

Introduction to Hermeneutics, with a Proposal **By Rev. Wayne Hammar**

(NOTE on personal pronouns in this paper: When referring to a generic person, whose identity as a male or female is unknown and could be either, I use feminine pronouns at one point and male at the next, roughly equally, although sometimes when I go back and edit, it may accidentally change the exact rhythm of female one time and male the next.)

WHAT IS HERMENEUTICS? The study of how we get meaning from texts is called hermeneutics. When people refer to interpretation of any text in a language they know, they are referring to some method of hermeneutics (whether they are aware of that or not). All texts must be interpreted to gain any meaning at all from them. The method we use to interpret varies, depending upon the type of text we are reading. Usually our method of hermeneutics is automatic and thoughtless, in the sense of doing it without any thought as to how we are doing it, not aware of the process we are using. Studying hermeneutics is the decision to think about how one interprets a text, deciding if this is the best method to use, instead of relying upon automatic reflexes, habits or patterns we gained somewhere along the way. It is the difference between deciding for oneself how to proceed and being blown by the winds (of our past or of current fads or of some unknown influence).

Some will say, "Why make it so complicated? I will just read it and see what it says!" The trouble with that sentiment is that one is mindlessly applying methods of interpretation without realizing it. Any literature (unless it has pictures, which is a different) is just ink on a page. Many complex cultures with vast oral literature have no method of writing. When we transfer language to ink on a page, we lose body language, facial expression and personal interaction which make a language live. Most psychologists say we "hear" more, pick up more, from body language and such than from meanings of words when someone is talking to us (including sermons heard live). Even that oral communication must be interpreted, but we have many more clues as we watch someone speak than we do from ink on a page. This is why so many misunderstandings take place between people – someone has interpreted the words spoken to them in a way not intended by the speaker. How many times have you said, "But that is not what I meant!" This shows the importance of interpreting, even when you are conversing with a live person. Even more so, written communication has no meaning without interpreting language represented by symbols ("letters") on a page or surface, and turning this into meaningful thought within the mind of the reader.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF SCRIPTURE: Any religion which relies on a body of literature for inspiration or guidance or doctrine has a special need to consider how that literature is interpreted. Anyone preaching from a text should be aware and decisive about how one is going to interpret the text since you are responsible for doing so for a group of people. Some religions or denominations appoint a certain person or persons with the authority to interpret "correctly" for that community for each generation. Others may take as their norm the interpretive methods of some founder or early leader; in future years, as understandings evolve, this leads to the problem of how to interpret that leader's writings. Other groups may just throw that scripture out there and leave it up to the individual to interpret, although every community will develop trends and unwritten norms from their community life together. Groups often assume that most will find correct ideas from an honest appraisal of the sacred text, although when unusual or radically different interpretations arise, the group often begins to

search for the “correct” interpretation. Some religions or groups may give more weight to the scriptural text compared to modern authorities, tradition or experience, others give less to scripture and pay more attention to those other sources of authority within the religion. So in each, hermeneutical methods will vary.

SOME METHODS OF INTERPRETATION OF ANY TEXT (NOT SCRIPTURE):

A. Relational – With this method, the reader interprets the words on a page in the context of a relationship which the reader has with the author (or some person related to the producing of that text). For example, one would read a letter from a loved one who is far away in a very different way than reading a textbook. As you read a personal letter, you know the personality of the author and can almost see their facial expressions and hear the tones in their voice as they say certain things. One identifies the words with the personality. This can even be done (to a lesser degree) with other texts, such as a book by someone who used to be your teacher, or a book by an author whose books you often read, in quantity, to the point you feel like you know that author, or reading a book by one whose biography you recently read.

B. Shared Experience – This is related to the Relational method above and in some ways to Typology below, because this refers to interpreting the text on the basis of having experiences similar to the author or a character in the story. If someone wrote about having a “bad hair day,” the reader might interpret their remarks or descriptions of what follows by remembering their own bad hair days. “I know how that feels” can lead to “I understand why she is saying that!” Novels and movies often design characters that the readers or audience can identify with (“this person is like ME”) and may also have “bad guys” who are designed to be people we would rarely identify with (especially if they will be shot by Clint Eastwood at the end – we would hate it if we identified with the person who had a hole blown in their body). But other texts might also lead to this interpretive method if they describe some aspect of human experience and we can recall similar experiences. Or we may know about the author's experience not mentioned in the text and realize that is why they say a certain thing in their text.

C. Factual – With this method the reader looks at a text purely searching for facts contained there. It is not personal. A science textbook might be a good example since one rarely cares who wrote it (as long as they are accurate and up to date) - one is looking for facts to learn about a facet of reality (or to pass a test). This could also be done with other texts, such as reading a newspaper article just to see what happened, in an event we care little about on a personal level. (This would differ if I was reading about the car wreck my mother was in; then I am looking for facts only as they relate to a person I care about, and to see how the news may have distorted my mother's role in it.) Even a letter can be read factually: when my brother was in Vietnam, he wrote to his fiancée at our home address because she dropped by our house daily. Once she opened a letter addressed to her and read the first line – “I am writing from the hospital.” She almost fainted, then read quickly through the letter, until finally on page two he told her about the scorpion bite that put him in the hospital and that it was OK now. Once she knew the fact that he was OK and not mangled, she went back through and read the letter in a more personal way. (Of course, he was rather thoughtless in not writing up front that he was OK!) This is a good example of switching hermeneutical methods automatically, without even thinking.

D. Intentional – Here one is searching the text for what the author intended you to gain from it. What is this person trying to advocate or propose or criticize here? If I interpret it THIS way, and the author knew how I interpreted it, would she say, “That is not what I MEANT!!!”? We might read an editorial essay with this kind of interpretation. What is this author advocating, and do I agree with his intended response? The art of good essay writing is declining, and also it is somewhat out of fashion in many academic circles to believe that one can really figure out the intention of someone you do not know from a text. One might read a printed version of a politician’s speech and still be unsure of exactly where that slippery politician stands. We tend to vote on other factors, often from a sense of whether we trust their character, not their specific words. In a cynical age, intention is seen as a mystery behind the false words they may put out for unknown and devious reasons. What they write may not be what they think. Further, works of art are often seen today as taking on a life of their own, changing in the eye of the beholder to the point that what the artist thought about it is not relevant. So a writing that is seen as a work of art may be beyond intention. If we choose the intentional method, we are dropping that cynicism and saying that we believe we can access, to some degree, the intention of that author and we will dialogue with the author’s intended ideas.

E. Awareness of Symbols – Some might search a text for clues based upon symbols used by the author (whether they intended to choose a symbolic expression or unconsciously referred to something that is symbolic in their psyche or culture). Sometimes people express themselves in ways that reveal an inner truth picked up from living in a culture or from experiences that they may or may not reflect upon consciously. An example might be an autobiography that constantly refers to male authority figures in a hostile way. Whether conscious of it or not, a psychologically-oriented reader may start interpreting this text as speaking about a father-figure.

F. Typological - This is a step beyond symbol awareness. This method will seek in the text "types" or similar aspects to something else outside the text or in other texts. For example, a character in a story may be a "type" representing all working class laborers, and thus as one reads about that person in the text, one interprets it as a comment on the situation which all working class laborers face (which could work into a Marxist interpretation if one is so inclined). The author may not have intended it that way, but one choosing that interpretation is interested in that "type" (whether it be laborers or prostitutes or abused animals or whatever) and one chooses to look for that type in whatever they read. Many stories in western culture are interpreted by literature professors as containing a “Christ-figure” – someone who is innocent and suffering becomes a symbol for the story of Christ that has been imbedded in the minds of any who grew up in our society, whether conscious of it or not.

G. Allegorical - This is a step beyond typology. Allegory takes details of a text and applies them to an entirely different situation and set of details. For example, Little Red Riding Hood has been interpreted as the girl being a "type" of all women victimized by "wolves" in society. But allegory would go even further and interpret the tale according to a totally unrelated scheme: the girl represents those who have limited ability to cope and are homeless while granny represents those with sincere intentions to help the homeless but she was replaced by the wolf who represents heartless institutions who only victimize the homeless even more while claiming to help, until the saving figure of the woodsman arrives, representing the federal government who will come in and solve the problem and all will be well! In allegory, every part of the story takes on new meaning in a new situation, and, obviously, a fertile imagination could find lots of

ways and meanings to turn a story to their own purposes. This gets quite far from intention, in most cases, though some will say the author intended their interpretation. J.R.R. Tolkien grew very angry when many tried to interpret the Lord of the Rings as an allegory for Hitler and Nazis or Communism and nuclear weapons, etc. He hated allegory as a method, and wrote the basic story before the advent of Hitler or atomic weapons. He did see the ring as a "type" for industrial dehumanizing elements in society, tempting because of the power and wealth it can bring, but he felt allegory took it too far.

H. Historical - A text can be examined to discover its place within a time-line, usually with the search for cause and effect. What prior thoughts had an effect upon the way this was written? How did this text make a difference in its own time or upon later writings? Can the meaning of the text be illuminated by the historical context, issues and customs of the time that it was written? We do this automatically at times, reading an old love letter, for example, after divorcing the person who wrote it. The interpretation goes back to former feelings and sharing. Otherwise, it would make little sense if one is no longer in relationship with that person. Many texts which are older than our current generation must be put in historical context to make any sense of references to issues no longer part of our mind-set. Imagine finding a story about sending a message in Morse Code if you did not know anything about the telegraph.

I. Postmodern Emphasis - In a wider recognition of diversity, and in a critique of the past two hundred years of "modern" thought, the more recent "postmodern" trends insist that there is no ONE truth. There are many truths, depending upon the perspective of the one seeking truth. A postmodern interpreter may use many of the methods above, or others since this is not a complete list but just a list of many prominent ideas. But the emphasis is finding a truth that is relevant for me or my group, not the truth for all people and all time. In this, the author's intention has little importance, since that is just ONE truth, not all the truth that can be gained from the text as it stands today. In fact, looking for author intention is called the "intentional fallacy," ridiculing the idea that anyone can really know what another person, not present now, intended when they wrote something. Even the writer himself cannot always know what they intended more deeply than the surface level -- she may be prompted by a variety of motives not sorted in a rational way. The postmodern interpreter finds out all that can be known about author and text but the postmodern interpretation will try to gain from dialogue with the text, for the individual or often for a group, such as feminist interpretation or the viewpoint of the immigrant in a new land. An example could be that Joanne ("J.K.") Rowling has indicated to interviewers that much of the writing of the Harry Potter novels was an exercise in dealing with grief (slow loss of her mother to a progressive disease). But an interpreter dealing with children who have little experience with grief may know this and choose to interpret the death of Headmaster Dumbledore from the point of view of the need to accomplish a quest on one's own resources, without the teacher motivating the pupil. Looked at from one group's point of view (older children who know little grief) this could be seen from the perspective of freedom to excel on one's own, but for another group (children who have lost a parent recently), sensitivity to their plight would push for a whole different "truth" from that part of the tale. As the text stands now, it has an impact upon the interpreter, regardless of author intention or how another interpreter may look at it, and in a diverse culture one may wish to offer a different truth to those who share a particular situation in common. In this case the Shared Experience (see B above) is in the readers as a group which has something in common, rather than necessarily what is shared between author and reader, although one can also look for shared experiences there at the same time.

HOW HERMENEUTICAL METHODS ARE USED WITH THE BIBLE AS SCRIPTURE:

A. Relational - The human authors of scripture lived long ago in a culture strange and foreign to us. But repeated readings of an author (like Paul, for example) may help us to get a feel for his personality and begin to respond as we would to a letter from a friend. We might see one passage differently in light of his tendencies and human traits which show through in reading all his known works. Also, on another level, if we consider the Bible to be inspired, then a text can be searched for an expression of human relationship with God, as using a Psalm in a devotional exercise. In what way is this text inspired? (a question every preacher needs to answer.) Am I reading a personal letter to God, perhaps overhearing a dialogue between the author and God, in which I can perceive the personality of both? (Note for Disciples of Christ: our emphasis on reason has historically made us suspicious of such "touchy-feely" methods involving relationships but, like all people, we have often felt the connection and identified with the humanity of the authors.)

B. Shared Experience - This method is one of the most popular for turning scriptural texts into sermons in our culture today. Pop psychology and personal experience command a lot of interest in our culture. The Bible tells many stories and shares many prayers and poems which speak to the human experiences as we journey with God. How is the experience behind the writing of this text similar to my experience, or ours today? In spite of cultural differences, do we share some human traits in common? How does the experience showing in this text speak to my own experience, if I consider Bible to be inspired, and therefore normative. (NOTE: this can be true even if one does not consider the experience to be historically accurate: one can learn from Noah's or Jonah's human traits even if one does not believe there was a global flood or a fish that could swallow a human live. Disciples of Christ who might differ on points of historical criticism still might interpret similarly, when we recognize the shared human experience described in a text.)

C. Factual - This is the most crucial method for those who believe in a literal interpretation of scripture (in the sense that is taught by fundamentalist thinkers). In this method, the Bible is inspired in the sense of being straight, word-for-word from God, so one searches for the facts God is laying out for us to grasp. Our work is to get those facts right. Some would say this is the only way to interpret the Bible, but in Christian history and today other methods are also used alongside this one by those who believe in inerrancy and literal interpretation, as long as the secondary interpretation does not negate the factual one. Many fundamentalist preachers use shared experience as a way of making the text come alive even as they make a doctrinal point by using factual interpretation. Another issue with this method is how to relate the many facts gleaned from many differing Bible texts. Fundamentalist interpreters have often made use of "chain-reference Bibles" which relate many texts in a chain of facts that they see as a single coherent statement of essential doctrines of the church. They use the idea of dispensations (the same truth looking different in different situations, or "dispensations," of Bible history, such as obeying God's commandments being different for Abraham compared to after the law of Moses and then after the advent of Christ). In some circles, this leads to the prediction of a final dispensation, the end of this world and the coming apocalypse. (For Disciples of Christ, those most insistent on the necessity of the church agreeing on a factual interpretation often took off into the Church of Christ or independent Christian camps, but as a "big tent" church, we still affirm the validity of those who hold strongly to this method and stay united to, and

affirming of, those who do not. The difference is our view of inspiration - did God give texts word-for-word to authors who were basically taking dictation with no human, imperfect input, or did God inspire humans in a relationship with God, out of which came a human writing which may contain human mistaken perspectives on other matters, but show truth in the view of God's presence.)

D. Intentional - One can buy many scholarly books which outline the "theology" of the biblical book or author. This uses a method of trying to get at the intention of the author in writing scripture. It is discredited by many postmodern scholars who call it the "intentional fallacy" - the idea that we can see the inner motives of an ancient author is ridiculed by cynics who feel it is just a way of projecting our own beliefs onto an ancient text. But for others, it is critical to know what the author intended. It is difficult to imagine how one can consider any text "inspired" if one does not have some sense of what the author intended to say. What did the inspired author mean? What is inspired about this text if not what the author intended? Most biblical scholarship from the late 1700's to the late 1900's (including the founders of the Disciples of Christ, who considered it vital to interpret scripture within the context of who wrote it and their circumstances) relied heavily upon a combination of intentional and historical interpretation, and this combination is still often seen today, though in conflict with both fundamentalist and postmodern trends.

E. Awareness of Symbols - Since we are not on a face-to-face basis with God, one could argue that all language about God is symbolic. Public worship is the manipulating of symbols in order to help a group of people reach an awareness of or openness to spiritual aspects of life. Past and present interpretation of literature used in worship must deal with symbols within that literature that seek to represent God or spiritual aspects of humanity. The interpreter may choose to highlight that aspect of the text as the inspired sense of the text. What symbols were used in this text and why? (For Disciples of Christ, when Alexander Campbell referred to texts about communion and baptism, he took the interpretive stance that communion and baptism were "made for man," not the other way around. In other words, the communion was instituted for our sake, as humans, not for us to please God (or displease God by not going to worship). Communion is a symbol to help us with our life in relationship to God and to God's people, not a rule-bound ritual closed to any who people may deem unworthy of God. This is an awareness that the communion itself is a symbol of what God wishes to give to us.

F. Typological - This form of interpretation has been used heavily throughout Christian history. Even the very confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ is a statement of typological interpretation: the "Christ" (Greek for "messiah") in the Old Testament is David or the davidic kings who followed, with the idea that prophets promised a new messiah. Christians, after the first Easter, began to apply scriptures related to the messiah as showing a "type" which God set up to lead to the messiah (Christ) of all time: Jesus. Even texts from Psalms which use "I/me/my" (supposedly by David) were interpreted in the New Testament writings and in Christianity as pointing to Jesus (as in Hebrews 5:5-6). A detached observer could say that such a passage could point to many different ideas and did not have Jesus in mind at all, but a typological interpretation sees this kind of language about a messiah (Christ) as setting up a type of specially set aside savior and, to the Christian, Jesus is the one who fulfills that type perfectly, the only one from the perspective of that confession of faith (Jesus is "the" Christ, not "a" Christ among many). But many other typological interpretations have been readily used over the centuries of Christian interpretation of both Old and New Testaments. The great 20th

century Bible scholar, Gerhard Von Rad, detached and precise in his scholarship and looking for author intention in his studies, used and promoted typological interpretations in preaching, even though he was aware that the Old Testament prophets probably did not have in mind a non-royal character like Jesus at all when they wrote about the messiah. To Von Rad, and many, a type is formed by the authors and sets up characteristics or definitions of the type that may be fulfilled later in a way not intended by the author, but a way that better "fits" the definition the author originally set up than the author's own idea about it.

G. Allegorical - This was the primary method of interpreting scripture in the first 1,500 years of the history of Christianity. It was a popular method of interpreting other texts in New Testament times (whether the Old Testament or other writings, such as the Iliad and the Odyssey). In the middle ages, this method was highly developed in the Church, and almost any biblical text could be interpreted in sermons or writings by four differing allegorical twists: (1) it can show a truth about the relationship between God, Christ, and humanity; (2) it can show a truth about the church and its structure and purpose; (3) it can give a lesson about human morality; and (4) it can show a truth about the future end of this world and heaven. In other words, any one text, whether it seems to talk about any of these things or not, can be taken and details in the text interpreted as meaning something about God, and that same text reworked so those same details tell us something about how the church should be, and then reworked again so those details teach us how to be moral human beings, and finally worked over to show us truth about the final end and home of humanity, whether heaven or hell. This often got out of hand, (for example many medieval scholars interpreted Song of Songs this way) and people found all sorts of stuff in the Bible that just wasn't there, but even at the height of the popularity of this form of interpreting, scholars would call people back and say that no interpretation should oppose or deny either the "plain" sense of the text or contradict established church teachings. The Protestant reformers (who used typology heavily) were suspicious of the allegorical schemes and usually drew back from them, and then in the age of rationalism such fantastic interpretations grew out of fashion. Even today, though, some unconsciously apply to scriptures things that have nothing to do with the surface level of the text, in a "this represents that" form that is allegorical. Further, with the rise of postmodern interpretations, some allegory can be seen as OK and showing a truth that is needed. Obviously, without controls, this method can find anything someone wants to find in any Bible text, if one has a good imagination.

Historical - Martin Luther was a groundbreaking Bible scholar when he broke with allegorical interpretations and began to apply historical context to what he saw as David's psalms. This was still spotty then, but since the late 1700's the primary method of Protestant scholarship has been historical, finding as precisely and in as much detail as possible the historical context of the literature we know as the Bible and how that literature itself grew over historical time. Only recently has postmodern interpretation begun to challenge the rule of historical and intentional methods over Bible scholarship. Fundamentalism was initially a reaction to such scholarship (and the scientific assumptions behind it; a revolt against modern science and where it is taking us was focused upon modern biblical scholarship and evolution), and fundamentalist rejected it, but have not dethroned it except where they set up their own churches and colleges. Even there, in defensiveness, the fundamentalists often try to use the same methods to come up with differing conclusions, in keeping with strict doctrines. In many ways the liberal historical-critical scholars were the most literal of interpreters, as they found clues in the scriptural text itself which showed multiple authors writing or adding to the same biblical book, or texts which

showed signs that the author thought something different from traditional teaching about the Bible or even differing from another biblical book or text. Rather than explain away such inconsistencies, they applied reason and tried to be detached observers of the evidence to reach "scientific" conclusions. But they inevitably got into historical details and theories about the writing of a text that bored average laypersons and went over their heads. Most people really don't care if Moses or a dozen later people wrote Genesis or whether Paul really wrote Titus. They do care when scholars seem to say Noah's ark was a story on a par with other people's myths about floods, probably just one more version of it and not a description of a historical event. Or when scholars point out that Jesus' birth to a woman who had not yet had sex is not found anywhere in the New Testament except in a few late additions at the front of Matthew and Luke (not referred to by those books anywhere else), and that such a "doctrine" is not essentially part of the rest of the Bible; then, people feel as emotionally threatened as the citizens of Whoville when the Grinch stole Christmas. (Like the Whos, the church survived such controversies.) But any honest assessment of the work of such scholars has to recognize that they show us real evidence of complexity about the Bible which we may wish to ignore, but cannot honestly deny. (Disciples history greatly involves the acceptance of the validity of higher criticism within the church, though in a practical sense most at the lay level are not sure what it means. We fought long and hard over acceptance of such scholarship in our colleges and ministerial training and this is much of what separated us from independent Christians. At this point, Disciples are firm in wanting ministers to be aware of such scholarship, whatever personal stance one takes on issues arising from it.)

I. Postmodern Emphasis - Since the 1970's, postmodernism is speaking to modern biblical scholarship, at first quietly and building in volume and audience. Bible professors will speak of the "intentional fallacy" and hold that a text with a complex history, taken from oral forms and various sources of the distant past, is impossible for interpret from the perspective of author intention. We tend to only subconsciously project our own intentions on the text when we try to explain the author's theology or ideas. So why not openly interpret the text from our own intentions and needs? Especially strongly felt in the academic world is the need for formerly unheard groups to have a voice, so feminist hermeneutics or the voice of the oppressed or immigrants' perspectives are coming to the foreground. Even texts that on the surface may have nothing to do with such groups can be interpreted based upon elements that are similar, using shared experience from a new perspective. For example, Danna Nolan Fewell interprets the tower of Babel from a feminist perspective. You might ask, "How is this possible when no women show up in the text?" (Of course, that in itself is an issue.) But she effectively takes the details of the text and searches it for how power is abused within the text and shows how forcing a common goal or one truth upon a people tends to lead to exploiting sub-groups within that population to reach goals increasingly set by a hierarchy. This compares to women and many other subgroups in society who are often asked to put their own goals aside to reach the "common" goal, often set by a male-dominated leadership or a male "head" of family. God effectively ends this domination in the story by letting individual voices be heard, each having their own "language." Here, diversity is good news and ends the domination. There are elements of shared experience and allegory in this interpretation as it is also keenly tied to the text itself. Recent immigrants who teach Bible here can look at many Old Testament texts that deal with "sojourners" or New Testament texts which show the believers as a small minority in an often hostile culture and find truth for their situation. (Disciples are intensely dealing with issues of diversity at the present time, and this has a great impact upon biblical interpretation both in our colleges and seminaries and in our congregations.)

A PROPOSAL

It is fair for any reader of THIS text to ask, "Where does this author stand on all this? Which method does he prefer?" If you do not care about author intention, maybe you do not ask this, but I will outline how I see it anyway, as I try to interpret scripture as a preacher and teacher of ministers within the Disciples of Christ in America today.

First, I must admit that the intense controversy in the 20th century between fundamentalist and historical-critical interpretations has shaped me to a certain extent. Both sides use various methods to supplement their primary one, but usually only to affirm one side or another. The historical-critical won many of the well-educated and is taught in mainline and now in Catholic ministerial training institutions, sprinkled recently with postmodern interpretations. Fundamentalism has grown in popular culture and set up their own educational systems, from home-schooling or Christian schools which teach "creationism" to colleges and ministerial training which teach the factual method with nods to historical background or shared experience as long as both conform to doctrinal positions. Many in our culture who are not keen on fundamentalist doctrine are also not buying the interpretations of mainline or liberal Catholic scholars either. In fact, the societal trend is for those folks to exit the church entirely. Few people even are aware of the teachings of the historical-critical method, and advocates of that method often do not try to appeal to more than the elite who can study in great depth the detailed evidence they produce. Often, it seems to me that the only voices about Bible that are heard by more than a few are the fundamentalist voices, and no other option seems available to the average reader of the Bible. And I personally do not believe that more than a minority of the population will ever strongly ally themselves to fundamentalist teachings. If that is the only alternative, then many will just give up on understanding the Bible. I intensely believe that the fundamentalist option is a valid interpretation and should be "out there" and available for that minority, but we need other equally valid and accessible options to be heard.

But the historical-critical, in which I have been trained and which has inspired me greatly, has failed to be an accessible alternative. It focused too much on the past, too little on current application to life, and is very difficult to master since it relies upon lots of detail to make its point. I am a history nut and delve into such detail for fun, but most do not. And even I need something more for my Bible to have a positive impact upon my prayer life. I think that the historical methods and theological searchings of author intent most effectively explain the background of a scripture text. But to avoid simply relying upon an "expert" to tell us what the Bible means, we all need another method of approaching the text, aided by expert explanations of the context.

Paul Ricoeur advocated a "second naivete" in which one learns ABOUT the text as much as one can, then goes back to read it again, with all that prior knowledge about the text in the back of your mind as you read. Try once again to see it as if for the first time, totally innocent of the theories of authorship and context (like a long-married couple on a second honeymoon). What does it say to you now? This fresh approach is not denying the evidence or background of the text: once we know such things about it, we would be foolish to interpret the text in a way false to that information. But to gain more than information, we approach the text again in a dialogue. First Corinthians 13 was set in the midst of a controversy between Paul and a divided congregation, but what does it MEAN? The background can make that text speak louder in a

second reading, in that even if we are defensive against accusations and fighting for what we see as the truth, love is not an option but an essential part of life together. It challenges me to examine my behaviors from the perspective of love, not just from the perspective that I am right and they are wrong, or that they unfairly accused me of being a lousy minister. And beyond all that, it pushes me to ask, "What kind of God would expect me to love when I am being treated like crap?" How is God's presence with me in prayer going to change if I see God inspiring another person in the midst of controversy and accusations to write such a marvelous and poetic vision of love? Answering these questions in a second reading can give me inspiration both in prayer and in sharing with others in a sermon.

So, taking off from Ricoeur, my proposal is to move toward a relational interpretation, with the emphasis shifted toward the relationship between the biblical author and God, a relationship which shows through the text. This means I will take seriously both what I can learn about the author (sometimes anonymous in scripture, but we can know some of the author's background and circumstances) and also what I can discern about that human author's intentions in writing. It also takes seriously that the author was human, and made mistakes even as the text was written. But beyond all that, I come back to the text and seek to read between the lines about the relationship of the author (or authors) of that text and God. This is what I mean when I say it is inspired: that the author was a human in relationship with God, a person or persons who had the presence of God in their midst as they wrote. Not that every word was whispered in their ear (in which case the human author would not matter; God wrote it all and human personality or relationship did not enter into it). Instead, knowing an imperfect human was granted God's presence, and related to that presence in individual ways, inspires me to come before God in prayer (dialogue), and to come before others as God's servant in Christ.

Along with this emphasis upon the relationship of God with author and myself with that same inspiring God, I make use of a variety of methods to help it along. Shared experience fits in nicely: much of this relationship deals with religious experience. I am suspicious of typology and allegory, as it seems not to fit with my very inner nature. I even cringe if people use symbols too often as an entry point into a text, especially if they "psychologize" an author to the point of seeing inner motives I do not see in a text. But I am humble enough to realize that such methods served the church well over the centuries, and I am aware that at times when I look for the relationship an author may have had with God, I am entering into an inner psychological realm, too. I try to do so in close awareness of the plain sense of the text. I have indicated the expanding of my mind and heart toward God as I interacted with historical and intentional interpretations, and these often help me along the way and excite me about the task of bible study. As a historian, I tend to quibble over facts, so the factual method is sometimes a distraction to me, but I do not discount it for others who feel a need for strong facts and sound, unwavering doctrine. I do not feel a need for that. I definitely feel that facts in a bible text that have nothing to do with relationship with God may be wrong or misguided or mistaken, part of the humanity of the imperfect person reaching out to the God who already reached out to that person. If they were wrong scientifically about how the world was physically created, I am not worried about that. But as they praise the One responsible for creating, I join in. The postmodern emphasis can grow from the second reading of the text, and as a child of the sixties who celebrates the diversity of humanity and diversity within the church, I respond joyfully to some of that emphasis, but I cannot discount the intention of the author of a biblical text to be prayerfully before God. This is what I deliberately try to do - be in

a three way conversation, myself with the author and with God who inspires us both. When I preach, I draw others into the conversation, too (I hope!).

Anyone who will preach or teach the Bible to others, or publicly represent a church like the Disciples of Christ which claims to be biblical, has an obligation to do the best one can to interpret the Bible honestly, after serious reflection on what it means. One designated as a minister by the Church must be examined and trained concerning how that will happen. As occasional followers of Jesus, we might get by with just glancing at the biblical text and letting whatever random thoughts come to mind, without any awareness of the process of interpretation taking place as we do so. But a minister must at least be aware of the method of hermeneutics they are using, and reflect on what method is valid. The method may differ from one text to another, since the Bible contains a great variety of differing texts. The method may differ from one audience to another, since our interactions with people and their needs vary greatly. But it is vital that we make deliberate choices on how to do this, choices which will mean we are honest about what we find in the text, and choices which will express that the church needs to express to the people we meet. Especially in preaching or teaching, we need to be fully aware of what we are saying about that text, and why.