CHAPTER 3 Requirements

The requirements of a successful practical comparative hermeneutic theory arise out of, and need to match, the description of the current debates given in Chapter 2. For this reason the section headings in this Chapter match those in Chapter 2, rather than the requirements evolved out of them.

3.1 Biblical hermeneutics and General hermeneutics

The debate about hermeneutics – whether, that is, it is Biblical or General – is in effect a debate about location. What is the location of our thinking about the Bible? Within what arena are our discussions to happen? Are we responsible only to ourselves, or to the academy, or to our own congregation, or wider Christian community, or to the whole Church (and what does that mean?[1]), or to some wider – perhaps national or even international – community?

The different hermeneutics of various writers answer this question in particular ways as we have already seen – but the more general point is that they do supply an answer: hermeneutic theories do offer a framework within which discussion can occur. The first requirement, then, is that a location of some sort is necessary. Our thinking about the Bible does need some context; it must relate to other thinking which is going on, it will adopt a particular style of language and pace, a particular range of interests, a particular set of assumptions about prior knowledge, and so on. It does not happen in the abstract, without reference to anything else going on.

Liberation theologians have made this point – about contextual theology – particularly strongly:

> ".... Let us assume that in the theology of the Church human beings do possess a corpus of atemporal scientific certitudes akin to those of mathematics. Even in that forced and hypothetical instance, human options depend upon an understanding and appreciation of the surrounding context and must be taken before the scientific certitudes of theology have anything to say..... We live and struggle in the midst of decisive contextual conflicts without science being able to provide any ready-made option in advance...... Man's acceptance of theology, and of divine revelation itself supposes a prior option that can only be viewed as the challenge posed by a specific, well-known context. Only on the basis of this contextual

1 see Prof Rowland's comments about Watson in his "An Open Letter to Francis Watson on *Text, Church and World*" in <u>Scottish Journal of Theology</u> Vol 48 No 4 p 514

> option does theology begin to have any meaning at all; and it retains meaning only insofar as it remains in touch with the real-life context."[2]

As Segundo's words make clear, this is not just a point about the inevitability of a discussion happening in a context, and the impossibility of eliminating external factors, but about the need for discussion and thinking to be rooted.[3]

3.1.2 A Christian hermeneutic

As was clear in Chapter 2,[4] although some hermeneuts have looked for a general hermeneutic within which to locate Christian interpretation, others have argued for a basic specifically Christian one. This thesis will attempt to take a middle line. The Bible is a document which is located with in the Christian (and Jewish) communities, and that location must be respected: further, as Bultmann[5] writes on the 'life-relation' of the exegete to the subject matter : there is a direct involvement: the Bible is after all about salvation.[6] The necessary location must therefore be primarily Christian, and accountable to the Christian Church (or Jewish). However Christianity also has a location within a pluralist world, and the insights of those outside those religious communities are important too: they may offer new understandings, or may give a critique of existing Christian thinking.

By supplying a framework, any hermeneutic tends to diminish the possibility of other sorts of discussion. The criticism of western theology, by liberation theologians, as white and masculine is an example of this: a debate about the dating of individual Psalms is less likely to lead to a demonstrative challenge of racism, sexism and poverty than a Bible study in a black Church on Psalm 137. A successful comparative hermeneutic must remain as open as possible to fresh areas of discussion. Hermeneuts themselves will need to exercise imagination and openness in order to fulfil this.

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2 J L Segundo: The Liberation of Theology (Orbis Books 1976) p 76

3 see for example T Eagleton: Literary Theory; An Introduction (Blackwell 1983) p74; he shows how a sentence chosen at random from a novel takes on its meaning as the reader uses various social and cultural assumptions. Without these the sentence would be meaningless.

4 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.1

5 Bultmann: Existence and Faith (Fontana 1964) p 349

6 see also Vanhoozer's and Watson's and Webster's comments above Chapter 2 Section 2.1.1

The development of the first requirement to include reference to Christianity, and openness to thinking from beyond that location,[7] will not produce a monolithic picture. The Christian community is too wide for that, and Christians thinking about or studying the Bible have locations and allegiances in addition to their Christian ones.

As I pointed out in the discussion in Chapter 2,[8] there are questions about what "Christian" means in this context. Different ecclesial traditions will give different answers, and the debate continues, but for now, in openness, let us say that wanting to belong to the Church, and being ready to locate the debate within it may be sufficient.

3.2 Authority

One of the reasons for the concern of hermeneutics with the issue of authority is the desire to allow the Bible to speak to Christians: the Bible reading them, rather than being read by them.[9] Several writers have considered models of the Bible as an agent of change.
Jeanrond takes an existential line:

> "Reading, i.e. the disclosure of the sense of texts, is one of the interpretative activities through which the human being can gain some awareness of himself or herself. A reader who truly aims at understanding a text must open himself or herself to it. Only then can the text unveil the existential possibilities which it may entail, and only then can the text transform the self of the reader. Reading leads then to a double disclosure, namely the disclosure of the text's sense and at the same time the disclosure of 'new modes of being in the world', the revelation of new modes of understanding."[10]

Thiselton offers four models of ways in which the Bible plays a role in change. First,

7 The relation of this requirement to a theological point of view could be developed: the Incarnation had particularity yet looked to a wider world as well as to its own.

8 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.6

9 cf Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 154

10 Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 110 Jeanrond goes on to quote Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (Cambridge University Press 1981) p 94

> " 'the unique power of the Bible flows from the fact that the Biblical words are words of love between God and man. The reading of the Bible therefore should be compared to reading love-letters rather than the study and use of a law book.' The recipient of a love letter does not normally respond by acknowledging receipt of information. Reading here often becomes transactional. It entails acts of acceptance, sometimes commitment, and probably deeper bonding." [11]

Second,

> "a narrative may draw the hearer into a projected narrative-world in which a flow of events and feelings are imaginatively experienced at a pre-reflective way. In this case the 'transaction' lies in the reader's willingness to step into this world, and to let his or her feelings and imagination be directed by the world of the text."[12]

Third, Thiselton suggests the approach adopted by Dilthey and Betti: "the reader must learn to stand in the shoes of the author." [13] This is for Betti the only way to deal with the modern world:

> "For humankind, nothing lies so close to the heart as understanding one's fellow human beings… An openness to be willing to listen, to see the other person's point of view, and to be changed, characterises any hermeneutically sensitive reading of texts, no less than in encounters between persons in everyday life." [14]

Fourth, Thiselton draws on Reception Theory using the notion of horizon of expectation: the

> "mind set, the system of references which characterises the reader's finite viewpoint amidst his or her situatedness in time and history…. A text can surprise, contradict, even reverse such a horizon of expectation."[15]

A hermeneutic which could not describe a way in which the Bible could offer a challenge – either to individual Christians or to a congregation or the Church – would be considered inadequate by most Christians, and this then is our second requirement.

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11 Anthony Thiselton: New Horizons in Hermeneutics (HarperCollins Publishers 1992) p 32, quoting Markus Barth: Conversation with the Bible (Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1964)

12 Anthony Thiselton: New Horizons in Hermeneutics (HarperCollins Publishers 1992) p 32 (Thiselton goes on to take as an example the Book of Jonah.)
see also Goldingay who, focused on preaching, looks as Scripture as narrative: "Stories engage their readers. How do they do that, and how do we enable them to do that in the retelling?….. First… stories are structured. Each story has a plot of some kind. We are presented with a problem that is to be solved; quite likely there are difficulties to be overcome on the way or consequences when the main events are over." John Goldingay: Models for Interpretation of Scripture (Eerdmans & Paternoster 1995) p 76 Goldingay goes on to quote Brueggemann: "We are not changed by new rules. The deep places in our lives…. are not ultimately reached by instruction….only by stories, by images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently." Walter Brueggemann: Finally Comes the Poet (Fortress, Minneapolis 1989) p 109

13 Anthony Thiselton: New Horizons in Hermeneutics (HarperCollins Publishers 1992) p 33

14 Emilio Betti: Die Hermeneutik als allgenmeine Methodik des Geisteswissenschaften (Mohr, Tubingen 1972) p 7 quoted by Thiselton New Horizons in Hermeneutics (HarperCollins Publishers 1992) p 33

15 Anthony Thiselton: New Horizons in Hermeneutics (HarperCollins Publishers 1992) p 34

The initial description of biblical authority is minimal, and appears to invite further consideration of the extent to which the Bible is normative. However, as we have seen in Chapter 2,[16] Barr asks a question about how much authority the Christian Church needs, and Grant and Tracy point out[17] that many of the early Christian writers dealing with heresies appealed to the authority of the Church rather than of Scripture. Further, how ever far the authority of Scripture (or anything else) is asserted, the fact remains that for that assertion to have any value requires assent from individuals. Bishops no longer have armies and prisons, and even the Roman Catholic Church has been unable to enforce its thinking on, for example, contraception.[18] There is a sense in which authority is now an existential question, and the right of, or even the need for, individuals to make their own choices has been established. This is not to deny communal or religious pressures or influences, which undoubtedly operate, but to point out that a different sort of description of biblical authority in action is required.

This different sort of description takes us to questions of how individuals change,[19] and of the sources of new ideas.[20] The possibility of change in human beings is tied up with theories about human personality, and with understandings of psychology. One innovative theory is expounded by McFadyen in his book The call to personhood.[21] He argues that persons do not exist as a kind of irreducible independent individual core, but grow and are created and defined by their place within a network of relationships. We are to understand persons in social terms, and ourselves as "in communication."[22] The fundamental relationship is that of a person with God, who calls each of us to be a person and in that call gives space for an autonomous response which allows us to become

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16 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.2

17 Grant and Tracy: A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible (SCM 1984) ch 8 pp 73 ff

18 Things are of course different within Islam, where the possibility of a religious state – a secular society based on the Sharia – has been realised or at least attempted.

19 Again there could be a Christian theological description of these points. Change has always been accepted as possible: it is what is meant by repentance and conversion; the source of energy and new ideas will be the Holy Spirit.

20 cf Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 106, where he insists that a theology or hermeneutic needs to give an account of where new ideas come from.

21 Alistair McFadyen : The call to personhood (Cambridge University Press 1990)

22 A McFadyen: The call to personhood (CUP 1990) p 7

persons. In our relationships with each other, which may be depicted as a web in which we are connected with all those with whom we have had some contact, our personalities are laid down by what McFadyen calls sedimentation. His book attempts to redescribe quite orthodox Christian doctrine using this new terminology and way of thinking.[23]

This does shed some light on the possibility of interactions between Bible and reader which may lead to change, yet there is one further point. A Christian hermeneutic would need to consider God's role in this interaction. A huge range of interpretations could be given to the statement that Biblical authority is linked to ideas of it as God's Word, but behind them lie ideas about God being present in, speaking through, judging through, acting or working through, the Bible. Our second requirement should be modified to include such ideas too.

23 A number of objections might be made: for example, it all seems rather smooth, for in the end everyone relates to everyone else, and the theory does not seem to do justice to the sharp disjunctions which seem to characterise some relationships. An example of this smoothness is its restating of what is evil: 'the provisional, the imperfection of the world, should [not] be considered evil - but just steps on the way to perfection.' A McFadyen : The call to personhood (CUP 1990) p 203 In the same way the theory does not describe what many experience as an essential loneliness in humanity. The existence of persons who do not communicate at all, or in a very limited way (people with late stages of Alzheimer's disease, or autism or some other fundamental cognitive/processing difficulty) must be a challenge to a theory which defines humanity in terms of communication. A third problem is that in McFadyen's thinking, relationships are articulated through language, whereas some linguists would argue that it is language which speaks through people. However, McFadyen's theory does give some sort of answer to the question about the possibility of change: it does happen in human beings, as new layers of sediment are laid down by new relationships and by new aspects of old ones (and the Bible could be part of both of these). On the other hand, persons do not cease to be that which they were; it is rather that the old is overlaid by the new; continuing the geological metaphor, subsequent erosion or the occurrence of faults or some major upheaval will allow the old to come to the surface, albeit changed because of what has happened, including the fact that the old is now over- or under-laid by a new sediment. Other psychological theories – such as Kelly's Theory of constructs – also offer descriptions of change in human beings.

3.3 Meaning: author, text, context, reader

3.3.1 Author and Reader

As Eagleton surveys various literary theories,[24] he seems to ask two basic questions of each theory: first how does it "nail down the text," how does it prevent someone from making the text mean just what they like; and second, how does it cope with change – with the text's reception in developing history? These two poles are typified by the discussion on author and reader in Chapter 2;[25] the author stands for the text's fixed value – especially in the theories of Watson[26] and Vanhoozer[27] – and the reader for the text's changing and developing reception. As the discussion in Chapter 2 showed, although the balance between these two remains under debate, both elements are present (and must meet) in most theories. This then will be our third requirement.

A further observation may be made. Both author and reader are persons, and any theory which describes meaning only within, for example, the impersonal sweep of history will fail to do justice to this fact. The idea of authorial intent upon which Vanhoozer and Watson, and the thinking of speech-act theory, are fundamentally personal. An adequate hermeneutic will need to include an account of this personal element. We have already looked briefly at the writing of McFadyen and his contention that persons do not exist in isolation, but as part of a network of relationships with others. This will have a bearing on how we see authors and readers as part of their communities. There is another aspect of the personal which must be considered here. We need, I would argue, some awareness of the role of self in interpreting the Bible.[28]

In order to understand anything at all complex, we need a pre-understanding - of the meanings of words, of the context of stories, and so on. The idea of a mind which is a *tabula rasa* is really one of a mind which would be so swamped by experience without context that the experience would actually be without content. But this pre-understanding, which makes possible an understanding of the Bible,

24 Eagleton: Literary Theory: An Introduction (Blackwell 1983)

25 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.3.1 and Section 2.1.3.3

26 Watson: Text Church and World (T & T Clark 1994) and Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997)

27 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998)

28 see e.g. Mark Brett, 'A Future for Reader Criticisms?' in F Watson (ed) : The Open Text (SCM, 1993)

may also make impossible some different understanding. To put it another way, we need some awareness of our own prejudices, and the tendencies we have to choose or privilege certain parts, and ignore others, or to interpret in a particular direction.

Some writers (eg Barr) have rejected these difficulties:

> "The question of presuppositions, however, is not as important as it sounds, and is highly paradoxical and contradictory. Presuppositions are one thing, how one handles the evidence is another. One may have the right presuppositions and come to the wrong conclusions; one may have the wrong presuppositions and come to the right conclusions. In any case traditional theology was in no position to tell Biblical scholarship what the right presuppositions were: for on many questions it had no presuppositions, right or wrong, to offer, as already remarked, while on others the presuppositions it had to offer were contrary to the actual data of the Biblical text. What is generally meant, when people speak about presuppositions, is that they want deductive considerations, based upon a few texts like 2 Tim. 3:16 plus purely deductive reasonings with these texts as departure point, to be imposed as authoritative upon the inductive study of the vast mass of the material."[29]

We may note two points in this passage: first that it is considered possible to operate without presuppositions, and second that it is possible to label presuppositions right or wrong. However, I would argue that many presuppositions are basic, in a way that puts them beyond being right or wrong,[30] and also that they lie behind every aspect of our thinking. Schweitzer, for example, in The Quest for the Historical Jesus,[31] shows that the attitude of writers to the eschatological, and to the supernatural, influences their view of the question of whether Jesus saw his mission and teaching (on the Kingdom) as eschatological and this in turn influences their understanding of his whole life.

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29 James Barr: Holy Scripture; Canon, Authority, Criticism (OUP 1983) p 112
However, many others have not : for example Gadamer : Truth and Method (Seabury 1965) p 465 : "Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment and his natural situation, etc."

30 In order for them to be, say, incorrect, one would have to compare them with some other set of presuppositions which were correct, but of course this begs the question, as well as not addressing the further difficulty of who would be able to do the judging. However, of course one might wish to say that some presuppositions are egregiously wrong – perhaps because they simply did not correspond to anyone else's perceptions; I would also want to allow that through some self-critical process, or otherwise, it is possible to revise one's presuppositions.

31 A Schweitzer: The Quest for the Historical Jesus (Third Edition, A & C Black, 1954)

Moreover, these presuppositions[32] are not neutral or value free. They may be part of a stance designed to keep or to gain power, or to support the status of a particular group or individual. Brueggeman gives some interesting examples of "vested interest interpretations,"[33] and makes the astute point that people even choose and avoid churches because of vested interests. Theology is then, without claiming that this observation exhausts its content, to some extent an autobiographical exercise, not one which is value free, or conducted in some isolated ivory tower.[34] It will be a requirement of any adequate hermeneutic that it take account of these personal elements.

This taking account of personal elements has an ethical dimension, and we shall look in more detail at this point in that section.

3.3.2 Text

The debates about the text, outlined in Chapter 2,[35] suggest three things. First, they suggest that any adequate hermeneutic needs to look at all levels of the text. Units of meaning include the word, the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the book, the whole canon. Attending exclusively to

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32 see Rudolf Bultmann: Existence and Faith: Is exegesis without presuppositions possible? (Fontana 1964) p 342 ff. [A translation from the German Ist vraussetzungslose Exegese mogliche? (1957)] Bultmann answers the question with (in one sense) a no. As an example of his own presuppositions he describes the historical method, which he considers necessary before any understanding is possible. (Incidentally, he points out that a commitment to the historical method would preclude the possibility of giving credence to 'miracle'.) He draws a distinction between prejudice and presupposition.

These presuppositions are of course historically conditioned: a palaeontologist, David Pilbeam, describes the way in which scientific thinking has been affected in this way: "In Darwin's day, when evolution and life was seen as a battle, he emphasised the use of tools as weapons. In the early decades of this century - the heyday of Edwardian optimism - the brain, intelligence and higher thoughts were said to be what made us what we are. The obsession with the brain is precisely why the Piltdown forgery , which had a modern-sized cranium associated with an ape's jaw, was accepted as genuine with such alacrity. In the 1940s, with the burgeoning of technology, Man the Tool-maker held the stage. The war years left their mark with the rise of man being linked with an ancestry as a 'killer-ape'. And it's surely no accident that the blossoming of the media in the 1960s coincided with a turn to language as the engine of human advance. Now, with the strength of the women's movement growing, the role of the male in Man the Hunter is being replaced by a picture of co-operative hunting-and-gathering groups in which females play a leading role." (Quoted in Richard Leakey: The Making of Mankind (edition by Book Club Associates 1981) p 52)

33 Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament (Fortress Minneapolis 1994) p 200

34 see, for example, McFadyen: The call to personhood (CUP 1990) e.g.: 'the social codes and structures which are simply "given" for persons are not arbitrary realities antithetical to the personal, but ossifications of previous personal communication; they are not so much objective as inter-subjective realities.' p 84

35 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.3.2

one or other level will lead, as recent critics have argued, to lost levels of meaning, and so to a deficient interpretation.

It is probable that in attempting to look at all levels there will always be room for fresh understanding – because the interplay of these different levels allows for what must in effect be an inexhaustible diversity of different combinations. Indeed there is a tendency for any hermeneut – particularly one whose "target area" lies outside Biblical studies – to operate with a "canon within the canon" – that is to operate most usually with a narrower range of material than the whole Bible. When this is the case, it will be salutary to broaden that range. In addition the history and tradition of the text's reception must not be ignored: even where, from our own perspective, it is a problematic history, that must be considered.[36]

Second, there needs to be respect, and as Vanhoozer for example suggests, an act of faith, towards the text: that, at the lowest level, it is worth reading. In the most general terms one could look at the idea of classic texts. Some postmodernists have suggested that the view that, say, Shakespeare is a better writer, or more worthy of study than, say, Enid Blyton is a social construct. Their argument goes that students of English take this view not because there is some objective test which can be applied to the two which would show it to be so, but because we have been taught it as a truth for so many years that it is now difficult to challenge. This assault on the canon of literature is in some respects quite hard to repulse and several literary critics have looked at the idea of "the classic text" in order to do so. T S Eliot[37] early looked at "greatness, classical style, maturity"; Kermode, later his editor, wrote a whole book: The Classic[38] in response to Eliot's classicist, restrictive criteria; Tracy picked up the idea in The Analogical Imagination[39] and Plurality and Ambiguity;[40] Jeanrond examined Tracy's ideas in Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking[41] and in Theological Hermeneutics,[42] where he also looks at Dilthey's[43] thinking on the subject.[44]

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36 see M Bockmuehl : : 'To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 pp 295 – 297
see below for a discussion on classic texts and their layers of meaning and history.

37 T S Eliot: "What is a classic?" in Selected Prose of T S Eliot ed Frank Kermode (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1975) pp 115-132

38 Frank Kermode: The Classic (Viking 1975)

39 David Tracy: The Analogical Imagination (SCM Press 1981) see especially chapter 3: "The Classic" and chapter 4 "Interpreting the Religious Classic"

All the definitions of a classic are, in their own ways, about the layers – of meaning, of history – which classics have. There can be little doubt that the Bible would more than adequately satisfy these or other criteria for a classic. One obviously suggestive point is what we know about the Bible's production; its history of redaction and reflection and further editing – from the first oral traditions to the formation of the canon. Second, each of the books, even the simplest, has now a considerable history of interpretation and use – which are part of the layers of meaning which adhere to them. This is part of what entitles the Bible to the title "classic". (Jeanrond, incidentally, makes the point that there are other classics in the Christian tradition: creeds, confessions, doctrines, liturgies, prayers, songs etc.[45])

Vanhoozer and others would see the Bible as qualitatively different from other classics, and so his act of faith towards the text of the Bible would be qualitatively different too. If our fourth requirement is then that respect and attention be paid to the text in all its layered complexity, the quality of that respect and attention will be significant.

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40 David Tracy: Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM Press 1987) Tracey gives several examples of definitions of a classic: "On historical grounds, classics are simply those texts that have helped form or found a particular culture. On more explicitly hermeneutical grounds, classics are those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation. In their production, there is also the following paradox: though highly particular in origin and expression, classics have the possibility of being universal in their effect. Moreover, in their continuing reception, which is what ultimately counts in any hermeneutical theory, another paradox is evident. Their ability as classics can be culturally dependant upon the instability of the particular culture's shifting canon of classics. For in any particular period some classics will disappear from the canon, while others, once forgotten or even repressed, will reappear……" p 12
"There is, in fact, no classic text that has not occasioned …. a puzzling history of reception… Every classic bears with it the history of its own conflictual history of reception…. Every classic bears its own permanence and excess of meaning. But its permanence can quickly become excess. And that excess can sometimes yield to a radical instability of different receptions that defy any definitive interpretation." p 14
"My thesis is that what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols, and persons "classics" is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth." p 108
"The classics are public in our second sense: grounded in some realized experience of a claim to attention, unfolding as cognitively disclosive of both meaning and truth and ethically transformative of personal, social and historical life." p 132

41 Werner Jeanrond: Text and Interpretation as categories of theological thinking (Gill and Macmillan 1988) pp 133 ff

42 Werner Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance (Macmillan 1991) p 175

43 Dilthey: The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life Expressions printed in ed Kurt Mueller-Vollmer The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present (Blackwell 1986) p 154 quoted by Werner Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance (Macmillan 1991) p 55

44 Incidentally and interestingly, the Literary Critical works coming from the secular stable show a little less interest in the idea of a classic. Cf my comments on the divide between the secular and Biblical critical worlds.

45 Werner Jeanrond Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 175 He also picks up Tracy's point about classics resisting definitive interpretation: "As Mark's Gospel emphasises, the apostolic tradition itself is full of inauthentic acts of discipleship. The self-critical dimension of Markan and other New Testament texts has added to their 'classic' character. They ultimately resist efforts of automatisation, domestication and manipulation by their readers." p 177

A third aspect of the survey in Chapter 2 was of the distance between text and author and reader. Respecting this distance will allow the text to be other, rather than too quickly domesticating and accommodating it: perhaps conflict with it should not be avoided.

Finally, we may note deconstructionism has focussed on the aporia – the inconsistencies and internal gaps of a text – showing how texts and their interpretations (which are also texts) undo themselves and fall apart. From a theological point of view this should be seen as a positive aspect of the Bible: it is particularly through such gaps that we see the Bible pointing away from itself and towards God.

3.4 Orthdoxy and pluralism

As we saw in the discussion on orthodoxy and pluralism, consideration of doctrinal issues by hermeneuts is naturally restricted by the disciplinary span between them: it is clear that there are some significant – perhaps irresolvable – debates about the nature of pluralism. It can also be argued that too often in the past doctrinal debate has been as much about excluding certain people (sometimes violently) as about excluding false doctrine.

Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's ideas that philosophy should be descriptive not prescriptive[46] are suggestive here: the fifth requirement is that a practical hermeneutic should be descriptive and analytic, at least to begin with.[47] I touched on this point in the Introduction, where I suggested that the taking of a strong position could potentially exclude the sympathetic reading of writing taking a different position. It may be objected that this is simply an acceptance of a pluralist view. The

46 see Thiselton: The Two Horizons (Paternoster Press 1980) p 36 quoting Sefler: Language and the World (Humanities Press, N J, 1974) p 200

47 cf Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 24 where he writes critically: "Contemporary literary criticism increasingly tends not simply to describe the reader's response but to prescribe it."

response must be that it would be unwise, *a priori*, to exclude – even, to refuse to engage with – other points of view: Muddiman makes a similar point:

> "For the sake of intellectual tidiness, philosophical theologians have, in the course of history, made several attempts to weave the threads of the Bible into systems […] but the best of them have always admitted, what their followers have forgotten, that the truth is larger than our capacity to perceive it at any particular moment. A theory, however brilliant, is no substitute for the reality it seeks to understand. And some theories by their very brilliance induce the sort of trance that anaesthetises us against reality. By contrast the Bible is more true to life. It presents us with truth incarnate….." [48]

3.5 Ethics

I mentioned, above, Vanhoozer's assertion[49] that there needs to be an act of faith towards the text. He goes further as we have seen, arguing that we (and our language) are constituted, by God, to mean and communicate things to each other. More specifically, this requires hospitality towards the text[50] and an attitude of trust. This hermeneutic of trust[51] is to be contrasted with the hermeneutic of suspicion advocated by "deconstructors who deny the very existence of determinate meaning." This hermeneutic of trust has resonances with the image, offered by Irenaeus,[52] of the Bible as a friend to be trusted, rather than a source to be tortured. Vanhoozer refers to Reid's principle of credulity[53] and perhaps he could have gone further: it is at least arguable that an initial reaction of trust is a more Christian attitude than one of distrust.

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48 John Muddiman: The Bible - Fountain and Well of Truth (Blackwells 1983) p 89

49 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 282, 283

50 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 397

51 Vanhoozer Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 291 – where he also quotes C A J Coady's view that testimony is as reliable a source of knowledge as memory and perception.
see also Steiner : After Babel (OUP 1998) where his first stage of the hermeneutic motion is trust towards the text.

52 quoted by John Barton: What is the Bible? (Triangle / SPCK London 1991) p 39 : see below in Chapter 4, Section 4.1

53 Vanhoozer Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 291 Reid: Thomas Reid's Enquiry and Essays ed R Beanblossom and K Lehrer (Hackett, Indianapolis 1983) p 281

On the other hand the hermeneutic of suspicion cannot be dismissed, as the survey in Chapter 2 showed.[54] The Bible and Christianity have both been instruments of oppression and subjugation.[55] Hard questions do need to be asked about prejudices and presuppositions, about power and performance, about commitments and allegiances.[56] This then is our sixth requirement – an attitude which is both trustful and suspicious.

Although this attitude has been depicted as primarily directed towards the text and its interpretations, it is highly important that it be directed towards oneself too. Self-criticism should not be just a solitaire version of theological ping-pong[57] where half-arguments are set up to be easily defeated, but a deeply serious attempt to analyse oneself and where one stands: theology is an autobiographical exercise. We have touched on this already when looking at author and reader, where I argued that presuppositions are necessary, but value-laden. Avis writes:

> "To what should the disagreements over the proper method for theology be attributed? The answer to this question will not be found merely by comparing the various methodologies at face value, but only by making – if it were possible – a deep social and psychological analysis of the whole experience of the theologian by means of sophisticated historical and biographical techniques that lie well beyond the scope of this book."[58]

We need then, each of us, to expose our own background, our own path, our own foundational ideas and values.[59] It should not be thought that this exposition is an attempt to remove our own 'bias', which would be impossible. It is partly an attempt to allow others to see that bias so that they are less

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54 Chapter 2, Section 2.1.5

55 see eg Rowland: Radical Christianity (Polity Press 1988) where its oppressive role may be inferred from its liberating one; see also eg ed Devasahayam : Frontiers of Dalit Theology (ISPCK 1997) for examples of Brahminical Christianity's (at the least) collusion with the oppression of Dalits. See also Chapter 7 on Cone, and its references, for examples of American Christianity's racism. Edward Said, following Michel Foucault, also makes the point that the uses of texts are bound up with 'ownership, authority power and the imposition of force'. E Said: The World, the Text, and the Critic; (Harvard University Press, 1983) quoted in Selden: A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York 1989) p102

56 Jonathan Magonet puts it well: "....when you read a newspaper, first you read what is written there. Then you say to yourself, "If that is what they have written, what really happened? And if that is what really happened, what are they trying to make us think? And if that is what they are trying to make us think, what should we be thinking instead?" You learn to read between the lines, and behind the lines. You learn to read a newspaper as if your life depended upon understanding it - because it does!" J Magonet: A Rabbi's Bible; (SCM, 1991), p 25

57 Basil Mitchell gave a seminar in Lincoln Theological College in the autumn of 1981 on Theological ping-pong – a game played by Theologians.

58 Paul Avis: The Methods of Modern Theology (Marshall Pickering 1986) p 222

59 See Appendix 1, for my own personal statement.

likely to be misled;[60] it is, more importantly, an exercise in locating ourselves, and therefore in admitting to ourselves that we have a location. It should be done in a spirit of caution, recognising, as McFadyen puts it, that "a person is never fully transparent to him or herself."[61] He suggests that openness, authenticity and rationality are the only ways of resisting communications guided by hidden interests.

In the discussion on ethics in Chapter 2,[62] we looked at two directions in which there are ethical responsibilities. The first direction is towards the text, the second is an ethical responsibility outwards, and this brings us back to the point made above[63] about the Bible as an instrument of oppression. Neither Christian individuals nor Christian communities may see themselves as insulated from the world[64]– in which we live and our actions are set – and our actions and in-actions have an impact on others: ethical responsibility must consider them.[65] For readers considered individually this ethical responsibility will be towards the communities of the Bible (Christian and Jewish), and towards the wider world. For communities – and some readings of the Bible are communal – the self-directed spirit of cautious trustfulness and suspicion must examine the community; it will also have an outward-directed responsibility.

For Christians, ethical responsibility has traditionally been seen as under the judgement of God. We shall not have a Christian hermeneutic without considering our responsibility towards God. This set of ethical responsibilities will be our seventh requirement.

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60 "Commitment is not a mask to be donned or taken off at will, and readers are less likely to be misled if they know that no historian can claim to speak *ex cathedra*." Prof. Eric Ives writing in: ed Hugh Montefiore: The Gospel and Contemporary Culture (Mowbray 1992) p 18

61 McFadyen: A Call to Personhood (Cambridge University Press 1990) p 164

62 Section 2.1.5

63 67

64 I use this word without wanting to make assumptions about the relationship between the Church and the world, but simply meaning that there is a world beyond the Church.

65 see Watson in ed Watson: The Open Text (SCM 1993) p 80, where he argues that interpretations must be ethically defensible

3.6 The competent reader

Gadamer[66] and Tracy,[67] as we saw in Chapter 2,[68] argued that meaning is, or should be, accessible to a naturally competent reader. The technical discussions of philosophical hermeneutics do not necessarily bar this: after all, everyone manages to breathe without necessarily understanding the biochemistry behind it. On the other hand, the fact that Tracy needs to argue in this way does support the contention that technical hermeneutics has been too complex. A more accessible approach is needed. This is our eighth requirement and a possible solution is the use of metaphors and images, which is explored in Chapter 4.

But if we accept the idea of accessibility there will, correspondingly, need to be a willingness for each to learn, and to improve their interpretative skills. McFadyen's thinking on communicative competence[69] and his tests of the truth and rightness of political commitment ("improving the quality of communication or increasing the quantity of those freely admitted as subjects to the socio-political process" [70]) will be useful guides here.

Gadamer also rejects the idea of method as part of a hermeneutic;[71] on the other hand, Avis argues for the importance of its study. He views the gap between theologies based on theory and those

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66 Gadamer : Truth and Method trans Glen-Doepel ed Cumming and Barden : (Sheed and Ward 1979) pp 5-10 see also Jeanrond : Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 9

67 Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) pp 102 ff

68 Chapter 2 Section 2.1.6

69 McFadyen: A Call to Personhood (Cambridge University Press 1990) pp 175, 176

70 McFadyen: A Call to Personhood (Cambridge University Press 1990) p 204

71 see eg the discussion of Gadamer's position in Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 9
see above in Chapter 2 section 2.1.6

based on praxis as a serious challenge, but argues that theologies need both theory and praxis, and that Christianity contains the resources to resist ideology.[72] We could perhaps expect that an adequate practical hermeneutic was open to a possible discussion of method. This might include consideration of the hermeneutic strategies employed by interpreters, and their implicit and explicit use of the Bible – and also their omissions, as well as what they include.[73]

3.7 Post-modernism

Post-modernism's incredulity towards meta-narratives should at least make us cautious of grand theories. Vanhoozer does argue, in effect, that the rejection of meta-narratives undoes theology, and that the Christian response must be the theological one of re-instating God.[74] Nevertheless, we might take to heart the danger of what could be called the imperialist tendencies of grand theories – to explain too much, in too much detail, claiming too much for themselves. A humbler, more cautious approach may be needed.

But if Christianity – and therefore its hermeneutics – needs to be able to respond to post-modernism, it also ought to interact with other departments of knowledge.[75] Scientific positivism is at least a great a challenge – and a good deal more public. To meet this challenge the theologian must preface his work, Macquarrie writes, with "as careful an exposition as he can give of the experiences, concepts and modes of discourse on which his theology is based" in the hope that the theological interpretation of the world "may be regarded as a legitimate approach to the world alongside the scientific one."[76] In other words, both scientific positivism and theological interpretations of the

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72 Paul Avis: The Methods of Modern Theology (Marshall Pickering 1986) p 224 see also p 210, where Avis expresses concerns about the 'data' of modern theology.

73 see Magonet, quoted in footnote Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found 67 see also Avis quoted 67 referenced at footnote Error: Reference source not found

74 see above in Chapter 2, Section 2.1.1 and Section 2.6

75 see eg ed Montefiore: The Gospel and Contemporary Culture (Mowbray 1992) passim, where it is argued that modern intellectual discourse marginalises theology by eradicating its categories, but that in fact theology and its categories stand up well intellectually.

76 John Macquarrie: Principles of Christian Theology (SCM revised edition 1977) pp 30 ff

world are based on axiom-like presuppositions; axiomatic, in the sense that ultimate justification or defence of them could not be attempted (this could only happen by arguing from some prior, perhaps unarticulated, positions, which of course would then be replacement “axioms”).[77] The point about “axioms” is that they are basic, and not that they represent ‘truth’, nor that they correspond to some external reality, nor even that they are all self-evident (indeed there is a sense in which an interesting choice of axioms will include that which is not self-evident): the axiomatic method is not an attempt to slip in 'under-cover' some statements which others ought to accept without consideration. It is an exercise in the laying of foundations; what is laid on these foundations will consist of the many ideas and arguments which are advanced and defended in the course of a particular work. The foundations themselves are logically outside the constructive task of the work; however, some justification, discussion and elaboration of them and their choice (as against other possible choices) might be a worthwhile exercise. To continue the image, discussion about foundations might take the following forms: the foundations are insufficiently strong to take the weight of the building; the building is not in fact resting on the foundations; I personally would not put up my building here (note that this last is a matter of personal opinion). It would not be valid to say that the foundations ought to be in the roof, nor that a building does not need foundations.

3.7 The Requirements summarised[78]

First requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should provide a location for thinking about the Bible – and this should be primarily Christian (or Jewish), but open to thinking beyond itself.
Second requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should allow for the Bible to challenge, and provoke change in, its readers. This should include the possibility of God speaking, acting, judging, through the Bible.

77 There are perhaps parallels here with the problems of logocentrism. Derrida, in his theories of deconstruction, has looked at the idea of the ‘centre’ of meaning, which cannot be replaced through structural analysis because that would end in finding another centre within the centre. Derrida has argued for a decentring, which relativises all centres. By using an axiomatic approach, it may be that we face this problem. See Selden: A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (Second Edition, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989) p 87f

78 Others suggest requirements – eg Kelsey : The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Fortress 1975) p 174

Third requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should take account of both those elements of a text's sense which are fixed, and those elements which, in its reception, change. This implies a personal dimension, and includes a consideration of the role of the self in interpretation.

Fourth requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should pay respect and attention to the text in all its layered complexity, including the history of its reception.

Fifth requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should be analytic and descriptive.

Sixth requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should include both trust and suspicion – directed both towards the text and its interpretations, and also towards the interpreters themselves.

Seventh requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should be ethically responsible towards the different communities of the Bible, and towards the world, and towards God.

Eighth requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should be accessible to all; it should be able to look at theological method and hermeneutic strategies, at both implicit and explicit use of the Bible, and at what is omitted.

Ninth requirement: an adequate practical hermeneutic should not claim too much for itself; but it should be able to offer some answers to the challenges of postmodernism and scientific positivism.

Having outlined the requirements which an adequate practical hermeneutic should fulfil, I am almost in a position to suggest such a hermeneutic. However, I turn first to a more detailed examination of metaphors and images used by theologians as a method of dealing with the Bible. Metaphors have the advantage of being accessible, and so of fulfilling part of our eighth set of requirements.