word: God. The Transcendent represents the crux of Law's theory, specifically, in the "existential response" of the reader.

According to Law, the texts achieve full meaning through their shaping the lives of the reader.³² However, in order for this to happen, the reader must have the correct response to the text. Law describes this as the "inner testimony of the Spirit, which

²⁸ Ibid., 189.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 190.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

assists us in our assent and obedience to scripture.”³³ This response constitutes the crucial component of Law’s theory, that is, having the appropriate perspective: an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in assisting the reader to see the meaning in the text and in aiding the reader to live out the messages correctly. This lifelong process demonstrates, for Law, the way to access the meaning of the biblical texts.³⁴ In a sense, the reader’s life is an extension of the text’s messages. In a few words, Law locates inspiration in the interaction between the text and the reader, and the most vital component of this relationship is the Holy Spirit’s influence in the “existential response of the reader.”³⁵

Laying Down the Law

While Law proposes a theory of inspiration that highlights the reader’s openness, I argue that inspiration lies in texts in so far as they elucidate the experiences of the authors’ interactions with the divine. In his book, *New Testament Theology: Community and Communion*, Philip Esler presents this perspective: “...all of the canonical documents of the two Testaments are the product of actual people who have responded to the experience of God in their lives and have sought to communicate that experience to others.”³⁶ Because this theory places the focus on the humanity of the authors, it accounts somewhat for the evident human component in the texts. This is because the human authors are responding to interactions with God rather than God having any part in writing of the texts. Some of these human aspects include the different writing styles and contrasting content visible in the texts. Since the texts are

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 190.

³⁶ Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 39.

viewed as different humans' responses to God, the humans will necessarily perceive God differently depending on the circumstances in which they encounter God. The theory also maintains the mystery of how the human-divine interactions which the authors respond to transpired. For instance, it does not specify whether the interactions were direct or indirect. A direct interaction with the divine might include hearing God's voice or seeing God, while an indirect interaction could be hearing a story about the words or actions of Jesus and/or his followers without direct contact with them, though this is not an exhaustive list of examples. The inscrutable interaction is the missing piece which no theory of inspiration to date thoroughly and completely illuminates. Overall, the general question of what it means for the Bible to be inspired is still, and mostly likely will forever be, under inquiry, but each theory which is added or dismantled comes closer to a viable explanation.

While this theory can be a sign post on the road to a full definition of inspiration, defining inspiration is not the only issue at stake within the expanse of inspiration. Not only is there no final verdict on the definition, but there are also issues linked to inspiration. Although reaching a final description of inspiration would be satisfying for those who reflect on the matter, the actual definition of inspiration plays no significant role in the reality of, say, the women who are not allowed to be ordained because of doctrine relying on 1 Timothy 2:12. The real issue is the fact that groups *do* describe the Bible as inspired and then *use* the justification of having "divine authority" in order to oppress.

For instance, one church holds the opposite perspective of the ELCA in regard to female ordination. The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church uses 1 Timothy 2:12,

among other verses, as evidence to prohibit females from becoming pastors³⁷, therefore denying women equal status in the church. For a second example, the Westboro Baptist Church has conducted 56,534 “demonstrations” at gay pride parades, military funerals, and other events to spread its propaganda. One of its main messages is that “God has killed [troops] in Iraq/Afghanistan in righteous judgment against an evil nation.”³⁸ Christian groups such as these ones use the biblical texts as divine evidence for their oppressive actions. It is clear that while some groups use the texts to liberate, other use them to oppress. Here is the task at hand: given that the biblical texts can be used to liberate and oppress, can Christians establish a framework which only allows for liberating uses within Christianity?³⁹

☼ **Esler’s Theological Model** ☼

Philip Esler provides a solution to this problem. Esler decries the notion that the historical analysis which brings about insight into the biblical texts is only useful in systematic theology. That is, the biblical messages found by means of historical research are not useful solely for scholars in establishing a set of organized, rational beliefs, but also for lay Christians to use in their everyday lives. Esler states, “For ordinary or everyday religion encompasses the whole range of what it means to be human under God—not just ideas, but also beliefs, values, aspirations, roles and practices (in day-to-day or liturgical settings), emotions, experience, and identity. Why should the historical analysis of the New Testament not be brought directly into contact with these factors?”⁴⁰

Esler wants to use historical analysis as the starting point to discussing the Bible’s

³⁷ A.L. Barry, “Pastors.”

³⁸ “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

³⁹ This argument will be limited to how Christians use the Bible, since how the entire use of the Bible would be a much bigger project.

⁴⁰ Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 274.

application to daily Christian life, rather than isolating its use to examining already established church doctrine. Esler realizes that Christians are not concerned with high-flying theological matters such as how Jesus could be fully God and fully human. Every Sunday church pews are full of Christians reciting creeds stating the basic beliefs of Christianity. The fundamentals do not comprise the issues which Christians encounter in everyday life which motivate them to turn to the Bible and their community for answers.⁴¹ Christians are desperately seeking answers for “hot topics.” As Esler states:

There are the emotional and evaluative dimensions of being a Christian at a time when various denominations are experiencing turmoil centering on matters such as sexual abuse by priests and ministers, the status of homosexuals, the suppressing of prophetic theological voices by centralized ecclesial authority, the involvement of religious [sic] in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the possibility that traditional Christian views on creation have legitimated an exploitive approach to the environment, and so on.⁴²

These are the relevant issues of the day which require critical and thorough analysis of biblical texts in order to find solutions which reflect Christian ideals.

One particular issue which Esler highlights is interethnic conflict, such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide when Hutus murdered approximately eight-hundred-thousand of their Tutsi neighbors, friends, and fellow humans.⁴³ Esler argues that this kind of situation exemplifies “the bizarre nature of conceiving systematic theology as the only

⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴² Ibid., 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 274.

recipient of biblical insights.”⁴⁴ Given that Christianity is one religion practiced in Rwanda, this is a prime example of interethnic conflict between Christians. This grievous example demonstrates that Christians must establish methods of responding to conflict in ways that do not end in the senseless, heinous murder of even one human, let alone eight-hundred-thousand Rwandan Tutsis. Christians are searching for answers to questions which may result in life, death, and cruel treatment of humans, and Esler proposes one method for using the biblical texts to find ancient examples of solutions to modern problems.

In order to find guidance using the biblical texts, Esler proposes a new model of New Testament theology. Esler strives to use historical analysis of the biblical texts within a framework of communion with their authors to establish a method which will aid Christians in responding to such integral inquiries. This model focuses on the intended messages and ancient contents of the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament in order to determine whether the guidance which the authors provide (to some, but not necessarily all problems) within their contexts are befitting for our modern context. All of this is possible within the framework of a cross-cultural and cross-temporal community of Christians.

While the texts can offer Christians guidance, Esler acknowledges that we must maintain a critical eye when examining the ancient texts, since their contexts are so far removed from our own: “We should expect that some of these ancient voices seem more adapted to a particular modern situation than others.”⁴⁵ He discusses the topic of biblical interethnic relations in a text which he sees as providing dangerous advice:

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Paul's letter to the Galatians. Esler summarizes that Galatians represents a poignant example of *anti-ethnic* sentiment in that Paul makes "highly artificial and provocative arguments" against Judeans who are outside of the Christ movement.⁴⁶ Because of this ostracizing language, Esler moves away from this text to what he deems a more suitable text, Romans, in which Paul handles the conflict "between Judean and Greek members of the Roman Christ-movement."⁴⁷

Esler's theological model begins with determining what Paul intended to say despite the momentous cultural gap between the ancient and modern worlds. This requires research into Paul's sociohistorical context. However, Esler argues that historical research alone does not provide the kind of tangibility which Christians desire when interacting with the biblical texts; there must be an element of community with their ancestors in faith. It is as if the texts are voices from the past that communicate with modern readers through their shared Christian identity. Readers can combine historical knowledge and the shared faith tradition to fully unravel what the author intended to communicate. However, there exists a distinct cultural gap between the ancient and modern audiences which forces modern readers to "penetrate the different cultural script in which the messages are expressed."⁴⁸ This invokes two vital questions: 1) how do the communities interact with the authors living in the past, and 2) how can the communities communicate over such a massive cultural gap?

In addressing the first question, Esler argues that we can know people and events of the past to some extent through human memory, since we perceive memories as real

⁴⁶ Ibid., 275.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 51.

life accounts. We also gain access to the past through the information discovered using procedures which have been accepted as valid for extracting facts from artifacts.⁴⁹ However, this amounts to simply knowing people from the past, not interacting with them. Esler uses Friedrich Schleiermacher's idea to argue his idea that modern readers can interact with ancient writers. For Schleiermacher, writing and speaking are two types of interpersonal interaction used to express and understand messages. In this sense, both speaking and writing are forms of dialogue. This allows Esler to view the biblical texts as opportunities for modern readers to dialogue with the ancient authors. As Esler claims, "to read such texts historically within the framework of interpersonal communion, to treat the 'You' who authored them as a real human person, necessitates doing all that we possibly can to hear that voice sounding forth to the full extent of its ancient otherness, yes, its strangeness from us."⁵⁰ Thus historical analysis aids the reader in understanding the humanity of the ancient authors, transforming the texts from mere words to invitations to dialogue with Christian ancestors.

As for the second question, communicating across an immense cultural gap, Esler elaborates on a four factor model proposed by William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim outlining the necessary elements which one culture must understand about the other. The first factor is culture: "the patterns of feeling, thinking, valuing, and potential action into which we are socialized by being brought up in a particular social setting."⁵¹ Second is the set of groups we belong to. These include, but are not limited to, family, ethnicity, religion, school, athletic team, town, and employer. These groups influence how we think and act, which come across in our interactions with others. Individuality

⁴⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁵¹ Ibid., 85.

constitutes the third group. The main component in individuality is personality. Here, it is important to recognize is that individuality differs in collectivist versus individualist cultures. The last factor is environment: geographic location, climate, and architecture.⁵² All four of these factors prompt humans to communicate in different ways and must be considered in intercultural dialogue. By accessing the historical perspectives of the New Testament authors and understanding modern culture(s) in contrast to ancient first and second century Mediterranean culture, Esler affirms that modern Christians can successfully communicate with their ancestors in faith.

With the framework of interpersonal communication with the New Testament authors in place, Esler concludes with a case study underscoring the utility of his model within the realm of interethnic conflict. As previously mentioned, Esler rejects the use of Galatians as an appropriate text for this topic because of Paul's anti-Judean sentiment. Instead, Esler turns to the book of Romans. The first step of the model is to conduct research to establish the contexts of both the modern and ancient intercultural conflicts, specifically "how each group defines its ethnicity and the history and character of the groups' interactions."⁵³ Romans is situated in negative sentiments between Greeks and Judeans in Alexandria a mere two decades before Paul's writing. The next step would be to research how the ethnic groups were organized around the city and how this influenced "Roman patterns of social relations, especially social stratification and honor-based hostility between groups, including those centered on houses."⁵⁴ This would provide a context for understanding Paul's message on ethnic relations within Romans. The subsequent step in the model is to compare the ancient and modern

⁵² Ibid., 86.

⁵³ Ibid., 279.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

contexts in order to determine whether Paul's message can be deemed appropriate for the modern context. Esler finds the ancient context to be similar to the modern context. Paul's message in Romans consists of an attempt to settle the conflict between Judean and Greek members of the Jesus movement by showing his audience their shared identity as Christ-followers, even as they maintain different ethnicities. Paul's move is similar to the modern social scientific focus on bringing groups together using a "new superordinate group, to establish for them a new common in-group identity."⁵⁵ Thus, the ancient and modern contexts match.

Besides the idea of a shared identity in Christ, Esler identifies what he sees as the climax of Paul's message to the Romans, and applicable to any modern ethnic conflict: *agape*, a type of love so illimitable that Paul employs the word thirty times in Romans⁵⁶, writing in a style which Esler interprets as elegant speech reserved for "a precious fragment of oral presentation."⁵⁷ This section exemplifies an instance in which the ancient author's voice is nearly tangible to the modern Christian reader; the communion of Christ-followers illuminates the historical data to form a relationship which Esler sees as the epitome of the appropriate employment of the New Testament texts in modern Christian lives.

One strength of Esler's model is the need to maintain a critical perspective of the New Testament writings. In keeping this mindset, Esler attempts to safeguard against propagating values from ancient culture which have since been deemed inhumane, such as slavery. Esler calls out the issues for which many Christians are seeking answers and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 280.

⁵⁶ Specifically, Romans 12:9-21.

⁵⁷ Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 281.

provides a means for resolving them using the messages from ancient members of the community of believers.

One weakness of Esler's theory is that not only would lay-Christians need to take up the role of an in-depth researcher, it would also require them to change one of the fundamental lenses through which many modern Christians view the Bible: its messages are intended for the modern reader. Esler starts his argument from a wholly different perspective: the messages of the New Testament authors are intended for their first and second century Mediterranean audiences.⁵⁸ In order to even begin the process of using Esler's model, the viewpoint of the majority of modern Christians would require shifting. If the messages were intended for modern Christians, there is no reason to discover the intended meaning of the messages through intercultural communion with Christian ancestors; Christians can just interpret them in their modern context and apply the messages to their lives. Consequently, this would affect how Christians view the inspiration of the Bible. If a given text has a specific audience, can the text be said to automatically mean something for readers who are removed from the context of the specific audience? If the texts of the Bible were meant for people from entirely different contexts—both culturally and temporally—how can they be said to be “inspired”(read: ways to respond to the divine) for audiences which were virtually unimaginable for the ancient authors? While the ancient authors and modern readers can commune over their shared identity in Christ, the fact that the text was written for ancient audiences in contexts far removed from ours puts into inquiry the very idea that these interpretations of the divine are applicable to modern audiences.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51.

Another aspect of Esler's model that I take issue with is this: can lay-Christians access the historical analysis which he finds necessary? In his case study of Romans, Esler digs deeply into the historical context of the book of Romans touching on details such as "patterns of social relations, especially social stratification and honor-based hostility between groups, including those centered on houses."⁵⁹ Unearthing these historical data would require much more research than most laypeople conduct on a daily basis, assuming they even have access to resources which would provide such information, such as university libraries. Moreover, even if laypeople found this information, they do not have the scholar-level training, which Esler possesses, in order to combine the information into a coherent context for Romans. And that only covers the ancient context. For the modern context, Esler uses his knowledge of social science to include the superordinate identity theory that brings interethnic groups together. Very *very* few laypeople have access to, the time for, and the training to understand this sort of complex information which is at the core of Esler's new theology. The purpose of the historical research is to discover the context within which the author and audience would understand the text, that is, what their social context(s) were.

All in all, fundamental to Esler's model is the idea that modern Christians can make themselves aware enough of both their own modern contexts and the ancient contexts of the authors in order to determine whether the intended messages of the author can be applied to contemporary situations. This idea leads into the analysis of how social context influences interpretation, since both understanding and applying the message of the author involves interpretation. First, it is vital to discuss what is involved in interpretation.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 279.

☼ Hermeneutics ☼

This question delves into the field of hermeneutics, which derives from the Greek verb, *hermeneuein* (“to interpret”). Hermeneutic tradition dates back to ancient Greek philosophy and formed a branch of biblical studies during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁶⁰ The field of hermeneutics can be summarized in a conceptual triangle: hermeneutics involves “the nature of a text, what it means to understand a text, and how the assumptions of the interpretive audience affect the content of the interpretation.”⁶¹ The majority of my analysis will focus on the last two angles.

Gadamerian Hermeneutics

One of the major modern theorists of hermeneutics was the 20th-century⁶² German philosopher Hans-George Gadamer. Gadamer, continuing his predecessor’s, Martin Heidegger, work argues that the process of meaning making does not terminate with authors; readers continue the process. From Gadamer and Heidegger’s perspectives, readers extract meaning from texts by applying their preconceptions to the content they read. A preconception is an assumed idea of what the meaning of the text could be. Gadamer, summarizing Heidegger, states, “[The reader] projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning.”⁶³ Readers constantly shape and reshape their understandings of the texts based on their preconceptions and the content they encounter in the texts. Through this process, readers make meaning from the text.

⁶⁰ Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.”

⁶¹ Harvey, “Hermeneutics.”

⁶² Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.”

⁶³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 236.

Gadamer also utilizes the term “fore-meaning” in his description of the reading process and how readers’ contexts influence the meaning they create from the text; however, he does not explicitly state whether fore-meanings and preconceptions equate to the same concept, or if there is a difference between the two. One way to conceive of these two ideas is that fore-meanings are the meanings which are reshaped during the process of reading, while preconceptions are the aspects of the social contexts of the readers that cause readers to have certain preconceptions. Gadamer proposes that the reader is part of the history of readers and that past understandings of the text influence the readers. He states, “The actual meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, is not dependent on the occasion represented by the author and his [or her] original public. At least it is not exhausted by it; for the meaning is also determined by the whole of the objective course of history.”⁶⁴ The very fact that the interpretive history of a text affects the reader’s understanding encompasses the concept that the reader’s social context also influences him or her. The interpretive tradition is part of the reader’s social context. Earlier, I examined the interpretative tradition of 1 Corinthians 11:10 and found that there was virtually no difference in the interpretation, even over twelve centuries. I argue that, although it is assuredly not the *only* influence on understanding a text, the interpretive history of a text *can* influence the reader and can therefore be considered part of his or her social context. Again, Gadamer does not explicitly state this, but one can safely make this extension from what explanation he does provide. With this in mind, let us now continue through more of Gadamer’s theory.

⁶⁴ Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 254.

Gadamer argues that the task of interpreters is to “examine the legitimacy, ie [sic] the origin and validity of the fore-meanings present within [them].”⁶⁵ One method to attempt this is through dialogue. In order to achieve a full understanding of a text, Gadamer proposes that fore-meanings be placed in dialogue with each other, which could potentially mean within the reader or between two or more readers. “In fact our own prejudice [fore-meaning] is properly brought into play through its being at risk,” Gadamer argues, “Only through its being given full play is it able to experience the other’s claim to truth and make it possible for he himself to have full play.”⁶⁶ In other words, Gadamer sees (in an ideal situation) the full realization of the readers’ understandings when the validity of the fore-meanings is challenged. This does not necessarily mean that one fore-meaning is right and the other wrong. While this could result in polarized prejudices, the purpose of the dialogue is to find parts of the prejudices which help to develop appropriate meanings from the text.

This is where the concept of temporal distance—a reader studying a text from a different temporal context—becomes essential. According to Gadamer, “Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.”⁶⁷ Subsequent understandings after the author produce meaning for a text. The meaning of a text does not depend solely on the author and his/her audience, but also on the interpreters and their social contexts;⁶⁸ readers make meaning from the text which expand on the meaning from the interpretive history. Gadamer points out that historical analysis views temporal distance as a way to transport the historian into the context of

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 237.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

the author for the purpose of finding the meaning of the text in its original context, void of contemporary context; the original context and contemporary context must be separate. Gadamer summarizes, according to historical analysis, the real meaning of the text can only be extracted “when [the text] is dead enough to have only historical interest.”⁶⁹ He labels this perspective as the “negative side” of temporal distance, which Gadamer takes issue with. Gadamer proposes that the original and modern contexts are connected. Both contexts are part of the process of meaning making, which is an infinite process. As previously noted, the interpretation of a text continually expands and revises with each new reader and era.

Esler and Gadamer

Esler fundamentally disagrees with Gadamer in regard to how meaning is made from texts. Esler sees the meaning in the author’s intention and the dialogue between author and reader, while Gadamer places the meaning making in the hands of the reader. Although this difference exists between the two, both see ancient and modern readers as in some sort of communion with one another. For Esler, they are in the community of Christ-followers; they share an identity in Jesus. For Gadamer, they are both part of the interpretive history of the texts, since the original and modern contexts are connected through the sharing of the object of their interpretations: the human-divine interactions. Ancient authors penned the biblical texts under the preconception that they had interacted (in some form or fashion) with the divine; the texts can be thought of as human interpretations of the divine. Modern Christian readers interpret the Bible under the preconception that they interact with the same divine. The ancient

⁶⁹ Ibid., 265.

authors and the modern readers share the basic preconception that they have interacted with the divine. The biblical texts serve as a means of communion for interpreting the divine.

Inspiration, Interpretation, and Authority

Some modern Christians perceive that they have accessed the divine and then turn to their ancestors in faith to understand how they made meaning from their interactions so that modern Christians might better understand or progress forward in communicating with the divine. This is where Esler's perspective on inspiration plays an absolutely vital role: modern Christians *must* realize that the biblical texts are *human responses* to the divine, not divine in themselves. Because of this, Christians must look at the text through a critical lens: when the ancient context values something, such as slavery, which the majority of humans recognize as immoral and inhumane, I argue, along with Esler, that Christians must call out the ancient authors and refuse to render these interpretations of the divine as useful for moral living. This perspective on inspiration also removes the inherent divine authority from the texts. Again, if the texts are human responses to the divine, they do not represent divinity in themselves. This delegates to Christians the responsibility of calling out their ancestors in faith, and fellow Christians, for inhumane values and actions, whether their interpretations of God were spot-on or missed the mark.

In his book, *The End of Biblical Studies*, Hector Avalos presents a solution similar to this, but much less feasible. Hector Avalos, sees the solution to ending the oppression caused by sacred texts in ending the authority given to the text. Important to note, Avalos provides an anecdote for how he encountered this issue. In his book, *The*

End of Biblical Studies, Avalos describes his experience at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature's⁷⁰ annual meeting. He notes:

I was distressed to see that biblical scholars would discuss biblical violence, and even acknowledge that it should no longer be tolerable, but few, if any, were willing to repudiate the Bible for its endorsement of violence...I decided to take what I had learned to its logical conclusion and write a book advocating the end of biblical studies as we know it.⁷¹

The scholars were so rooted in the authority of the Bible that they would acknowledge its major humanitarian flaws, but would not dream of devaluing it. Avalos sees this as one of the major reasons why the new goal of biblical studies should be to stop placing authority onto sacred texts: people know that the biblical texts can be used to oppress, yet they still see them as authoritative.

In order to accomplish this, Avalos think that scholars, translators, priests, and ministers, who influence how Christians and others view the Bible, must begin reframing how they educate people about the Bible. They should tell their followers that the texts are ancient, written by authors who are dead, long dead, and that the scholars and others who have taught them about the texts were only doing this so that they might keep the Bible relevant, and therefore keep their careers afloat.⁷² Avalos believes that the oppressive use of the Bible⁷³ can only be mitigated by ending the reliance on them, and this is his solution to move toward a world driven by humanitarian values. Therefore,

⁷⁰ The largest conference on bible scholar's in the world.

⁷¹ Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, 27–28.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23, 342.

⁷³ He notes that many small portions of the texts are used “in justifying violence and oppression” and provides much evidence for how very little other content of the Bible is used.

the termination of biblical authority “becomes a moral obligation and a key to this world’s survival.”⁷⁴

While Avalos’ method may be an ideal way to end the oppressive influence of sacred texts, it is not feasible. Christians are not going to simply give up their dependence on the Bible after centuries of considering it their life-blood. Even if, as Avalos proposes, leaders disclose the scholarly creation of the Bible, the influence which the texts have had on the everyday life of many Americans will not be erased. I argue that Esler’s proposal for maintaining a critical perspective of the texts, somewhat extended, satisfies Avalos’ motivation for ending the authority of sacred texts; view the texts as human responses to divinity, not divinity themselves. But what does the extension Esler’s theology—the calling out of ancient authors, and fellow Christians on oppressive uses of supposedly divine authority—look like in a practical sense? It is simple to say that Christians, past and present, must hold each other accountable for living virtuous lives while employing the biblical texts, but can Christians actually accomplish this?

In her book, *Democratizing Biblical Studies*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, like Avalos, proposes an educational shift in order to find liberation from (but in her case in) biblical texts, but they do so in opposite directions. His begins with the institution and trickles down to the lay-Christian, while Schüssler Fiorenza begins with the oppressed laypeople and transforms the institution. Schüssler Fiorenza highlights that “wo/men” battling for rights in “society, the academy, and synagogues, mosques, or churches” are able to “articulate emancipatory knowledge and liberating insights that need to be

⁷⁴ Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, 342.

recognized by scholars and ministers.”⁷⁵ Future bible scholars and church leaders must be trained to ‘translate’ these voices into the dialogue of the church and academy so that it might be made “public knowledge and inspire research in the interests of justice for all.”⁷⁶ This bottom-up, grassroots approach utilizes the knowledge of the oppressed in order to teach the elite how to transform their hegemonic, institutional space into egalitarian space. To use Gadamer’s language, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that graduate students in ministry and biblical studies must be trained to recognize their own preconceptions,⁷⁷ especially those which lead to the Bible being used “as a weapon against emancipatory struggles for equal citizenship in society and church.”⁷⁸ The specific areas which she sees as problematic in how texts influence the maintenance of oppression include the “social constructions of sex/gender, race, colonialism, class, and religion.”⁷⁹ In order to educate future scholars and ministers about how to lead others in emancipatory uses of the Bible, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes the creation of a bottom-up dialogue in which scholars and ministers listen to the narratives of grassroots groups who have developed ways to lift themselves out of the mire of oppression.

My extension of Esler’s model of communion between modern and ancient Christians includes the same sort of accountability which Schüssler Fiorenza advocates for. Esler warns Christians to maintain a critical lens as they discover the intended meanings of the texts so that Christians might not act inhumanely due to an ancient value which has been since deemed immoral. Schüssler Fiorenza wants to essentially wake the academic and ecclesial worlds up to the fact that their current mainstream

⁷⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies*, 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

method of biblical interpretation, historical criticism, propagates oppression. This is because it sees the text as univalent and isolates access to the texts' original meanings to scholars. This causes a complete lack of interpretive perspective: we always interpret texts within a social context.⁸⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza wants to keep the institutions which propagate the oppressive, "divinely inspired" messages accountable to those whom they are oppressing. In this case, the voices of the laypeople are amplified to shake the foundation of the institutions which oppress them through historical-critical biblical interpretation. In both Schüssler Fiorenza's work and my extension of Esler, Christians are challenged to keep each other accountable for their usages of the biblical texts. I argue that Schüssler Fiorenza wants grassroots group to become, in a sense, the modern, critically-thinking Christians who point out the flaws of the ancient author's views, such as the use of slavery in antiquity. However, Schüssler Fiorenza's version of the awakening is solely for modern Christians to hold each other accountable. She brings the preconception of the necessary changes for social justice which Esler fails to establish. Esler points out problems of the modern context which require insight from the ancient authors; however, Schüssler Fiorenza provides the framework for the critical lens which Esler argues for, but does not expound upon. Schüssler Fiorenza lays out how to show blinded modern readers their own oppressive preconceptions in a Gadamerian way⁸¹: through placing them in dialogue with each other. That is, when academics and ecclesial authorities discourse with marginalized grassroots groups, as well as feminist and other critically-thinking "reader/hearers"⁸², the former realizes the necessity and utility of the latter's perspective. While the bending of the institutional ear

⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁸¹ Though unacknowledged by Schüssler Fiorenza.

⁸² Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies*, 18.

may sound like a fool's errand, Schüssler Fiorenza provides a framework⁸³ for the education of those who will be future institutional gatekeepers.

One issue which Schüssler Fiorenza's fails to address is how inspiration and authority fit into her interpretive paradigm. If she were to include Esler's perspective on the inspiration of the Bible into her educational framework, this will help to alleviate the problem of biblical authority which she merely alludes to. If biblical interpreters can no longer justify their oppressive actions with "divinely inspired" biblical "instructions," this grants more authority to the oppressed to call out the institutions on the oppressive interpretations, since the institutions would then be simply relying on the responses of *human* authors to the divine.

The root of the entire problem of oppressive uses of the Bible is this: the preconceptions of readers. The preconceptions, as we saw with Gadamer, stem from the context of the interpreter. The contexts of Chrysostom, Calvin, and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church all share one preconception: the misogynistic, malicious mentality of the inherent inferiority of females. However, this mindset is not rooted solely in the Christian tradition, but is engrained into the minds of every human through socialization. We teach, whether overtly or covertly, unintentionally or intentionally, that females do not deserve to be treated with the same dignity, respect, and love as males. In order to make progress toward a more just world, we must revolutionize the socially-constructed psyche of female deficiency into an ethos which embraces each human on the simple fact that all humans require dignity, respect, and love in order to reach their full potentials. But is this cultural revolution possible?

⁸³ And has attempted to implement.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza declares that this is, indeed, possible and vital in order to progress toward lifting up, along with females, other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ population, ethnic minorities, and others. Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to break down the institutions which push the oppressed farther down into the mire of marginalization. Her method for accomplishing this is simple: listen to their voices. Instead of treating them as the undesirables of the privileged, hoist them—using open ears and critically-thinking minds—into the realm of society which every human belongs to: one in which all members are granted the opportunity to participate in an egalitarian space which values the thoughts of all, while keeping each other accountable actions, whether those be the product of biblical interpretation or any given framework. Only through an egalitarian alliance centered on the accountability of all humans to live virtuously and act humanly will we not only liberate the oppressed, but drive one other to treat every human we encounter with the dignity, respect, and love which is the life-blood of a life well-lived.

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