Hermeneutics is more important than God! This statement, obviously hyperbole, does more than attract attention; it compels recognition that one's hermeneutics determines what one believes about God. Hermeneutics may not really be more important than God, but it borders on being almost as complex, which is attested by the continual stream of books on interpretation theory. Hermeneutics deals with the way we read and appropriate data, particularly textual material, and we enact a hermeneutic virtually all of our lives, even if usually we do so unwittingly. I teach NT and am no hermeneutical theoretician, but hermeneutics is really all I teach; I merely change courses. As Paul Ricoeur aptly said, "Hermeneutics is the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text." That is precisely what Christians are supposed to do—decipher life in the mirror of the text of Scripture—and because the stakes are so high in how the reading of Scripture takes place, we must give conscious and careful attention to what we think we are doing.

Throughout the church's history Christians have nurtured themselves by reading Scripture, but they have also often distorted the text and found themselves in endless debates about how Scripture should be understood and appropriated. Our own time is marked by hermeneutical confusion as much as any ever has been. Is that because of the increasing complexity of life or have we used hermeneutics to obfuscate matters, to provide a defense against the text and a way that we

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1 Originally presented as part of the Carmichael-Walling Lectures at Abilene Christian University.

can manipulate the text? Do we discuss hermeneutics more now because we actually read the text less?

The problem, of course, is that in the attempt to decipher life in the mirror of the text we often see only our own faces and agendas. We end up abusing Scripture rather than understanding and appropriating its message. The abuse of Scripture is a continual problem in the reading of lay people and clergy, as many Sundays demonstrate, and also among scholars. Especially with lay readers the focus is often on what the text “means to me,” but now in our time academic treatments do essentially the same thing under the name of reader response hermeneutics. But being biblical is no easy task, and this work requires a whole interpretive community and all the effort we can invest. Further, no one should think that only one way to be biblical exists. But, being biblical does entail being conformed to the biblical message, and false interpretations can indeed be shown to be false.

Reader Response Approaches

The assumption of everything said so far is that there is a message inscribed in the biblical text to which attention must be paid. In our day, however, a wholesale rejection of such an assumption has taken place. Partly this is because any attempt to find an author’s intention is viewed as either impossible or irrelevant; and partly because readings are often

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2The strange alliance of Christian devotional reading and academic reader response approaches has been noticed by others. See N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God; vol. 1 of Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 60.

3See W. K. Wimsatt with Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in The Verbal Icon ([Lexington]: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3. This article is often referred to as foundational, but it is marginally relevant to biblical studies. It is reprinted in On Literary Intention (ed. D. Newton-de Molina; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), a collection of essays debating the issues. See esp. the article by Quentin Skinner, “Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts,” 210-221. One should note that Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s article is about the interpretation of poetry, not narrative texts, and that they say “poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention” (p. 5)!