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Hermeneutical Theology

C. M. Howell

Hermeneutical theology is an approach to theological inquiry arising from the work of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann around the midpoint of the twentieth century. The movement materialized in the works of Gerhard Ebeling, Ernst Fuchs, and Eberhard Jüngel as they engaged with the broader 'linguistic turn' in philosophical thought. The central claim is that God is constituted by an event of self-interpretation. In most of its variations, the self-interpretation happens within the horizon of human language (i.e. as the 'word' of God), thereby offering a distinct type of access to the divine being. This means that God's self-interpretation is simultaneously God's self-revelation, which humanity receives as the self-address of God.

The specific places where God's self-interpretation and self-revelation happen are designated as unique types of 'language-events (*Sprachereignissen*)' or 'word-events (*Wortgeschehen*)'. Both posit a concrete correspondence between the form (*Gestalt*) and content (*Sache*) of language, which allows for a direct kind of understanding upon being addressed. These events are typically understood to be of a poetic nature, such as in the modes of metaphor, narrative, or parable. The reception of these 'language-events' does not, however, include an automatic, rational comprehension of the speaker (i.e. God). The task of theology, then, is to understand the 'meaning' of God, and to develop correlating concepts to events of God's self-revelation.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Linguistics, God, Trinitarian theology, Language, New Hermeneutic school, Interpretation, Revelation, Meaning

Table of contents

6 Recent developments

1 Hermeneutical theology

1.1 Introduction

Hermeneutical theology is a distinct approach to theological inquiry arising in the second half of the twentieth century. It emphasizes the self-communication of God's presence, understood as an event of self-interpretation. As such, hermeneutical theology is not concerned merely with a text, as is biblical hermeneutics, nor is it a general hermeneutical theory developed from a specifically theological foundation. Hermeneutical theology is a way of understanding the *meaning* of *God*.

The basic premises of hermeneutical theology are established in the work of Karl Barth and, above all, Rudolf Bultmann, as they engaged with philosophies such as of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The discipline is substantially developed by the school of the 'New Hermeneutic' founded by Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs and progressed in important ways by Eberhard Jüngel. This school arose from debates within biblical theology concerning the historical validity and meaning of Jesus' life and words. Against the method of historical criticism, which judges the reality and sense of biblical events via a historical analysis, the New Hermeneutic prioritizes language over history. To do so, scripture is assumed as a self-interpretative event that communicates directly with the reader. Therein, rather than Jesus' speech being an obstacle to encountering the reality of his life, his speech was the very meaning of his life. This framework allows language to become a continuity between Jesus (as God's revelation), the reflection on Jesus in the New Testament, and the church's reiterations in preaching of Jesus' identity with God.

1.2 A definition of hermeneutical theology

There have been multiple attempts to offer a comprehensive definition of hermeneutical theology. As an early summarization, James Robinson offers that hermeneutical theology 'embraces the whole theological enterprise as a movement of language, from the word of God attested in Scripture to the preached sermon in which God speaks anew' (2008: 71). Werner Jeanrond, focusing specifically on the New Hermeneutic school, describes it as a 'unique combination of [the later-Heidegger's] new philosophical departure and a retrieval of the Reformational understanding of the power of the Word of God' (1991: 148). David Nelson emphasizes the movement's origin in the debates of the historical Jesus of the 1950s–1960s. Concerning these debates, the leading hermeneutical theologians strove 'to establish the continuity between the Christ of the kerygma and the Jesus of history through a hermeneutical decision concerning the nature of divine and human language' (Nelson 2013: 90). This decision involves conceiving that 'the relations between the kerygmatic Christ and the man of the Jesus of Nazareth is a thoroughly linguistic relation' (Nelson 2013: 91). Otto Pöggler understands hermeneutical theology through

its relationship to philosophy. While philosophy is the totalizing endeavour to take up all questions within a 'sociohistorical context', theology concerns merely the 'religious decisions' of certain people in this context. Hermeneutical theology, then, concerns the meaning of these decisions, how and why they are made (Pöggler 2009: 27). Ulrich Körtner defines it as the 'interpretative practice of a soteriological interpretation of reality' that has implications for 'Christian faith and its life-practices' (Körtner 2008: vii). Finally, Ingolf Dalferth understands hermeneutical theology from the 'fundamental maxim' that: 'Theology is essentially hermeneutical, because it attempts to understand how believers *(newly) understand themselves, the world, and others* because God himself makes himself understandable' (2013: x, original emphasis). He expounds that hermeneutical theology is based on two aspects: the Reformation's emphasis on the incarnate *verbum Dei* (word of God); and the correlation between *cognitio Dei* and *cognitio hominis* (knowledge of God and knowledge of humankind; Dalferth 2016a: 6). On this basis, hermeneutical theology's 'primary goal is to understand the understanding of God and to understand everything else in the light of this understanding' (2016a: 131). These two aspects converge to allow God to become present as God's self through the medium of language.

These varied definitions can be abridged: hermeneutical theology sees language as the 'place' of God's self-understanding (Jüngel 2014a: 49). First, this definition discloses the Protestant roots of the movement, which allocate the word of God (*verbum Dei*) as the appropriate mode of God's presence. Second, it highlights that language is something other than a set of signs produced by a rational subject in order to point towards God and reality. Rather, language is an irreducible factor in the human experience of being-in-the-world. This can either be understood in the sense that language is an expression that makes reality understandable and communicative, or in the more radical sense that language is the basis of reality. Third, it implies that language initiates human cognition, rather than being a mode of replicating human thought. Fourth, it speaks to the mediational function of language. Language is the place of God's self-understanding in so far as God's presence in the word *is* an interpretation of God's being. God remains other, but appears *as* the word, or as an event of divine self-interpretation.

2 The conceptual framework of hermeneutical theology

The role of language in both God's and humanity's self-interpretation is articulated through a series of conceptual moves rooted in the hermeneutical tradition of the nineteenth century (section 3.1). These moves help to distinguish hermeneutical theology as a specific approach to theological questions, from several related schools and movements.

2.1 The importance of trinitarian theology

The ‘Trinitarian Turn’ of twentieth-century theology is an important precursor for hermeneutical theology. Trinitarian theology argues that Christian theology is misled if it starts with the understanding of God as a monolithic entity who stands apart from the world. Rather, it must begin with God’s trinitarian nature, by which God is both the one who stands apart from the world (as the Father) and also the one who appears in the world (as the incarnate Son), and the creative force which binds the two (as the Spirit).

Hermeneutical theology is interested in the interaction within the trinitarian relations, or between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. Taking strong cues from the Lutheran tradition, this interaction is understood in terms of the *verbum Dei*, rendering the Son as the word of God. This understanding grounds the fundamental use of language in all aspects of theological understanding. It also understands the interaction between the Father and the Son as an event of *self-interpretation*. That this Son is the incarnated *verbum Dei*, the eternal event of God’s self-interpretation, is manifested in the human person Jesus, particularly in his speech. Jesus’ words then become the place where God can be understood as God, because they are the place where God’s own self-understanding happens.

2.2 Language as relational ontology

Hermeneutical theology posits that language is intertwined with all understanding of reality (Bayer 2003: 137–143). It is helpful to distinguish this ontological function of language from the ontic function of language as everyday speech. The latter designates person-to-person conversations and would include analysis of the structure and meaning of that speech. The ontological function of language, however, concerns the intelligibility of being. This level of intelligibility is neither an immediate encounter with things-in-themselves, nor a version of eighteenth-century rationalist or empiricist epistemology. It views being as essentially communicative, therein offering itself to the capacities of human understanding and cognition. Being, and all things within its domain, appear *as* one thing or another. Hermeneutical theology directs this framework to the appearance of God, seeking to develop theology by understanding God *as* God.

Understanding God as God invokes the doctrine of the Trinity, and in particular the inner-relationality of God’s being. Helmut Franz – in an exposition on John Calvin’s phrase *subest locutioni relatio* (expression from a relation) – reasons that a place (*locutio*) is required for any relationship to be distinguished (Franz 1962: 198). For hermeneutical theology, this place is the word of God (*verbum Dei*). This clarifies that the meaning of ‘God’ in either position of the phrase ‘God as God’ is not exactly identical, but reveals something of its oppositional term. They are related by interpreting each other. This interpretation happens, theologically, in the relationship of the Father to the Son. Yet, since the Son becomes the *human* Jesus, God’s self-interpretation acts as a standard for

understanding all of humanity's existence in the world. Based on a hermeneutical theory of the Trinity, hermeneutical theology understands the world as a linguistic-relational network. This network is typically summarized by the relations between God, humanity (including the self), and the world (natural and otherwise; Ebeling 1987: 346). Hermeneutical theology strives to understand the proper interpretation of how these three domains are both similar and distinct.

The role of Jesus' language for the domain of God is mentioned above (section 2.1). For the domain of humanity, the linguistic nature of his appearing – that Jesus is theologically interpretated as the *word* of God – affords a linguistic definition for humanity. In a reinterpretation of the traditional Aristotelian definition of humanity as a *zōon logon echon*, as a 'rational animal' (adopted from Heidegger), humanity is understood as an 'animal having language' (Jüngel 2014a: 230; Schwöbel 2011: 435–436). This is not to mean that humans have a possession over language, in the sense that they can wield it to their own ends. Rather, it means that humanity is irremovably entangled in language (Ebeling 1967: 368). All of the essential characteristics of humanity (consciousness, reason, understanding, community) are deeply involved with language.

The most important means via which language constitutes humanity is through an address of God. In an address, a person's attention is awakened by the speaker, akin to a person hearing their name called out in a given context. When the address is God's, the person is awakened from a place beyond the world, and thus is awakened to the limit of the world as such. This content therein has a ripple effect, providing a basis for a reinterpretation of all of reality through God's address (Dalferth 2016a: 74).

2.3 Language as event

The foundational concept used in hermeneutical theology to explain the hermeneutical character of reality is that of 'word-event' (*Wortgeschehen*) or 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*) (Robinson 2008: 119). Ontologically, these events designate points of being's interpretation, the places where meaning, history, temporality, and understanding become intelligible. In terms used above, language-events are where the domains of God, humanity, and the world come into a certain correspondence with each other. They are where a context of meaning is established.

Ontically, this happens in poetic modes of speech. In typical discourse, the subject and predicate of a sentence have meaning distinguished apart from the opposing term (Jüngel 1980: 120). The subject exists apart from any one predicate, allowing a variety of predicates to be attributed. Alternatively, in the poetic modes involved in language-events the subject and predicate only have their specific meaning in their linguistic interaction. In this sense, language-events are metaphorical in nature. The traditional example is 'Achilles is a lion'; while the phrase brings to mind both a person and a lion, the meaning of

the phrase is not reducible to either. The metaphor happens in the interplay of the terms, and draws from either term something uniquely related to the particular context. In other words, it *reinterprets* what it means to be Achilles and to be a lion. To say that Achilles is brave, strong, powerful, majestic, commanding, etc. would perhaps convey the same information as this metaphor, but the experience of this information would be decisively different. Poetic modes of speech therefore allow the syntactical context to expand to include both the speaker and audience (Jüngel 1980: 128). They are experienced more directly than information transmitted through discourse. This is described as the 'interruptive' presence of language-events, which is how they gather the speaker and audience into a single context. These interruptions are a breaking-in of new possibilities to life, new ways of being. They are recognized through the experience of their effect, but, in such an experience, they shift the meaning of reality.

When the language-event in question is God's address, it establishes the relationship of these domains with a specific order (Dalferth 2016a: 89). God is the speaker, since the address is not preempted by a human inquiry. Humanity is the one who is addressed, and thus gains a self-understanding as one capable of being addressed (i.e. a linguistic-being). The world is interpreted as that about which God addressed us. God's address is interruptive in the sense that humanity is created anew in their relationship to God. They receive a new freedom (i.e. new possibilities) which informs the meaning of their existence, as both life and death.

2.4 Form and content

Language-events appear through an identification of 'form' (*Gestalt*) and 'content' (*Sache*). Content here refers to the substantial meaning, the 'what' that is being communicated; form is the means of communication (i.e. language; poetic modes) (Jüngel 2014a: 293–294). The identity of form and content reaffirms the ontological understanding of language, that reality happens in language and is not something towards which language points. If the specific content could be divorced from the form, then other forms could be used to designate the same reality. Rather, language-events are places where reality accrues 'concrete' meaning. 'Concrete' here carries the connotation of 'concentration', meaning that reality and language are intertwined in language-events and are distilled to their most potent effect. In the words of Ernst Fuchs, 'the concrete word is what first raises being into being, admits gathering as gathering and therefore also allows it [to be]' (Fuchs 1969: 209).

There are three important theological precedents for the concretized unity of language-events. First is Augustine's doctrine of the sacraments, which distinguishes a certain set of signs as being involved in the reality of the signification (Fuchs 1968: 222). In simplified terms, sacraments are places where God becomes present in a unique way. They do not

merely point to God, but allow God to be united to the context. This corresponds to the distinction between the poetic mode of language-events and the designative function of discursive language. Thus, rather than being *res significate* (signified thing), language-events are *signum efficax* (efficacious sign) (Jüngel 2014a: 294).

Second, the question of how a single particular event is taken to summarize an entire whole or context finds an answer in Martin Luther's use of synecdoche (Fuchs 1968: 232). A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a particular part comes to represent a whole (i.e. 'The White House' stands for the entire political structure of the United States). The particular use in Luther developed around debates of God's presence in the sacraments. Logically, Luther argues, there is a clear distinction between the body of Christ and the substance of the bread and wine. Grammatically, however, the two are designated by a single sign. 'When two diverse being become one in grammar, grammar embraces these two things in a single expression, and as it views the union of the two beings, it refers to the two in one term' (Luther 1957: 301). Hermeneutical theology sees this as allowing language to represent all of reality, and language-events to be the specific places where this synecdochical representations occurs.

The third precedent is scripture, itself forming a precedent in a twofold sense. At a general level, scripture is understood as the witness to the historic events of God's self-revelation, which culminate in the person of Jesus Christ. As a witness, the text of the biblical canon is itself an interpretation (Ebeling 1964: 79). It transmits God's appearance as a salvific effect, as eschatological reality, etc. At a more specific level, scripture itself is not identical with God's revelation. The 'word of God' is the specific language-events that occur in Jesus' speech and the New Testament's formulation of the gospel. These events are similar in their effect of collecting people into the kingdom of God. In this reading, it is primarily Jesus' words that result in faith, more so than his performance of miracles and other physical acts of his life. As Jesus proclaims the word (largely in parables), he brings people to faith in God, gathering them to God's kingdom. Jesus is therefore understood as a 'being in the act of the word of the kingdom of God' (Jüngel 2014a: 353). Paul's writings are seen to have the same effect. Yet, in that they differ from Jesus' words – not only in having a different author, but in being materially different words – they are interpretations of Jesus' proclamations, therein reiterating the validity of the hermeneutical aspect of theology.

2.5 Explanation versus understanding

The constitutive effect of language can be further grasped through the distinction within the hermeneutical tradition between 'explanation' (*Erklärung*) and 'understanding' (*Verstehen*) (Fuchs 1968: 135). The difference can be simply presented in terms of schematic priority. Explanation flows from cognition, as a means to transfer knowledge from one mind to

another. This transfer occurs through and in language, making the task of language to be selecting which words more aptly carry knowledge in explanation. Language is seen largely as a problem to be solved for the sake of knowledge. Understanding, however, precedes this transmission function. In Ebeling's formulation: '*The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding of language, but understanding through language*' (Ebeling 1964: 93, original emphasis). Address is a clear example, for when one's name is called one hears the address prior to the capacity to respond. On these terms, language is seen as the basis of cognition, as that which ignites cognition by transferring the 'rules' and content upon which thought can begin. It is not a secondary step to cognition, but intimately involved with all of thought's processes and results.

The difference in schematic priority results in a distinction between the content of explanation and understanding. Explanation concerns facts of knowledge, truth-claims that can be rationally verified and interrogated through empirical evidence. In contrast, 'meaning' is the content of understanding (Dalferth 2016a: 23). Unlike knowledge, meaning is not contained within the object of thought. Meaning is always tied to the thinking-subject; what something 'means' is partly answered in what it 'means' for me. Meaning then has two aspects: the meaning of something, or the interpretation of something *as* something; and the meaningfulness of that interpretation, or the significance of it for God, humanity, and the world. Likewise, understanding involves self-understanding (subject) with the hermeneutical presence of what is being understood (object). As such, understanding always brings the subject and object together through a hermeneutical correspondence.

2.6 'Art' versus method

The communicative transference of both form and content in language-events means that the hermeneutical aspect of hermeneutical theology does not designate attempts to devise a proper method of understanding God and all things in relation to God. It is rather to extrapolate the relation of the world to God through the lens provided by God's address. In this sense, it is more related to the use of 'interpretation' in the arts than in the academic study of interpretating texts, or in the sense of a musician's interpretation of a certain piece of music (Robinson 2008: 70). Interpretation in this sense happens in a practical dimension, as a reiteration of the content in view. It simply cannot be presented nor attained in terms of a theoretical exposition. Here, meaning must be experienced.

In confirmation with understanding language as the place of meaning (section 1.2), the source of such a language-event is not located in any ability of subjectivity. There is no 'genius' to be had behind moments of self-interpretation. Moments of illumination are the product of language's ontological dimension, of being's own self-interpretation, which gather the speaker of such powerful speech themselves as they gather an audience for

its message. For God's address this schematic is rather clear. The person is addressed, which realizes the linguistic nature of their being and existence. When it comes to the reiteration of language-events in poetic forms, the relationship of the speaker to the event can be discussed in terms of an author to a story (Jüngel 2014a: 308). Even here, the author is not reducible to the producer of the story, but discovers both their role as author and the story that they are telling as they are entangled in the story. Their primary function is to interpret what they discover, but to do so as much by listening to the discovery as by being creative. There is an art in storytelling which cannot be reduced to a method.

Hermeneutical theology sees the task of theology to be of the same kind as this art of storytelling. While the objective is to interpret God *as* God and all things in relation to this interpretation, it cannot fulfil this task in a wholly scientific fashion. Theology searches for meaning as it happens in language-events, and uses these events as markers for further exploration. There is a rational aspect of this task – namely, to develop the necessary concepts and analytical structures to support exploration – but the appropriateness of theology is not judged by this aspect. It is rather judged by how closely theology corresponds to the form and content of God's self-interpretation.

3 The beginnings of hermeneutical theology

It may be tempting to see the uniqueness of hermeneutical theology as a strange set of conceptual moves which stands equally in tension to traditional Christian thought as to contemporary philosophy of language. However, many of the conceptual moves of hermeneutical theology have historical predecessors. The way its primary thinkers interact with this tradition is one of the primary strengths of its conceptual moves and potential value. This claim can partly be substantiated by tracing a few key developments preceding its moment of inauguration.

3.1 Nineteenth century

The theology of the nineteenth century has bearing on hermeneutical theology in both a positive and negative sense. Positively, hermeneutics is inaugurated as its own academic discipline and language has begun to be developed towards its constitutive sense. Negatively, this version of hermeneutics is grounded in the psychology of the author and is supported by a certain historicism against which twentieth-century thinkers tend to react (Ebeling 1964: 84).

3.1.1 F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Friedrich Schleiermacher provides the historical basis of hermeneutical theology in his effort to establish hermeneutics as a discipline with a unique question and method. He defines hermeneutics as the 'art of understanding' (Schleiermacher 1998: 5) which he develops as 'the theory of the conditions on which understanding is possible' (Ebeling

1964: 91). This broad definition means that sciences outside of textual interpretation – such as psychology and history – can now take up the task and achievements of hermeneutics.

Schleiermacher divides the task of hermeneutics into two aspects: that concerning the grammatical form of a text (or the objective aspect) and that of the psychological/technical aspect of the author (or the subjective aspect). He defines the grammatical aspect as the particular linguistic conventions of the text in question (Schleiermacher 1998: 30). The psychological aspect strives to understand what unifies the subjective and objective aspects of a text, or what brings the text into a concrete whole. Every author uses grammar uniquely, but does so while maintaining the ability to communicate. Thus, the task of hermeneutics is fulfilled when there is a correlation between the form and content of a text and its author. In grasping this correlation, the goal of hermeneutics – to ascertain the conditions of understanding – is fulfilled to such a degree that the hermeneutician is able 'to understand the utterance first just as well and then better than its author did' (Schleiermacher 1998: 23). As discussed above, hermeneutical theology removes this correspondence from a subject–object relationship to the direct identity of form and content in language-events (section 2.4).

Alongside developing hermeneutics, Schleiermacher also makes strides to establish a constitutive function of language. This is most prominent in his notes dating from roughly 1805–1819 (Palmer 1969: 92). Here, language operates in a similar way to the two aspects of hermeneutics. On the one hand, language precedes the individual subject, and offers a structured means for thought. The subject receives rules for thinking from their linguistic context. On the other, what makes the subjective aspect distinct is the unique ways individuals use the larger linguistic standards. Yet, even here, the uniqueness of the subject is made available through their use of language. The degree to which the subject is unique can be ascertained to the degree in which their language is unique. This function of language therein works in unity with Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. In his words:

> Just as the art of speaking and understanding stand opposite each other (and correspond to each other), and speaking is only the external side of thought, so hermeneutics is to be thought of as connected to art and is therefore philosophical. (Schleiermacher 1998: 7)

In terms of hermeneutical theology, language becomes the place where both the subjective and objective aspect can be apprehended.

3.1.2 Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911)

The import of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics was transmitted to the twentieth century largely through Wilhelm Dilthey. Among other things, Dilthey inaugurates the distinction between explanation and understanding (section 2.5). He does so in an attempt to

revitalize the ‘human sciences’ (*Geisteswissenschaften*) in light of the growing prominence of the ‘natural sciences’ (*Naturwissenschaften*). Both can take a common phenomenon as their object of investigation, but they do so in different ways. The natural sciences seek to *explain* phenomena through a theoretical analysis of the relationship of each particular phenomena towards the development of an overall theory. The human sciences assume a certain connectivity of the whole which provides an *understanding* that exceeds the sum of its parts (Dilthey 2002: 105). His basis is, in part, that all scientific inquiry is done by humans, who assume a great degree of understanding of life outside of theoretical analysis (Dilthey 1986: 93). Dilthey sees hermeneutics as the appropriate discipline to support the centrality of understanding in the human sciences. In doing so, he repeats Schleiermacher’s definition that ‘the final goal of the hermeneutic procedure is to understand the author better than he understands himself’ (Dilthey 1986: 104). The importance of the distinction between natural and human sciences is that it effectively replaced epistemology with hermeneutics, therein preempting the move to locate meaning outside of the subject in hermeneutical theology.

The major supplementation of hermeneutics by Dilthey concerns the emphasis on the ‘historicality’ (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of understanding (Palmer 1969: 110). ‘Historicality’ here most directly speaks to the inherent temporality of an individual’s life-experience (*Erlebnis*). This is a decisive move against the Kantian notion that time is projected onto objects of cognition through subjective activities. Rather, the subject becomes self-aware on the basis of their experience of temporality. Thus, similar to Schleiermacher’s constitutive theory of language, history becomes the place where the human essence (*Geist*) happens, and therein is the place where the understanding of the human sciences happens.

The field of hermeneutical theology will take up this emphasis on the historicality of understanding only by placing an emphasis on the linguistic nature of history. Equally important, it will also inherit the implications of historicality on understanding. Given that history conditions understanding, hermeneutics cannot achieve a final, totalizing grasp of the meaning of things. All life-experience culminates in another place from which understanding happens. Understanding, then, operates by analogy. This means that all understanding is the interpretation of something *as* something, which includes a degree of difference alongside similarity.

3.2 Twentieth century

The topics introduced during the nineteenth century were largely discounted due to the rise of the historical-critical method in biblical hermeneutics. Karl Barth’s commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans is seen as the beginning of a theological retrieval of these topics. Among others, it incurred a lively response by Rudolf Bultmann. These twentieth-century discussions of hermeneutics were developed in direct criticism of

Schleiermacher's emphasis on psychology and the primacy of the historical-critical method. Perhaps most importantly, the distinction between *hermeneutica sacra* and *hermeneutica profana* (sacred and profane hermeneutics) is abolished for the sake of developing the validity of hermeneutics for all of theological reflection. Scripture still retains a privileged role during this period, but the task at hand is one of making its meaning meaningful for a modern world, rather than uncovering the 'true' meaning of its pages. The different ways that this task was developed in the decades leading up to the beginnings of hermeneutical theology can be mapped by tracking responses to the meaning of God.

3.2.1 Karl Barth (1886–1968)

In many ways, Karl Barth inaugurated theological discussions of hermeneutics in the twentieth century with his commentary on Romans. In the first edition, published in 1918, Barth begins a move beyond hermeneutics as a method of biblical interpretation, which operates by the historical-critical method, to hermeneutics as the basis for any appropriate utterance of theological value:

> The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence – and this can never be superfluous. But, were I to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification […] my whole energy of interpreting has been expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit. (Barth 1933: 1)

Exactly what the 'old doctrine of inspiration' means transported hermeneutical questions to the forefront, creating an immediate precedence for hermeneutical theology to work from as it materialized in the 1950s. In general terms, Barth intended to engage the 'content' of biblical literature and to translate it into the contemporary historical moment. To achieve this, he moves beyond treating the text as an object which, according to the historical-critical method, should be purged from any subjective influence, to approaching the text as if it were a subject speaking to the interpreter (Robinson 2008: 88). The subject speaking from the text is the 'eternal Spirit', which Barth will develop according to a trinitarian theology. The point here is that the content of the Bible (the voice of God) is separated from its form (the empirical text). The task of the interpretation, then, cannot be had through a method but only by an experience with God (section 2.6). This becomes more obvious in the second edition of Romans:

> If I have a 'system', it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative and positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth'. The relationship between such a God and such a man, the relationship between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible […] At this crossroads the 'Bible sees Jesus Christ'. (Barth 1933: 10)

Barth's move introduces two significant points which remain relevant topics throughout the twentieth century. First, to move beyond the historicality of the text means that history is itself grounded on some more primordial reality. Barth will posit this reality as the 'word of God', while Rudolf Bultmann develops it as the 'kerygma of Christ' (Robinson 2008: 147). Second, whatever this reality is, it acts as a unifying feature that can transcend the historical distance between the biblical authors and their modern interpreters. In terms from the previous quote, it has its basis in 'eternity' and not in 'time'. This comes to be an experience of faith, which itself receives various analyses as to how faith happens and how it is structured. Hermeneutical theology responds to both of these questions in a unique way, which establishes its peculiar approach to theology.

Beginning with the first point, Barth draws on the Reformation's dogma of the 'word of God' to establish the place where humanity encounters God (Ebeling 1961: 256). He articulates this dogma in three forms. Working theologically, the word of God is the incarnate *verbum Dei*; it is the content of scripture; and, in a similar way, it is the content of preaching (Barth 2010: 85). All three forms move the discussion of the meaning of God (as articulated in the Bible) from an emphasis on either the subjective aspects (the author) or the objective aspects (the text) to a place between these two (section 2.2).

This leads Barth to posit that faith is the experience of *hearing* the word of God. Or, in a more standard formulation, faith comes from being *addressed* by God. The hermeneutical value of this experience is that God's address introduces a new mode of self-understanding *as* faith, or through the experience of having been addressed. For Barth, this is the same experience which inspired Paul to write the Letter to the Romans. However, this is not an attempt to reconstruct the psychology of the author, as with nineteenth-century hermeneutics. Barth is focused on the 'relationship of such a God to such a man' (quoted above), which is conceptualized in the address and its correspondence in faith.

Barth's emphasis on the word of God as the content of biblical meaning is explicated according to the doctrine of the Trinity. 'Only […] in faith in God's word, can we say who God is: He is the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (Barth 2010: 130). This is just as much a description of 'who' God is as it is of 'how' God is. The 'how' of God speaks to God's self-interpretation in revelation, or to the fact that God is the type of being who reveals himself *as* himself (Jüngel 2014b: 13). The word of God is the Son of God, in whom God's self-revelation takes place. The other two forms of God's word witness to the Son as expressions (form) of faith (content), but are grounded in the movements of the Holy Spirit. In all three forms, it is God who is active in the word (Barth 2010: 140). What is decisive in Barth is the particular nature of the Son as the word of God.

Barth describes the Son as the 'objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*)' of God, or the concrete point of God's self-understanding. He interprets the Son via the doctrine of election, which he develops as the primordial event of God choosing to be for humanity (Jüngel 2014b: 76). This decision is made in eternity (and thus outside of history) but is ultimately realized in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is, therein, simultaneously a eternity (and thus outside of history) but is ultimately realized in the participant in God's self-determination as well as the means by which that self-determination takes concrete form.

To be for humanity means, on the one hand, that God goes beyond his divinity in his self-understanding. It is to say that God involves that which is 'other' in his essence. This appears within the immanent Trinity, in that the Son is differentiated from the Father; but, in that 'otherness' is an inherent feature of God's essence, it also grounds the validity of the economic Trinity for God's self-definition (see Immanent and Economic Trinity). In its most radical form, God's self-understanding can happen within the otherness of the world's history – not because history defines God, but because God initiates such an event.
On the other hand, to be for humanity means that God's self-understanding happens in accordance with the conditions of human existence. To state this otherwise, God understands himself in such a way that he is understandable to humanity. Language is the basis of this correspondence of God's self-understanding and humanity's understanding of God.

3.2.2 Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)

Rudolf Bultmann critiques the first edition of Barth's *Romans* as not providing 'anything other than an arbitrary adaptation of the Pauline myth of Christ' (Bultmann 1948: 740). He argues that Barth relies too much on the mythological features of Paul's writings and not enough on a sound critical approach to those features. Yet, by the second edition, Bultmann lightens his critique, explaining that Barth stood alongside Schleiermacher in the successful attempt to translate an experience with God in contemporary form. He maintains the criticism that Barth too readily accepted Paul's own formulation, seemingly unable to spot the inadequacies of Paul's own expression (Bultmann 1922: 372–373). Bultmann therefore follows Barth in a separation of content and form, but unlike Barth he is willing to critique the biblical form of faith's existential content. Most importantly, Bultmann 'placed the question of understanding at the very centre of his theological thinking' (Dalferth, Bühler and Hunziker 2013: x). These are the seeds of hermeneutical theology that are cultivated by the New Hermeneutic school (Körtner 2008: 105).

Bultmann draws on the early Heidegger's criticism of historicism by emphasizing the fundamental role that interpretation plays in understanding history. Bultmann develops this insight from a specifically theological perspective. He argues that if theological hermeneutics were to engage with the meaning of history, it would have to focus on

a specific trajectory of ‘salvation-history’ (*Heilgeschichte*). Yet, to do so would mean engaging in a theoretical development of how to delineate a salvation-history before the relevant events are taken into account. Bultmann argues to do the opposite, to begin with ‘salvation-events’ (*Heilgeschehen*) and work from these to the import of history (Bultmann 1969: 277–278). Hermeneutical theologians develop Bultmann’s concept of salvation-events into the unique features of language-events (section 2.3).

Salvation-events have an existential character. In them there is a ‘participation of the knower in the known, a (dis)placing of the subject within the reality of the object’ (Congdon 2015: 688). As part of human existence, every human person is involved in the dynamics of self-understanding, reflecting on their own self via a variety of hermeneutical media. In the salvation-event, this reflection happens from God’s presence, offering a uniquely theologically-based identity. The ‘object’ of salvation-event is God, and the ‘subject’ is the individual believer. The presence of God, however, is not an unmediated encounter with God’s eternal form. It is an encounter with God *as* Christ, or the concrete event of God’s own self-understanding (Congdon 2015: 345).

God’s self-understanding is an eschatological event for Bultmann, which he roughly understands to mean God’s judgment in the kerygma of Christ (Bultmann 1952: 4). The important aspect here is that this judgment happens according to its own temporality, and not that of history. In one sense, this judgment is in the future, and thus yet to be fully realized in the world’s temporality. In another, it has already happened in God’s self-understanding in Christ. An aspect of this self-understanding is the interpretation of Christ *as* righteous (Bultmann 1952: 279). The righteousness of Christ is transmitted to the believer through salvation-events as part of their own self-understanding. In other words, they experience Christ *as if* they themselves have already undergone God’s future judgment. This self-understanding serves as a ‘pre-understanding’ for grasping the kerygma of the *verbum Dei* (word of God).

As with Barth, Bultmann distinguishes the self-interpretation of salvation-events from the ‘psychological’ attempts of nineteenth-century hermeneutics (Bultmann 1984: 88). He is not calling for a critical interrogation of the author of theological expression, but of the experience that both the author and the interpreter have undergone (Bultmann 1952: 324). An emphasis remains on God’s self-understanding throughout his hermeneutics. Nevertheless, Bultmann understands all of language to decompose the reality of salvation-events, some modes more violently than others. This means that the continuity of theology through history cannot be grounded in the transmission of texts or dogmatic formulas. It is rather realized in the self-understanding that happens in light of salvation-events, in the kerygma of faith.

The effect of Bultmann's theoretical moves is evident in his interaction with scripture. The basic structure of Bultmann's biblical hermeneutics is to posit the salvation-event as the 'content' from which the biblical writings emerge. This means that the meaning of the text is not located in the words themselves, but, as with Barth, behind them, in the experience of the author(s) with God (Bultmann 1984: 74). At the same time, the language of the Bible is constrained by the author's historical place and time. The task of biblical hermeneutics is to translate the content/salvation-event into contemporary language and substantial meaning. It does so through an approach termed 'content-criticism (*Sachkritik*)'.

An important step of this translation is a critical engagement with how the biblical authors brought the content to expression in their own time. Bultmann does not assume, for example, the Paul's writings are the flawless standard of faith's expression. Rather, he asserts that, at times, there are 'tensions and contradictions, heights and depths' within Paul's writings that stem from his mixed use of the various religions of his time (Bultmann 1922: 372–373). The root of Paul's problematic expressions is his inappropriate use of myths and dogmas (Bultmann 1955: 238). These must be cleared to regain the existential event laying behind the text – which is the project known as 'demythologizing'. It is in this event that the biblical authors and modern believers are united. This point becomes the basis for the New Hermeneutic, and all of hermeneutical theology established in its wake. In hermeneutical theology, however, the event which unites the experiences of God scattered across history happens in the text, in the *word*, and not at a place behind it.

4 The 'New Hermeneutic' school

Hermeneutical theology developed its distinct characteristics immediately following the Second World War when Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs (both former students of Bultmann) were located at the University of Tübingen. Either thinker had different fields of interest – Ebeling with church history, Fuchs with biblical theology – but found agreement in exploring what insights the ontological understanding of language could bring to theology (section 2.2). It was during this time that Ebeling reestablished the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* as a leading theological journal that continues to be published today. Eberhard Jüngel (a student of Fuchs) developed the initial insights in important ways, making great strides to introduce the New Hermeneutic as a valid and fruitful approach to theology.

The New Hermeneutic can be summarized as a synthesis of Barth's doctrine of the word of God and Bultmann's emphasis on the kerygma of Christ (Ebeling 1964: 83–84). Speaking with these voices, the meaning of God's word is transmitted at an existential/ ontological level to all believers in history. Going beyond them, however, this transmission happens in language. The content of God's word is united with its form (section 2.4). The

‘place’ of the language-event, however, differs slightly between Ebeling and his colleagues Fuchs and Jüngel.

4.1 Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001)

Gerhard Ebeling first took hermeneutics as a central focus in a dissertation analysing the topic in Luther. This early work shapes his entire endeavour as a dogmatically-grounded theory of language, rather than one that primarily garners concepts from philosophical hermeneutics. Already in this early text the basic definition of his hermeneutical theology appears:

> The relation between faith and word in the process of understanding and interpretation is not a relation that moves from the subject to the word, but rather from the word to the understanding. Faith adds nothing new to the word, but is becoming effective of the word as that which it claims to be – as God’s word […]. This correlation between word and faith belongs to the word not on the basis of its general structure as word, but rather as witness to the incarnation of the Son of God, in which it is this incarnate One who is encountered in the present. In all words of Scripture we have to do with nothing other than the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. (Ebeling 1991: 382)

Ebeling understands hermeneutics to be in a state of chaos in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only do multiple disciplines – namely biblical theology, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology – employ hermeneutics in different ways (Ebeling 1963: 27), but even within biblical hermeneutics it appears ‘that each Biblical book requires a special hermeneutic’ (Ebeling 1964: 90). The ubiquity of hermeneutical dissonance means that shifts in the topic touch nearly all theological disciplines, and could potentially collate them to a single place.

Ebeling approaches the hermeneutical question through viewing language as the fundamental situation of human existence. The place of God’s word is discovered in the ‘completely normal […] oral word taking place between man and man’; in this general context words can either be ‘destructive and deadly’ to human existence or they can be what ‘brings wholeness and gives life’ (Ebeling 1964: 102). This occurrence of the latter in ‘normal’ speech does not determine if it is God’s word, but, upon theological interrogation, reveals that all of reality is an event of self-understanding orchestrated by God’s word. God’s linguistic presence makes sense out of any positive event of human language – including the necessity of language in the first place. The words of positive effect are ones which gather the conversates in love, and the union of love, word, human existence, and being is the meaning of the word of God.

Unique to Ebeling’s hermeneutical theology is a strong use of the Lutheran distinction between the ‘word of the law’ and the gospel as the ‘word of faith’. In this use, the word of the law is all language (constitutive or otherwise) which does not lead to faith.

Only the gospel is a word-event of God's address, for it creates faith as its receptive correspondence. Yet Ebeling notes that the bondage of law is logically necessary for the gospel: 'The gospel is the fulfillment of the law', which implies '[i]f the law is not there […] the gospel becomes meaningless' (Ebeling 2007: 134). This leads him to see the word-event of God's speech as the fulfilment of all speech, which implies that the word of God has one more or less 'correct' interpretation which must be guarded against misunderstandings and distortions (Ebeling 1973: 203–204). Language corresponds to the word-event if it maintains the eternality of the gospel and resists being reduced into practical prescriptions. In other words, language must remain an 'art' that derives its judgements from God's linguistic presence (section 2.6; Ebeling 1963: 356).

Also unique to Ebeling is the understanding of the Trinity as the *summation* of theological language (Dalferth 2016a: 149). Part of his justification is that speech of God by the 'average Christian' has little use of such '"higher regions" of Christian doctrine' (Ebeling 1963: 334). But this is not to say the doctrine of the Trinity has no place in theology. The word of God is what creates faith, which at its most general level is a confession of Jesus as God, therein tasking theology with developing this confession through critical reflection on traditional dogmas. Ultimately, the relation of the word of God with Jesus means that the Trinity is the appropriate theological concept to grasp this word-event. This means, however, that Ebeling's hermeneutical theology is not materially grounded upon the doctrine of the Trinity.

4.2 Ernst Fuchs (1903–1983)

Ernst Fuchs summarizes his inaugural text on hermeneutics in much the same way as Ebeling, as a 'systematic introduction to the exegesis of the New Testament' with the hope of consolidating a fragmented discipline (Fuchs 1963a: 100–101). Like Ebeling, he understands Jesus' speech as the grounding point of all language and its possible meanings. Yet he is distinct from his colleague by his engagement with Martin Heidegger's later work. Among other things, this influence pushes Fuchs to develop an ontological import of language, rather than Ebeling's more theological theory of interpretation.

Unlike Bultmann, who primarily engaged with Heidegger's earlier work, Fuchs' theology finds its touch point with the Heidegger of the linguistic turn – although, according to James Robinson, Fuchs 'interpreted' Heidegger's concepts of authentic/inauthentic existence into an 'understanding of language' nearly a decade before Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 1959) was published (Robinson 2008: 59). In these terms, human existence is inauthentic if it engages with the world without the understanding of its ontological dependence on the world. Inauthentic existence is 'sinful' because it is self-contained and egoistic (Fuchs 1963a: 67), because it is unconscious of its own fragility and limitations (Fuchs 1964: 138). Authentic existence opens up when

humanity (*Dasein*) discovers its own being-with (*Mitsein*) (Dalferth 2016a: 12–15). It is the 'essence of language that reminds [humanity] that they belong to communication' with the world. Theologically, the relationship of humanity to the world is grounded by a more fundamental relationship with God. Fuchs explains this as language bearing the character of 'love' which draws things together. The loving character of language is most explicit in the 'mystery of Jesus' proclamation. This culminates in the claim that 'asking about God no longer means metaphysically searching for him, whether he is or not, but rather following the language that loves man […]' (Fuchs 1963a: 62). Here, Fuchs says, is the 'illumination (*Lichtung!*)' of being (Fuchs 1963a: 72).

Language for Fuchs is something other than person-to-person speech (as with Ebeling):

> Language does not only consist of sound. Even more, language is not simply speech. Rather, language is primarily a *showing* (*Zeigen*) or a *letting* (*Lassen*) be seen, a meaning in the active sense […] a 'perception'. (Fuchs 1963a: 131)

Fuchs explains that language is an event in the sense of 'something happening that stands out in the usual context of things' (Fuchs 1968: 135). Events are something to see, to take notice of. They attract attention of an entire context, catching the gaze of people, becoming the talk of the town. This means that while anything which produces such a 'coming together' is the ontological function of language, not all events that have such an effect are (ontically) speech. Music and art could also be places of ontological gathering.

The ontological hermeneutics of Fuchs offer a development to Bultmann's 'content-criticism' (Gadamer 1962: 263). While for Bultmann the place of the 'content' lives in the existential structures behind the text, and the aim of such criticism is proper interpretation of the text, for Fuchs humanity is so entangled in language that there cannot be a clear distinction between content and form (Fuchs 1964: 116–119). The aim of hermeneutics, then, is not to clarify the text or the subject matter, but to understand humanity itself (Fuchs 1959: 13). Thus, the concept of 'pre-understanding' is replaced with the concept of a 'hermeneutical principle'. As Fuchs defines it:

> […] a hermeneutical principle designates what bestows on understanding the power and truth of an *event* (*Vorgangs*). It is the *power* of understanding in the birth *of the language naming truth*. The hermeneutical principle shows the 'place' of truth. (Fuchs 1963a: 111, original emphasis)

A hermeneutical principle is what draws out the meaning of language through provoking an event. 'If I want to know whether someone is a football player, I have only to bring a football near to him. Then I can tell at once whether he is a football player or not' (Fuchs 1964: 138). Fuchs is clear that 'there is no hermeneutical principle for *God*', nothing to bait God into acting (Fuchs 1963a: 110, original emphasis). Equally, there is one for the

term ‘God’ as it is uttered from the lips of humans and read in the words of scripture. The hermeneutical principle here is an existential despair of humanity, an inherent poverty which humans cannot overcome by their own merits or strength. Fuchs names this ultimate need an ‘death-existence (*Todesdasein*)’ – which is dually supported with Rom 7:24 and its Heideggerian echoes.

The import of the hermeneutical principle can be seen by two further points. The first is that it is irreducibly historical. This is because, on one hand, death is the apex of the finitude which defines the human experience of history (section 3.1.2). On the other hand, the hermeneutical principle causes an event, an occurrence of ontological activity. In such a language-event, ‘language assumes the essential character of being – that is, it gathers together’ (Fuchs 1969: 207). This ‘gathering’ involves consolidating a historically located existence, in the sense of making history experienceable as more than a chaotic temporal flux (Fuchs 1960: 425), as does it also bring God, humanity, and the world as realms of being into a relationality (section 2.2). As he explains elsewhere:

> Being springs forth from language, when language directs us to the sphere of existence determinative for our life. Is this the ‘meaning’ of the word of God? Then hermeneutics would indeed be nothing other than the ‘doctrine of the word of God’ (G. Ebeling), faith’s doctrine of language, and, conversely, the theological doctrine of the Word of God would be the question of being in the horizon of biblical language. The content of human historicality would not then be named questionability, but rather linguisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*). (Fuchs 1965b: 115)

The second is that, since language is the activity of being, there cannot be a place behind language of ontological or existential significance, as with Bultmann (Fuchs 1963a: 93–94). This reinforces Fuchs’ broad definition of language. Anything that occurs as an ontological event is understood in terms of hermeneutics, but it also means that the biblical text, as with Paul’s Letter to the Romans, is not merely an expression of faith, but is where faith is happening. This applies as much to Paul as it does to the various readers scattered throughout history. The language-event is also not limited to the moment when faith begins in the believer but is the place from whence faith continues to venture (Fuchs 1964: 119). It is the continual ‘Yes’ of God that sustains all of reality (2 Cor 1:19–20). In this ‘Yes’, language becomes ‘originally the language of God, and its basic trait would then rightly be named love’ (Fuchs 1963b: 17).

These two points are drawn together in Jesus’ words. To the first, Fuchs renews an interest in the ‘historical Jesus’, understood not per the historical-critical method but by the history-creating impact of language-events. Jesus’ words are his history. As such, language opens up that history for all believers. To the second, this history is continual. It does not stop with the instantiation of faith, but includes the subsequent experiences of faith. Jesus’ words gather believers into the ‘kingdom of God’, which we do not experience

as a waiting for a distant God to become near, but as the participative communication of a mysterious God in the (temporal) near (Fuchs 1964: 120). The temporality of Jesus' proclamations of the kingdom of God is that of eschatological time (Fuchs 1964: 127). The prayer that arises from one's being unto death is the prayer for the kingdom of God to come, for in this prayer the experience of believing that one's 'sins are forgiven' is realized, therein providing 'the strength and freedom to love [one's] neighbor' (Fuchs 1964: 121).

4.3 Eberhard Jüngel (1934–2021)

Eberhard Jüngel was a student of Fuchs and inherited much of the latter's structure for a hermeneutical theology. Language is more than speech, thereby possessing ontological significance, and faith takes place in the word, not some place behind it. Jüngel, in fact, applies Fuchs' concept of language-event in his doctoral thesis to the then ongoing debates in biblical theology. Jüngel is most distinct from Fuchs and Ebeling in his work on Barth's trinitarian theology, which he sees as the material basis for all hermeneutical theology.

Jüngel's doctoral thesis, *Paulus und Jesus* (Paul and Jesus), introduces the centrality of hermeneutics to his thought. The question he addresses concerns the relationship of the historical Jesus to the christological statements made by the apostle Paul. Following Fuchs, Jüngel argues that 'this question is primarily a question of theological hermeneutics', not one of historical-critical analysis (Jüngel 1962: 3). He argues that Jesus and Paul are similar in the language-events of their gospel proclamations. The difference between their speech is a difference in interpretation. Jesus' language-events (especially his parables) are the place of God's own self-interpretation; and Paul's writings are interpretations of God's self-interpretation in and by faith.

Jüngel's next major work, *God's Being is in Becoming* (*Gottes Sein ist im Werden*, 1965), is a milestone in trinitarian theology. He frames the book as a 'paraphrase' of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity that is achieved through the hermeneutical method of Fuchs (Jüngel 2014b: 7). Jüngel's primary worry is against a concept of revelation that would leave some metaphysical remainder behind the presence of God, some entirely unknown and ambiguous realm of divine ontology. Following Barth's trinitarian model (section 3.2.1), he argues that the presence of God can be understood as God's self-interpretation, thereby making his whole being present in a hermeneutical event. However, God's presence is not of the sort that can be immediately perceived, or even brought within the confines of space and time. While being present, God's presence includes his absence, or an aspect of God's being that remains hidden in mystery. Yet 'mystery' here does not mean 'riddle'. It has positive content, revealing that absence is included within God's trinitarian being. God's self-interpretive presence include an 'identifiable' absence (Jüngel 2014c: 129).

The eventful nature of God's self-interpretation makes temporality a primary theme throughout Jüngel's career. There are two opposing points that need to be held in tension here. On the one side, that God's self-interpretation is an event within God's being means that God cannot be understood as an eternally-static deity far removed from the world's history. Jüngel will go on to develop that God is constituted in the historical Jesus, in so far as Jesus is summarized by his language-events. On the other side, God's being is neither a process of gaining ontological actuality nor of a culmination of arbitrary transformations of identity. Either of these would mean God enters *into* the world's history at the event of his presence. Rather, the dynamics of God's presence is reflective of the temporality within God's eternity, which is the temporality of the movement of love within and between the trinitarian persons. Jüngel posits that it is this eternal dynamic that acts as a blueprint for the world's history. Thus, while God is dynamic, he is not changing. '"Becoming" thus indicates the manner *in* which God's being exists, […] the ontological place of the being of God' (Jüngel 2014b: xxv, original emphasis).

In *God as the Mystery of the World* (*Gott ah Geheimnis der Welt*, 1976), Jüngel exchanges the concept of 'becoming' with that of God's 'coming'. He sees this concept as being able to encapsulate the language-events of both the Old and New Testaments as well as those of the Christian tradition (Jüngel 2014a: 303). In all of these periods, God is known as the God who is coming to unite believers with his love. Given Jüngel's doctrine of revelation, God's coming cannot be understood in the sense of a metaphysically-distant deity coming to the world. Rather, God's coming to the world is God's self-interpretation of his being. God comes to the world because God comes to himself (Jüngel 2014a: 38).

Jüngel employs Barth's trinitarian framework to explain what it means to say that God comes to himself. The Father is the 'origin' of God's coming, which equally means he is wholly other to the world and the 'sovereign' to the world's being and existence (Jüngel 2014a: 381). God's sovereignty applies to temporality and history, reaffirming that the dynamics of God's coming are not a product of the world's influence upon him. Likewise, the Son is the 'goal' of God's coming (Jüngel 2014a: 384). There are a few decisive points to be noted here. First, since 'comes' is not in the future tense, it means that God has already came to his goal, therein guarding against any sense of a process or lack in God's being. God is eternally at his end while unceasingly departing from his origin. Second, the Son *is* the historical Jesus, erasing any use of the doctrine of the two natures of the incarnation. This means that as 'God comes to God' he comes to the human Jesus, and therefore comes to humanity more broadly (Jüngel 2014a: 383). Third, that Jesus' life is summarized by the language-events of his preaching, the goal of God's coming is the word of God's speech (Jüngel 2014a: 387). Humanity therein encounters God's coming as the address of God's word. Finally, the Spirit is the 'how' of God's coming, indicating both that God 'remains' God in his coming and that 'God's being *remains* in the [dynamics] of

coming' (Jüngel 2014a: 387, original emphasis). Jüngel adopts the traditional Augustinian model of the Spirit as the *vinculum caritatis* (chain of love) between the Father and Son, which means that God's eternal coming from the Father to the Son by the Spirit is, quite simply, the unending nature of God's love.

Following from the dynamic nature of God's self-interpretation, Jüngel reasons that the most appropriate way for theology to speak of God is through narrative (Jüngel 2014a: 390). The story which maps to God's coming is that of Jesus' death and resurrection. In Jesus' death, the differentiation between 'God and God' (i.e. the Father and the Son) happens, therein making clear that there is an 'real movement' from God to God (Jüngel 2014a: 388). At the resurrection, God's self-differentiation is shown to be overcome by a 'still greater similarity' through the Father's love for the Son (Jüngel 2014a: 288). The analogous correspondence for humanity is the story of faith, hope, and love (Jüngel 2014a: 290). Faith is an acknowledgement on the relationality of being, of the need for God (as other) to secure human existence. It is directed primarily to the Father, but only as he comes to the world in the Son and Spirit. Love happens as humanity is caught up in the Spirit's movement between the Father and Son. Since God raised Jesus from the dead through his love, God revealed that his love takes place within the limits of the world. This same love happens in every contemporary language-event which results in faith. Lastly, hope is grounded by the historical fact that God has come to the world and promised to come again. The material content of this coming is the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, which offers certainty for God's eschatological return.

5 The current state of hermeneutical theology

Hermeneutical theology as an active discourse began to fade in the last decade of the twentieth century. A considerable factor is that the philosophies which helped to constitute hermeneutical theology's intellectual milieu have themselves become increasingly obsolete (Dalferth, Bühler and Hunziker 2013: xiv–xvii). In addition, criticisms have mounted both from outside and inside the discipline. From the outside, discussions of hermeneutics have largely been carried through in recent years by biblical hermeneutics (Jeanrond 1991: 159) and the broader fields of semiotics and analytic philosophy. From the inside, hermeneutical theology has received several criticisms of its own proponents which it has yet to overcome. There have even been calls to abandon the approach altogether and work towards developing theological hermeneutics (Nethöfel 1992: 244–261).

5.1 Common critiques of hermeneutical theology

Criticism of hermeneutical theology are roughly divided between its use of scripture and the degree (or lack thereof) of conceptual development. To the first, a foundational assertion of hermeneutical theology is that the concept of the word of God only gains concrete meaning in the 'movement which leads from the text of Holy Scripture to the

sermon' (Ebeling 1964: 85). If this is so, as Wolfhart Pannenberg points out, then that means the concept of the word of God is established by the history of its happenings which, in his mind, remains open until the totality of history has occurred (Pannenberg 1988: 241). That the word is defined at the culmination of history means that history is assumed as the overarching category of language-events. Similarly, the near collapse of reality into language, including the idea that Jesus' words serve as a synecdoche of his existence, is persistently criticized (Thiselton 2009: 193). This is exasperated by a charge of cherry-picking biblical text to support the theory (Thiselton 2009: 193–194) and treating the word of God with an 'authoritarian attitude' (Pannenberg 1969b: ix). Perhaps most detrimental, there is no clear biblical basis for neither the concept of God's 'self-revelation' in a hermeneutical event (Pannenberg 1969a: 9) nor even the concept of the 'word of God' as used in hermeneutical theology (Pannenberg 1969a: 10). As Ingolf Dalferth explains, part of the decline of hermeneutical theology towards the end of the twentieth century is its failure to address these and other criticisms (Dalferth 2016a: 96). The lack of conceptual development extends even to claims made on the dogmatic basis of the word of God. One example is the failure to develop the cosmological implications of understanding the world through God's address (Dalferth 1992: 99).

6 Recent developments

The waning of hermeneutical theology following from these criticisms does not mean the movement has altogether disappeared. There have been important developments in another generation, which have in themselves spurred a renewed interest in this way of doing theology.

Following the trinitarian concerns, there has been a recent development in understanding God's self-relationality *as* a conversation. This development is based in one of Luther's many illustrations of the Trinity, wherein he explains God as a Speaker (Father), Spoken (Son), and Listener (Spirit) (Schwöbel 2018a: 354–355). While retaining hermeneutical theology's emphasis on a temporality unique to God's eternity, and a unity of form and content, this conception reintroduces God's act and will in lieu of the concept of language-events. All the major categories of hermeneutical theology appear: 'God is eventful, relational, personal, communal' (Schwöbel 2003: 66), but this conception stays in closer contact with the categories of classical metaphysics. Among other things, restoring an emphasis on God as the Speaker allows hermeneutical theology to utilize prevalent theories of language for its own conceptual development, including J. L. Austin's theory of speech-act. The relevant passages in Luther also imply that the division between word and history (in Pannenberg's critique) is a false dichotomy. Rather, history is determined by the realization of the Word (Christ) in God's divine speech-acts.

In response to another criticism, significant strides have been made to develop the fundamental concepts of hermeneutical theology. Ingolf Dalferth (1948–) is especially important in this regard. A major aspect of this development is a modal distinction between possibility and actuality. Following Jüngel, Dalferth argues for placing possibility on an equal standing with actuality: 'That which is actual would not be if it were not possible, and that which is possible can only be because it is actual' (Dalferth 2003: vii). Dalferth argues for this modal relationship via the doctrine of creation. Creation is a divine speech-act, which means the possibility of the world precedes its actuality, and its reality occurs in an event where the two meet. The 'meaning' of God's creative speech-act is located in the interplay between these two. For Dalferth, it is the task of philosophy to analyse actuality, and that of theology to investigate possibility, which compels theology to remain in constant contact with the relevant philosophical concepts.

In a similar vein, Ulrich Körtner offers an updated form of hermeneutical theology that is the 'synthesis of hermeneutics and semiotics' (Körtner 2008: vii–viii, 110–111). He argues that theology should conform to God's goodness through a '*hermeneutic of love*', '*of hope*', and '*of promise*' (2008: 31–32, original emphasis). These principles mean that theology does not strive to make strictly conceptual distinctions but navigates through 'blurred boundaries' (2008: 43) of metaphorical categories by an 'art of understanding' (2008: 36). This kind of judgement is developed in the practical activity of worship. Drawing on Ebeling, Körtner argues that worship is a 'word event' where the believer not only encounters God in the word but all aesthetic aspects of its context (2008: 172–181).

To address the criticism of hermeneutical theology's use of scripture, Ulrich Luz maintains a critic of the historical-critical method in biblical hermeneutics, doing so with appeal to Ebeling and Fuchs. He argues that the meaning of the New Testament is to be a text open to multiple interpretations in the practical dimensions of faith. As such, the 'truth of biblical texts is […] not a matter of certain predicates but a question of adequate treatment of the text in the context of life' (Luz 2005: 279). Luz explains that 'adequate treatment of the text' is to treat the 'story of Jesus Christ' in a consistent manner to the whole of the New Testament, which is to re-present that story's meaning in a 'symbolic' sense (2005: 282). The truth of scripture, then, is not a delimitation between truth and untruth, but is truth 'in the sense that it brings truth itself into being' (2005: 283). The truth of the story of Jesus 'lies in the fact that it initiates a movement' (2005: 282–283). 'This means that *New Testament texts and interpretations of them are true so long as they bring about love*' (2005: 284, original emphasis). Hans Weder highlight's Luz's work on the Gospel of Matthew as a potential site for a reorientation of hermeneutical theology (Weder 2013: 235).

A further development is found in scientific discussions, grounded theologically in understanding creation as a speech-act of God (Schwöbel 2018c: 47). Against the

theoretical framework of modern science, a hermeneutical reading of the world unites meaning and being, along with fact and value, emphasizes the particular (i.e. contingent) over the universal (i.e. necessity), while maintain the latter as a 'conversational' relational network (Schwöbel 2018c: 58–61). As the Father speaks the world in an original act of creation, the incarnated Son offers the interpretive principle for reading the 'book' of nature, and the Spirit gives the world a meaning/value tethered to an absolute end. This extends to anthropology, in which humanity is understood as 'creatures of possibility' (Dalferth 2016b: ix). Humanity is defined by possibility, first, by being a creature of God. Before humans could act, they must be given the possibility for action, which includes the possibility of their being and existence as much as their autonomy. Second, humanity is defined in that humanity is grounded in a horizon of possibility; their being is in becoming because it is always encountered by a multitude of possibilities in their life experience.

Attributions

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