WHAT IS THE WORD OF GOD?

UNDERSTANDING DIVINE COMMUNICATION THROUGH A RELEVANCE-

THEORETIC MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

BY

CHRISTIAN WILLICK

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. KENNETH A. CHERNEY, JR., ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 17, 2023

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

What is the word of God? The question is a provocative one, no doubt. Or perhaps it is one which a person may be tempted to shrug off for being so patently obvious. To be sure, a fruitful answer to this question is accessible to all those with Spirit-given faith. But an answer that comes even close to grasping its depths—that is accessible to no human being. Should that give us cause for concern? This paper seeks to explore as deeply as possible what the word of God is by exploring what a "word," "communication," and "meaning" are. To that end, it evaluates the concept of the Bible as *divine communication given through human means* in line with the ever-advancing field of *human models of communication*. The conclusion will serve to say as much as can be said about our understanding of what the word of God is, and to offer the comfort we have that the level to which we can understand the word of God, however limited, is enough.

INTRODUCTION

Words have a peculiar power to impact us in our thoughts and actions in a way that nothing else can. One instance in my life showed me that quite powerfully. I had just gotten back home from one of the most life-changing trips spent with a friend and his family. It grew me not only in my experiences but also spiritually, emotionally, interpersonally—and now that I was gone, I was struggling at home with the aftershock of withdrawal. How should I go on? Where should I go from here? I missed my friend, and a big part of me wondered if I had even been a good enough friend to him. Then I saw a little stone angel figurine above the fireplace. Inscribed on it was a message that spoke to the deepest parts of me and gave me the words I needed: "A friend loves at all times." That was the answer, and my fears and doubts were washed away.

When I told my dad of this experience, he was supportive. Quite naturally enough, though, he also encouraged me to look for comfort in the words of Scripture rather than in whatever random trinket came across my path. It was good advice and has stuck with me ever since. But it wasn't until years later that I realized: "A friend loves at all times" is Prov 17:17. The power I had felt but was unaware of at that time came not just from a human sentiment sold on a cheap trinket but from the direct words of Scripture. And even though these words were not directly addressed to me, even though I was quite separated in time and place from their origin in Proverbs, still they spoke with relevance to my particular context, and there was power in that.

What is the word of God? I must admit, these words that form the first line of my thesis title reflect quite an extensive journey of thought in getting this study to its current form. This

question could be answered in a number of beautifully simple ways accessible to every believer, from a seventh-grade catechism student to an elderly bed-ridden Christian with dementia. The word of God is the Bible which we read. The word of God is the Scripture which we hear read and have preached to us and ponder in our hearts. The word of God is that which is clothed in water and given under bread and wine. The word of God is the Word made flesh, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ (John 1:14 NIV).

Then come the definitions which take a deeper knowledge of systematic theology to articulate. The word of God is anything which convicts us of our sins (in its alien use) and anything which assures us of the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus's sake (in its proper use). At its most fundamental, the word of God contains power (Rom 1:16). It is that which has created all things (Gen 1:3) and still sustains all things (Heb 1:3), without which nothing exists (John 1:3). And what is even greater and profounder still—the word of God is God's communication to us in ways accessible to us.

This final aspect is the focus of this paper and gives rise to a number of questions: Is it really possible for a human being to access divine meaning? If so (or to the extent that it is so), what are valid ways of doing so? Thus our research question is: What implications does the notion of divine communication through human communication have for our biblical hermeneutic? Our goal will be to analyze as much as can be said about the word of God as divine communication given through human means and to arrive at this firm conviction: The level to which we can understand the word of God is the level to which God himself has enabled us and, however limited, is enough.

We will start with a discussion on definitions for various keywords that are a part of communication scholarship. These definitions will show us the importance of the study of

hermeneutics, at which point we will explore what both the Bible and secular theories have to contribute toward a proper biblical hermeneutic. Then we will gradually move from broad to narrow, from the overarching field of hermeneutics to the more specific field of communication models (a code model versus more inferential models) and finally to the relevance theory of communication in particular. After our deep dive into relevance theory, we will draw applications to our original discussion of biblical meaning and then conclude what can be said about our understanding of the word of God as communication.

Finally, before we begin, indulge me for one more moment as I explain my rationale for this thesis. What follows is a relating of my personal apprehension of the truths I've known previously and the truths I've learned from this study, in the hope that it might be of benefit to others with similar searching minds at similar junctures in their life. "What is the word of God?" is the most fundamental question for a study of everything else scriptural, the most important thing worth studying, and hence for me the answer to this question will be the foundation for anything else to be worthy of study as well.

DEFINITIONS

"Word" and "Communication"

When seeking to answer the question "What is the word of God?" it is important first to answer the question "What is a word?" When speaking of a "word" in the context of communication, such as this paper does, we will not refer to it as broadly as in the introduction, where the "word" of God could encompass something as large as an entire book or something as abstract as power. At its simplest, a word is a *vehicle for communication*. It is comprised of letters or characters when

written for the eye, sounds and syllables when spoken for the ear, or visual or tactile symbols when signed for the eye or hand. All of these fall under the category of communication with words.

This, then, naturally leads to the question: "What is communication?" While the definition we use for a "word" is confined to the context of communication, this does not mean that all communication *must* use words. Rather, we will say that communication, at its simplest, is the *sharing of meaning*. This certainly happens often with words, whether they are written, spoken, or signed. However, it very often happens without words too, such as when a knowing look is shared or when something left unsaid is still implied and understood because of the sender and receiver's shared context. This definition of communication will require of us also the difficult but rewarding task of defining what we mean by "meaning."

"Meaning"

If meaning is that which is shared in communication, then what exactly is meaning? With particular application to biblical communication (i.e., the word of God as Scripture), author Jeannine Brown says that "meaning is textually inscribed and is conveyed within shared language conventions and mutually held contextual assumptions."[1] In other words, meaning is that which is carried by a linguistic expression (i.e., a word, a string of words forming a sentence or larger unit, or some other shared language convention, whether expressed explicitly or implicitly) and by relevant contextual information in order to convey to a recipient some communicative intention. This means "meaning" exhibits certain characteristics. According to Brown, some of these

---

1. Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 70.

characteristics are that meaning is author-derived, complex yet determinate,[2] attended with ambiguity, and imperfectly accessed by readers, yet still able to be accessed.[3] We will treat each of these characteristics in turn.

"Author-Derived"

Meaning within communication cannot belong purely to a public sphere in which one word is permitted to mean any possible thing. If this were the assumption of meaning, then effective communication would not be possible at all. Rather, meaning of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and whole writings is wrapped up in a finite *domain* belonging to the sender. "Domain" encompasses all the relevant contextual information attendant to an individual word or words in the sender's mind. For example, the domain of the word "cat" for the average American would likely include, most centrally, a four-footed feline house pet, and less centrally any number of larger animals in a zoo or in the wild, but it would likely not include something like a grilled cheese sandwich. Thus, successful communication happens when the receiver apprehends that domain, or at least a sufficient amount of it, and interprets the sender's meaning accordingly. Successful senders and receivers will operate within that shared domain, where the sharing of meaning (i.e., communication) can actually happen.

---

2. "To say that verbal meaning is determinate is not to exclude complexities of meaning but only to insist that a text's meaning is what it is and not a hundred other things." E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 230.

3. More on this final characteristic will be shared in the last two sections of this paper.

"Complex yet Determinate"

It will be noted that this is not a guarantee that only one *aspect* of meaning will be communicated from the sender to the receiver. A domain allows for more than one possible aspect of meaning, not just a one-to-one correspondence, and it falls on the receiver to interpret a proper aspect of meaning from that. This also does not mean every interpretation will be valid, though. This is what it means that meaning is complex yet determinate.

"Ambiguity"

Ambiguity, the next characteristic of meaning, is inherent in meaning both because meaning operates within a domain and because even words (the most explicit vehicles used to share meaning) can carry more than one meaning. Ambiguity, therefore, can be intentional or unintentional on the author's part, or it can arise because of the gap between author and reader.[4]

Take, for example, a practical illustration of intentional ambiguity on my part from a few years back. When my girlfriend-at-the-time Raquel Freese and I broke up in July 2019, after having dated and then broken up a number of times before then, I told people afterward that this was the last time we were breaking up.[5] The first interpretation people derived from this was that I believed that Raquel and I, after dating and breaking up more than once at this point, were now broken up for good. I allowed that as a possible meaning. But I also intentionally allowed for a second interpretation, which some people picked up on. The second interpretation was not that I believed Raquel and I would never get back together, but that I believed if we did then our intention would

---

4. Intentional or unintentional ambiguity in biblical communication may be what is behind prophecies which have multiple fulfillments, NT interpretations which expand on OT quotes, or puns, double entendres, and metaphors in the biblical text.

5. I had told her of my doing this after the fact too, and so I am using this example with her kind approval.

be to see our relationship through to marriage, still making July 2019 "the last time we were breaking up." This second interpretation is the one that proved true, as Raquel is now my fiancée, and the two of us are engaged to be married on June 8, 2023. The words of my utterance all those years ago allowed for either interpretation, and so both interpretations, though contradictory, fit within my overall domain of meaning. This too highlights the complexity, and yet also the determinacy, of meaning.

Intentional ambiguity is also something that can be taken advantage of in communication without the receiver needing to be aware of it. In one conversation with my grandma, I said to her, "Oh yeah, I remember you have that property in Oconomowoc." I had one particular house in mind which I was sure she owned, but I could not remember if there was more than one. So I utilized a word that could be either singular or plural ("property") to make my meaning ambiguous, and therefore to be correct whether she had one property or more property(ies).

Finally, permit one more example to illustrate unintentional ambiguity as well. A student pastor got up to make opening announcements in church one Sunday. He had what he wanted to say in mind, but in the heat of the moment he started to say a phrase incorrectly. He paused ever so slightly, gave the correct word without further comment, and carried on so that what he said sounded like this: "Good morning and welcome to St. John's for worship. Today the whole Christian church gathers to—for the Third Sunday in Advent." He had meant to say "for the Third Sunday" from the beginning, so by adding the word "to" he considered this an error.[6] However, it occurred to him that the way he said this, the congregation members would not have perceived it as an error but would have heard: "Good morning and welcome to St. John's for worship. Today the whole Christian church gathers too, for the Third Sunday in Advent." The word "too" was not

---

6. How do I have such intimate knowledge of exactly what this student pastor was thinking? Let's just say I know him very well.

a part of his intended communication, yet by falling in line with the domain of his communicative intent (meaning), this then would be an acceptable interpretation of the phrase he uttered.[7]

These characteristics of meaning leave us with a less than definite definition. Since meaning encompasses a domain and there are a number of potentially valid (and invalid) interpretations, there needs to be a second-order task (a "thinking about thinking," or a "communicating about communicating") to establish principles for distinguishing the valid interpretation from the invalid. This second-order task is hermeneutics.

THE NEED FOR A PROPER BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

"Engaging in and interpreting communication is at the heart of what we are doing when we read the Bible."[8]

A common myth is that a good, literal translation should not be an interpretation. Rather, one should translate faithfully to the original so as to remove any of the "fuzziness" of interpretation. What this mindset fails to take into account, though, is that all translation is interpretation, because "all reading is interpreting."[9] Interpreting is done on the receiver's end always. One can't just "read." "The idea that it is possible to achieve a pure reading of the text is one which must be shown up for the self-deception that it is."[10] And that is because, fundamentally,

---

7. There is also the possibility that such an interpretation would not be valid if it fell outside of the domain of authorial intent. However, in this case I feel confident saying this was within the domain of authorial intent, even though the ambiguity was unintentional.

8. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 3.

9. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 11.

10. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 167.

all communication involves interpretation. Words are signs that point to a referent and are not the referent themselves. This means it will necessarily fall on the receiver to connect the sign to the referent, which is the very definition of "interpreting."

This is why we need hermeneutics. The Greek word from which "hermeneutics" is derived literally means "to translate" or "to interpret." Hence hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. It is a second-order task which instructs us on how to read the Bible and gives us a proper framework to produce a fuller treatment of the definitions mentioned above. It is a necessary means, especially when considering ancient texts far removed from our culture and language, to promote effective communication.

Hermeneutics from the Bible Itself

Where does a study of biblical hermeneutics start? In addition to and even before considering theories about hermeneutics, a biblical hermeneutic starts, by faith, from the Bible itself. Scripture testifies about itself that all of it "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). It is divinely inspired. What this means is that "prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). Additionally, Scripture says that it contains the very power of God independent of anything else (Rom 1:16). Thus we maintain that Scripture's author and interpreter is the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit interprets Scripture through other Scripture.

One may note now that it is essentially circular, not only to "think about thinking" in hermeneutics (i.e., we always bring with us our own presuppositions[11] about thinking just by how

---

11. "In the never-ending work of interpretation, we cannot jump out of our skins. We bring with us always and everywhere our selves—that is, our presuppositions and histories, our stories." Joel B. Green, "The (Re-) Turn to

we think), but also to use what Scripture says as a framework to understand what Scripture says (i.e., to let Scripture interpret Scripture). This is not a bad thing; in fact, it is unavoidable. It launches us ultimately into the realm of faith, where reason and sight cannot prove anything to us about God, but the child-like faith and trust he has worked in us assure us he has given us all we need for salvation (2 Tim 3:15; 2 Pet 1:3) and he will not mislead us (Num 23:19).

This circular process, though, leaves us with certain important considerations. For one, this means that the work of interpretation will at no point in time ever be definitively concluded. Instead, "the hermeneutic principle from which Luther starts, with its antithesis between the letter and the Spirit, also leads him to the realization that the understanding of the scripture is not something that can be preserved and passed on. As existential life continues, so the understanding of the scripture is a continuous task which can never be brought to a conclusion."[12]

Luther's hermeneutic reflects an extension of the hermeneutical spiral, in which ongoing study circles back and forth between numerous aspects of the biblical text. One "spiral" is judging our interpretation of an individual passage in line with the overall theme of the book it occurs in, which is itself supplied by the individual passages that make up the book, and back and forth between parts and whole continually. Another "spiral" is the engagement between careful study of the context and careful study of the text. "In practice, this engagement between careful study of the text and assessment of historical context is ongoing—a back-and-forth movement or conversation. In this way, these areas for analysis are not so much steps to walk through as they are points of recurring engagement in the interpretive process."[13]

Narrative," in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation*, ed. Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.

12. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 99.

13. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 40, n. 71.

Perhaps a part of the concern not to let a translation become too interpretational is grounded in a fear of overemphasizing the role of the reader, to the degree that the reader in effect supplants the author. However, the circular nature of hermeneutics should instill in us just as great a fear of making the reader a master over the *text*. The reader can never be perfectly objective in his reading or translating, especially since, as we noted above, not even the simplest forms of communication are a one-to-one correspondence. Translations cannot do everything; the teaching ministry is essential to provide readers with the contextual information they need that is not contained in the linguistic expressions themselves. Therefore, "an inferential model of communication should lead to a realistic view of what can and cannot be accomplished by a Bible translation alone and to an appreciation of the critical role of the teaching ministry of the church—not just for spiritual formation, but if religious communicators are to speak with any hope of being understood."[14]

Theories Pertaining to Hermeneutics

We have established a reliance on what Scripture says of itself to be of primary importance in our consideration of biblical hermeneutics. Since, however, Scripture is God's word to us through *human* communication, we also do well to take into account various human theories on hermeneutics and the nature of communication.

Literary Theory

Since the Scriptures have been handed down to us as a body of literature, literary theory has contributed a great deal to this topic. In particular, one literary theory on communication advances

---

14. Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., "To Equivalence and Beyond: Reflections on the Significance of Eugene A. Nida for Bible Translating," in *Heritage and Hope: Essays in Honor of the 150th Anniversary of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*, ed. Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr. (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013), 288.

the need to allow for *implications*, defined as "that which is not explicit in communication."[15] If explicit statements lie in the more central and apparent areas of meaning's domain, implications lie at the edge of meaning's domain, and it is in these "blurred edge" areas that the hardest interpretive questions arise. Similar to our discussion of ambiguity in meaning above, this notion of implications in literary theory says not just that communication may include implicit information *intended* by the author, but also that it may include *unintended* implicit information which the author communicates without even being consciously aware of it at the moment of writing, and yet which falls under the pattern of authorial intention (i.e., intended meaning). Intention should not be limited to what is directly on an author's mind at exactly that moment.

This applies also to the Scriptures as they have human authors working behind them. Taken a step further in that Scripture is also divine communication, though, even the prophets themselves searched their writings to understand what the Spirit of God was saying through them (1 Pet 1:10–11). The full meaning of their words was not always apparent to them as they wrote. So there were implications in their writings of which the human authors must not always have been aware. Yet we would not say that there were implications of which the divine Author was unaware. And even so, God was pleased to work through these means: through linguistic expressions (*words*) with authorial intent (*meaning*) and relevant contextual information (*domain*). It is our moral obligation, then, to study these as faithfully as possible, since "we must firmly maintain that God desires to do nothing with us men except through his outward word and sacrament."[16] Yet it also remains our great comfort that God will accomplish all he purposes through his words (Isa 55:11), and that that will be for the eternal good of us his people (Rom 8:28).

---

15. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 91.

16. Ebeling, *Luther*, 109.

Literary theory also deals with the concepts of author and audience in literary forms of communication. When approaching the Scriptures, it is clear that we are not the original audience of these works written thousands of years ago. And yet we can say that the relevant meaning of the Bible is still accessible to us. The reason for this is that, according to Jeannine Brown, successful communication of a text does *not* depend on identifying an empirical author or an empirical audience only (i.e., knowing the historical author's identity or specific details about him or her). [17] The historical author's meaning has been inscribed into the text, encompassing everything he finds it necessary to communicate. This Brown calls the implied author in the text. Thus it is important to identify the implied author (the kind of author the text itself would lead us to construct, as opposed to the author as we know him from external information) and his implied reader (the kind of reader the text itself would lead us to construct, as opposed to readers as we know them from external information). When the reader interprets in a way that is in harmony with the author's implied reader, successful communication occurs. This makes the gathering of meaning accessible to anyone, given the necessary shared contextual information, whenever words are recorded such as in the Bible.

Narrative Theology

Another theory which contributes to the discussion of biblical hermeneutics is that of narrative theology. It is evident that the Bible does not present doctrines and teachings isolated from history. Rather, the history and the stories that the Bible sets up are themselves the framework from which the Bible actually teaches and from which we as receivers derive doctrine and teaching. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the story of salvation. The Bible is the great story of the Creator God

---

17. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 29–31.

who became our Savior and still calls us to restoration with him. It depicts the whole of human history from paradise lost to paradise regained.

Here is the particularly relevant contribution of narrative theology to biblical hermeneutics: "A significant stream of narrative theology affirms the normativity of the biblical story because the Bible itself claims a prioritized stance in relation to other ways of explaining God and human existence."[18] However, while on the one hand we accept the Bible's claim to its own normativity, on the other hand this does not mean that we can accept just any particular interpretation as normative. What we have learned of communication teaches us that there will be one line of interpretation between author, text and reader—not multiple lines—that properly reflects the Bible's normative meaning. This is where a proper biblical hermeneutic is essential, and must be explained by a proper understanding of the Bible as communication.

THE NEED FOR A PROPER MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

The Code Model

In communication theory, various models have been proposed to express what happens in communication. One such model is the code model, or conduit metaphor. Within this framework, ideas (or meanings) are objects, linguistic expressions (or words) are containers, and communication is sending. One analogy for this, proposed by Emily Branton, is that meaning is like soup, words are like Tupperware, and successful communication happens when all of the sender's soup (meaning) is contained within his Tupperware (words) and passed along to the

---

18. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 34.

receiver.[19] The problem with this framework is that "there is not a one-to-one correspondence between words and concepts."[20] In other words, it is impossible to allocate all of the soup into the Tupperware, as a domain of meaning is not that firmly bounded. "For relevance theorists, the function of linguistic meaning is not to encode the speaker's meaning but to provide evidence of it, and the idea that any thought (let alone all of them) can be fully encoded has been rejected from the outset.… There is no such thing as 'full explicitness.'"[21]

Another problem with this framework is that, in the code model, language is viewed as propositional and word–meaning packages as cargo between people. However, very often in the Bible, language is viewed as an action or a purpose; speech is an action begun but is not seen as successful until that action is carried out.[22] "In this way, interpersonal categories are truer to an understanding of the Bible as Scripture and more useful than models that primarily emphasize the text as code (with the author as encoder and reader as decoder)."[23] Additionally, "Gene Green notes that the code model downplays the role of the author in communication, since all that is needed to interpret is found in the text—that is, in the code. 'Thus the code model opens the door for the suppression of authors since texts can stand on their own and, truly, are orphaned from the moment they are given birth' ('Relevance Theory,' 220)."[24]

---

19. Emily Branton, "Full and Empty Words: Unpacking Cognitive Metaphors for Speech in Biblical Hebrew," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (Denver, CO, November 19, 2022), n.p.

20. David Bosworth, "To Mourn or to Dry? *'abal* in the Prophets," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (Denver, CO, November 19, 2022), n.p.

21. Deirdre Wilson, "Relevance Theory," in *Oxford Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Y. Huang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12–13.

22. Take, for example, such exhortations by Paul as "Be completely humble and patient, bearing with one another in love" (Eph 4:2), etc.

23. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 5.

24. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 5, n. 7.

Inferential Models of Communication

A British scholar named H. P. Grice, whether he knew it at the time or not, was a pioneer in taking steps away from the code model of communication. He formulated maxims which began a discussion on a more inferential model of communication. One maxim in particular, the "maxim of relevance" (essentially, "successful communication is that which is relevant to the context of the overall communicative act"), was expounded upon by Drs. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson to form the communication model in focus in this paper: relevance theory. Before discussing relevance theory, however, another inferential linguistic theory is worth mention.

Speech-Act Theory

Speech-act theory states that a communicative act involves these four components: a locution, an illocution, a perlocution, and a perlocutionary intention. The locution is the explicit statement made in communication; the illocution is the force of the statement (e.g., command, request, question); and the perlocutionary intention is the desire of the sender for a specific response from the receiver in line with his statement. These three could be said to make up the communicative act of the sender. The perlocution, then, is the actual response of the receiver to this statement (i.e., what the receiver actually does with this information).

To illustrate, consider this statement from Josiah Loersch to me. When Josiah said, "Go write your thesis," the words that made up his statement formed the locution, the force of the statement as a command was the illocution, his desire for me to leave and work on my thesis was the perlocutionary intent, and my going and writing my thesis was the perlocution. Since the

perlocution matched Josiah's perlocutionary intent, this would be termed a successful communicative act according to speech-act theory.[25]

Thus one of the main tenets of speech-act theory, which its four components of communication illustrate, is that a communicative act not only says something but also does something. It elicits a response. Therefore, two valid questions for biblical communication according to speech-act theory are "What does this text say to you?" and "What does this text do to you?"[26] This is in line even with what the Bible says of itself, that it is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). To use the words of speech-act theory, Scripture uses locutions in the form of illocutions to carry out a variety of perlocutionary intentions.

Ebeling takes this a step further: "Just as the word of God is fearful to those who fear, a fire to those who burn, and salve to the meek, and in general: whatever your disposition is, so the word of God is to you. For whatever someone is like, God, the scripture, the creation is like that to him."[27] I would be willing to grant that it *could* be all those things; but *will* it be? It is my opinion that relevance theory would say it *could* but not *will*, since only the most relevant meaning *will* be inferred, which we will see now as we turn briefly to introduce relevance theory.

Relevance Theory

Relevance theory, briefly stated, operates on these two principles: (1) Interpreting an utterance requires receivers to infer more than just the linguistic expression, i.e., the words; and (2) Receivers

---

25. I am indebted to Josiah Loersch and Seth Koelpin for this and other statements eliciting this perlocution from me, which provided this example as well as spurred on this thesis to a quicker completion.

26. This is done very effectively in a sermon by Mark Paustian at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chapel, livestreamed 28 June 2022, https://www.wisluthsem.org/wls-chapel/daily-chapel-june-28-2022/.

27. Ebeling, *Luther*, 195.

will infer only those things that have the most contextual effects for them, or in other words, those things that are most relevant or salient to them according to the context of the utterance. "Context" here is used in a different way than in its commonly understood sense. In relevance theory, context is everything participants regard as true (or probably true) and potentially in play as they are talking. Context can include what has been said previously in conversation or in the literary context, and it can include the cultural context (from specific to broad) attendant to that utterance. Relevance theory says that communication succeeds when a receiver constructs a mental representation that overlaps with the sender's sufficiently to advance the purpose for which the communication is taking place. For this to happen, the sender's and receiver's contexts need to be populated with at least some of the same information. In that sense, all communication involves a level of controlled inference, and it is only in this way (a linguistic expression plus a particular assumed context) that meaning is shared, i.e., that communication happens. In this way, relevance theory views communication as inferential and contextual information as essential.[28]

> Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice 1989: Essays 1-7, 14, 18; Retrospective Epilogue). In developing this claim, Grice laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model. According to the code model, a communicator encodes her intended message into a signal, which is decoded by the audience using an identical copy of the code. According to the inferential model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that verbal comprehension involves an element of decoding. However, the linguistic meaning recovered by decoding is just one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative inference process which yields an interpretation of the speaker's meaning.[29]

---

28. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 24.

29. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, "Relevance Theory," in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. L. R. Horn and G. Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 607.

Over and against a code model of communication, relevance theory relies on these three assumptions about communication:

> The first is that a sentence meaning is a vehicle for conveying a speaker's meaning, where a speaker's meaning is an overtly expressed intention that is fulfilled by being recognised. The second is that a speaker's meaning cannot be simply perceived or decoded, but has to be inferred from her behaviour, together with contextual information. The third is that in inferring a speaker's meaning, the hearer is guided by the expectation that communicative behaviour should meet certain standards.[30]

For relevance theory, this "certain standard" is the presumption of optimal relevance, which we will define in the main section on the relevance-theoretic model below.

Speech-Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and an Éclair

An implicit request I made to my classmate Karl DeMarce in the cafeteria earlier this year illustrates both speech-act and relevance theory. There Karl was, sitting at the table with an éclair on his plate for dessert. There I came, moving down along the table to sit across from him. My linguistic expression or locution (speech) to him was, "That's a big éclair, Judge." The relevant context included the fact that I did not have my own éclair, that I am widely known (though not wide myself) to enjoy dessert after lunch, and that I perceived Karl's éclair as big, perhaps big enough to share. (Karl did not rely on other less relevant contextual items like the fact that I had already had a lot to eat, because he inferred as more relevant that there is always room for dessert.) The inference Karl made was that I would like part of his éclair. The illocution (act) on my part was a request, and Karl supplied the intended perlocution by giving me half of his éclair.

---

30. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 1.

Successful communication happened because my meaning was shared and acted upon as intended.[31] This is speech-act and relevance theory at work.

This illustration and countless other experiences from life show that there is an art to communication. It is not just a one-to-one correspondence, where words are packed with a code that is deciphered in exactly the same way every time. In an entirely different context, my words could have asked for an entirely different response or conveyed an entirely different meaning. I could have just finished my own big éclair and, with a full belly and crumbs on my mouth, said sluggishly, "That's a big éclair, Judge."

Part of the art of communication, too, is that there is the potential for the message *not* to be deciphered correctly. Karl could have acknowledged the fact of his big éclair without grasping my subtle plea for part of it. And yet that contributes to the power[32] of communication, when the sender has enough trust and confidence in the receiver's ability to interpret favorably and respond accordingly, even when the intended meaning is not explicitly stated.

"Efficiency" and "Effective Communication"

Why not just make an explicit request? Why not just ask, "Karl, could I have half your éclair?" That would certainly remove more chance for misunderstanding. And yet I have become convinced that communication is more effective and more satisfying to both parties when *less* is said and yet the proper meaning is still successfully shared. This idea follows a basic human

---

31. I am indebted to Karl DeMarce, both for this unintended illustration and for that delicious half of his éclair.

32. This certainly illustrates the point made in the introduction that communication has power. How much more so, then, with divine communication (Isa 55:11; Rom 1:16).

principle of the desire for efficiency, but must be balanced so as not to violate an expectation of clarity.

When discussing what makes for effective communication, an instructive phrase is the old adage "brevity is the soul of wit." There is much truth in this and much support for this from the principle of the desire for efficiency. And yet a defining characteristic of effective communication seems not just to be "brevity" or "efficiency" (in the sense of the quickest way to say the most, or the quickest way to say something), since always saying something as briefly as possible may be seen as uncaring, ruthlessly efficient, or frustrating to the receiver, and since many longer modes of communication (e.g., narrative) prove to be especially effective and satisfying even though horribly inefficient by that standard.

Rather, I contend that this defining characteristic of effective communication ("efficiency," if we understand the term correctly) is measured in terms of the greatest *reward* for the amount of time, energy, or effort invested. That is the mark of effective humor: Something is shared not as briefly as possible, but as efficiently as possible in that sense. Something is shared between sender and receiver that each knows would not be possible without much shared context, and just that realization is the result of the sender's high esteem of the receiver and results in the receiver's high satisfaction with the sender.

Even more than brevity being the soul of wit, efficiency is the soul of effective communication. We will see a similar thought to this play out in our deep look into relevance theory next.

A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

To restate what is now increasingly evident and supremely fundamental to this paper: The relevance-theoretic model of communication is important to a study of biblical interpretation because God's prescribed method of communicating his divine word to us is through human means of communication. This theory, then, proposes a model of how such communication works.

Relevance theory was first presented by Drs. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in a series of jointly authored works published from 1985 to 1988. A student of Wilson's at the University of Oxford named Ernst-August Gutt represented their work for his doctoral dissertation. His goal was to apply relevance theory to finding a suitable model for Bible translation, and he found out that relevance theory itself was sufficient as a model for Bible translation. His summary of Sperber and Wilson's work is in what follows, from which we will work to deduce the principles that make up relevance theory.

First, Gutt remarks, "For Sperber and Wilson (1986a), the crucial mental faculty that enables human beings to communicate with one another is the ability to draw inferences from people's behaviour."[33] This is pivotal. According to Gutt, Sperber and Wilson saw the highest communicative ability of the human mind, and that which makes communication possible in the first place, not as the ability to speak with such precision and exactness that everything is made explicitly clear, but rather as the ability to say less. The sender's goal is not to overwhelm the receiver with so much information as to remove all ambiguity, but to share just enough information (and no more!) to allow for the successful transfer of his communicative intention. "The communicator's goal, then, is to produce a stimulus—verbal or otherwise—from which the

---

33. Ernst-August Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," Ph.D. diss., University of London (1989), 40.

audience can infer what he 'means,' or, in the terms of relevance theory, what his informative intention is."[34]

"Informative intention" is the word Gutt uses here, as also used elsewhere by Sperber and Wilson, to define meaning. However, I find Jeannine Brown's definition of meaning as "communicative intention" better than Sperber and Wilson's "informative intention," since meaning is broad enough to encompass more than just cognitive information. To Sperber and Wilson, "A speaker producing an utterance has two distinct goals: to get the addressee to understand her meaning, and to persuade him to believe it."[35] While this is true, it is still not broad enough to incorporate additional notions of speech-act theory—that an utterance is capable not only of carrying out the purpose of sharing cognitive information, but also of eliciting some sort of effect or response from the receiver.

Returning to a thought introduced above, relevance theory claims "that on the one hand linguistic expressions do have some meaning, and yet that this meaning is not necessarily identical to the meaning actually conveyed by that expression on any given occasion."[36] In other words, as we have said, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between words and the ideas or referents to which they point. This is because communication involves two distinct processes of the mind: the one is *semantic representations* (i.e., the thought output of the linguistic part of the mind after it has taken as input all attendant linguistic formulas; or in other words, the mental picture behind a word), and the other is *truth-propositional forms* which are derived from the semantic

---

34. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 41.

35. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 20.

36. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 43.

representations after putting them through more thorough mental processing (i.e., taking into account *context*).

> Consider the following example: (1) On a walk in the woods: (a) Sheila: I heard something in that bush. (b) Fiona: No, it was only the wind. The meaning expressed linguistically in Sheila's remark is extremely vague: the word "something" can be used to refer to any non-human entity at all, including the wind or the rustling it might produce in the leaves of a bush. However, Fiona's reaction shows that she understands something much more definite than that, and in particular that she thought Sheila intended to refer to something other than the wind, perhaps an animal. Fiona's answer also indicates that she took Sheila to be referring to an event that had happened just in the last few moments or so. However, there is nothing at all in the linguistic meaning of Sheila's utterance that ties it to that particular time. Thus in a different context Sheila might use that same sentence to refer to something she heard at a different time, in a different place, involving a different bush etc.[37]

From this example we see that, according to relevance theory, an understanding of context plays a huge role in properly understanding communication, and how relevance theory defines "context" is: "the mutual cognitive environment of communicator and audience."[38] This means the potential for what the context includes can be quite broad: "A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation."[39]

So we see that included in communication are both the *utterance* itself and the *context* surrounding an utterance (which are representative of the two distinct processes of the mind in communication as mentioned above, i.e., *semantic representations* and *truth-propositional forms*). Relevance theory, then, serves to define the relationship between these two elements. "Relevance

---

37. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 43.

38. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 44.

39. Sperber and Wilson, in Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 44.

theory treats utterance comprehension as an inferential process which takes as input the production of an utterance by a speaker, together with contextual information, and yields as output an interpretation of the speaker's meaning."[40] Where relevance comes into the conversation about context is that "not all the assumptions available from the potential context are equally accessible at any given point in time.… It seems that communication, no doubt like many other human activities, is determined by the desire for optimization of resources.… This means that the different degrees of accessibility of contextual assumptions make themselves felt by the amount of effort their retrieval requires in a particular act of communication."[41] This general principle means that the receiver is always most likely to assume those particular elements of the context which require the least amount of effort for him to recall. In other words, it is Ockham's razor applied to communication: the simplest assumption is the best.[42]

However, this is not the only aspect to optimization, as it would not always be invalid for successful communication to rely on inputting more effort than the simplest assumption. One example of this, explored above, is when inputting more effort results in a higher esteem felt from sender to receiver and greater satisfaction felt from receiver to sender (cf. pages 20–21 above). Gutt takes this in a slightly different, but related, direction: "The other aspect of optimization is, of course, that of obtaining benefits."[43] The benefits he sees which an audience might expect from a communicative act are the modification of their contextual assumptions in one of three ways: additional derivation of contextual implications (adding to their contextual knowledge),

---

40. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 3.

41. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 45.

42. "Communication often takes the simplest form by leaving unsaid elements that those involved in the communication can take for granted." Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 90.

43. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 46.

strengthening of assumptions already held (confirming their contextual knowledge), or elimination of assumptions due to a contradiction (revising their contextual knowledge). These Gutt calls "contextual effects,"[44] and Sperber and Wilson call these "cognitive effects," defined as "a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world."[45]

This is what informs the notion of relevance in relevance theory, and what at last leads us to our fullest definition of the theory. "The central claim of relevance theory is that human communication crucially creates an expectation of optimal relevance, that is, an expectation on the part of the hearer that his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost."[46] And the reason why receivers have this expectation lies in the *principle of relevance*,[47] stated here in three different ways by all of the authors:

> Principle of relevance: Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.[48]

> Relevance of an input to an individual: a. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. b. Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.[49]

> According to relevance theory, other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved, and the smaller the mental effort required, the more relevant this input will be to you at the time.[50]

---

44. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 46.

45. Wilson and Sperber, "Relevance Theory," 608.

46. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 50.

47. Dr. Wilson calls this principle by a slightly expanded name: the Communicative Principle of Relevance. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 7.

48. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 50.

49. Wilson and Sperber, "Relevance Theory," 609.

50. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 5.

In all these cases and in all the authors' writings, the principle of relevance rests on the assumption that the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition. This is not how communication may, could, or should function, but how it *will* function.

One might disagree with this principle of relevance if "ostensive communication" is meant to include any utterance of an individual. Therefore it is important to define what is understood by "ostensive communication." It is conceivable that someone may produce an utterance of sounds and syllables without the intention for optimal relevance, i.e., without the intention to communicate. Such a case, however, according to the definition contained within the principle of relevance, would not be considered communication. Ostensive communication is that which actually seeks to communicate, and the way to do this is through optimal relevance.

Sperber and Wilson clarify this with their definition of optimal (not *maximal*) relevance. An interpretation achieves optimal relevance when: "a. It is at least relevant enough to be worth the addressee's processing effort. b. It is the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences."[51] This means what is *optimally* relevant is simply the greatest level of relevance that the speaker is *willing and able* to produce at that given time.

Sperber and Wilson are also not saying unequivocally that the sender will follow the principle of relevance every time. That does not negate the principle, but means that a receiver operating on the principle will invariably miss the intended meaning and a failure in communication will occur. Wilson then notes quite insightfully: "Failures in communication are common enough. What is remarkable and calls for explanation is that communication works at all."[52]

---

51. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 7.

52. Wilson, "Relevance Theory," 8.

The conclusion of relevance theory in terms of meaning, then, is that the speaker's intended meaning is the one that is consistent with the principle of relevance (i.e., that affords the greatest contextual effect for the least effort), "and there is never more than one interpretation that fulfils this condition."[53] While I agree that there will of necessity be only one interpretation or meaning (Gutt uses these two words interchangeably for this conclusion) that is most relevant, I disagree with an extension of this thought which says that there must always and only be one facet of meaning intended by the sender. Such a line of thought would not account for communicative features with multi-faceted meaning such as double entendre, pun, or the notion of "intentional ambiguity" discussed above. However, Gutt would agree that in such circumstances the "one interpretation" is broad enough to include double entendre, pun, literary openness, and however many facets of the sender's meaning that may fall within his "informative intent." Additionally, Jeannine Brown's definition of meaning as "communicative intention" nicely allows for these communicative features with multi-faceted meaning too.

Finally, when forming an utterance, relevance theory operates on the assumption that the processing effort which is saved through the information communicated by that sentence outweighs the effort required to process that sentence.

> This explains two important points about communication: firstly it explains why unnecessary reminders are felt to hinder successful communication: they involve additional processing effort without adequate gains in contextual effects; secondly, it explains also why there are occasions when it is appropriate to express information that is actually already known to the audience: it is appropriate under those circumstances where the processing of the "reminder" can be assumed to be "cheaper" in terms of processing effort than an unaided search of memory.[54]

---

53. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 51.

54. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 54.

By way of a very simple summary, then, my understanding of the relevance-theoretic model is that what is "unsaid" in communication is just as important as what is "said," and to translate this communication in a way that makes the unsaid said (or makes the implicit explicit) destroys the (or a part of the) communication. It makes the communication less efficient. It does not advance the purpose of the communication. Relevance theory states that successful communication relies a lot more heavily on implications and context rather than on explicit information and words alone. None of this, however, jeopardizes the simple, clear, and sufficient communication of Scripture that is the saving gospel message. A healthy understanding of relevance theory, as with all disciplines of study that we employ, simply serves to mine the depths of Scripture as thoroughly as possible out of a great respect for what it claims in its entirety to be: the inspired word of God, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

APPLICATIONS FOR DEFINING A BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC AND MEANING

In the first dozen pages of this paper, we began to describe the elusive concept of meaning and the second-order task of hermeneutics. These we said were fundamental to answering the question "What is the word of God?" And now, having familiarized ourselves with communication theory and with what relevance theory brings to the table, we are ready at last to wrap up everything together and conclude the discussion begun nearly thirty pages ago.

At the heart of what God's word is, is communication. It is God as the divine sender imparting his very words to us as receivers through human means of communication. What, then, is at the heart of communication? It is the sharing of meaning. And that entails more than just sharing facts or information. Jeannine Brown says the biblical text communicates more than just

cognitive information—that there is more than just one purpose behind a word, but that there are multiple purposes.[55] This is evident since the text, in addition to communicating cognitive information, also calls for more than just understanding; it has power in itself—God's power—to create and strengthen faith; and it very often calls for an action on the part of the receiver to complete the communicative event. It is locution, illocution, and perlocutionary intent all wrapped into one, as speech-act theory says.

Meaning is shared and thus communication happens in more direct ways with words (spoken, written, or signed) but also in more indirect ways, through what is unsaid and gleaned through contextual cues, as relevance theory says. Scripture affirms this communication beyond mere linguistic expressions not just through what is unsaid in a text but also through lifeless objects that speak volumes when combined with contextual information. These can be as universal as a sunrise (Ps 143:8) and the stars in the sky (Ps 19:1–4), or as contextualized as a cross (1 Cor 1:17–18; Gal 6:14). However, since God has given us his word in written form, we find great comfort in this, that "the most striking feature of linguistic communication is that it can achieve a degree of precision and complexity rarely achieved in non-verbal communication."[56] It is no accident that God has preserved his communicative intent (i.e., meaning) for us in *words*, the most precise means of communication accessible to us.

Here we would do well to note that there is "meaning" in all these things mentioned (words, objects, etc.) ultimately because the word of God sustains them all (Heb 1:3). This is what allows for a higher, objective truth that is God himself to whom we can appeal, who does not change, who assures us that his word and communication will not return to him empty but *will* accomplish

---

55. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 6.

56. Gutt, "Translation and Relevance," 41.

what he desires, and who is always at work even behind language, which changes just as quickly as we human beings do.

Brown's words are extremely helpful in this regard. "We need not fall into either extreme [denial of objective truth or assertion of objective access to that truth] in our hermeneutic, if we clearly distinguish between objective truth or reality and the always-subjective human appropriation of truth."[57] This, though, forces us to admit a very sobering and, to me, startling fact: "We can access reality only through subjective appropriation.… Communicative intention [i.e., meaning] is a reality apart from readers' perspectives on it. Readers, however, approach the text from their particular subjective vantage points. So our knowledge of meaning is not objective, since human beings are not objective. In the end, we will only partially access meaning. We 'see in a mirror dimly,' as the apostle Paul would put it (1 Cor. 13:12 ESV)."[58]

What Brown says, and what Scripture affirms, is that God's word is the objective truth that orders and sustains all of reality, and yet as subjective creatures our access to this truth—our access to meaning—will always be only subjective and limited at best. The question we sought to answer at the beginning of this paper, the goal of understanding divine communication and divine meaning, is one which can never be fully understood by us, not even close, not even though it is preserved for us in human means of communication. Why is this the case?

Fundamentally, this is the case first of all because God has created us in this way. We were created as finite. "To be human is to interpret."[59] And yet since God created us in this way, that

---

57. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 79.

58. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 79.

59. Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 165.

means this finitude is a gift. "This is not a flaw but a gift; it is part of who we are."[60] Specifically, that part of who we are is the *subjectivity* of our nature. "However close the reader gets to understanding the text, the reading will still be peculiarly that reader's reading: the subjective is never lost, nor is it necessary or desirable that it should be."[61] The subjectivity of our nature is still the level at which God meets us with his objective truth, as Ebeling remarked: "Just as the word of God is fearful to those who fear, a fire to those who burn, and salve to the meek, and in general: whatever your disposition is, so the word of God is to you. For whatever someone is like, God, the scripture, the creation is like that to him."[62]

Secondly, this is the case because the fall into sin has affected and limited us further. This calls for humility, but not despair. On the one hand, we must always bear in mind that we can only ever access textual meaning in less-than-complete ways. But on the other hand, "if God has chosen to speak through Scripture, we can trust that the capacity to understand has been built into us, however finitely and imperfectly."[63] We can trust what God clearly and unmistakably does communicate in his word: that he has given us everything we need for life here and hereafter (2 Pet 1:3), and that he cannot and will not lie to us (Num 23:19).

What can we say about meaning, then, and how our limited access to it affects our task? The first thing we can say is that biblical meaning as an inscribed divine-human communicative intent[64] is accessible to the Christian. We have established that meaning is not multivalent in the

---

60. Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 165.

61. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 64.

62. Ebeling, *Luther*, 195.

63. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 80.

64. "Textual autonomy in its more rigid forms, however, tended toward a code model of communication in which neither author nor reader was particularly needed for successful interpretation…. Meaning (as communicative

sense that there are "multiple, potentially conflicting, meanings for any given text because language allows for multiple possibilities, and an absent author cannot arbitrate between these possibilities."[65] However, meaning is multi-faceted within the scope of authorial intention.

A helpful way I picture this is that meaning is not like a library with countless books (a collection of many or even limitless things), but meaning is like a book with multiple chapters (a single entity with multiple layers). The meaning doesn't change into many things (multivalent); rather, it encompasses a broad range of things to such an extent that its depths are never fully plumbed. Meaning in a secular context *might* theoretically have the potential to be plumbed, but must fight against the current of time and ever-changing, ever-renewing existence. Meaning in a divine context, on top of that, is *ipso facto* beyond the depth of the human mind. Recall Ebeling's summary of Luther's theology: "As existential life continues, so the understanding of the scripture is a continuous task which can never be brought to a conclusion."[66] And yet meaning in the form in which God has given it to us in his word is not hopelessly inaccessible but is accessible to us through his Spirit.

> So, can we ever finish reading the text?
>
> We can answer no to this question for at least two reasons. First, meaning (especially conceived at the book level) provides a rich and complex world to explore, and in practice it is not exhaustible. Second, the world around us and we ourselves are constantly changing in relation to the Scriptures. Each time we return to the text, we are different: we ask different questions; we bring different issues; we arrive at different insights. Our contextualizing of the text occurs between the textual world and our world, and this interaction helps to explain our experience of motion in relation to meaning. In reality,

---

intention) can exist without a reader, but the *communicative event*, viewed in its entirety, cannot." Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 55, 87.

65. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 54. This is a common tenet of "New Criticism," a reaction against the role of the author in interpretation which seeks for sole autonomy of the text and says, "The understanding of the text is never a definitive one, but rather remains open because the meaning of the Scriptures discloses itself anew in every future."

66. Ebeling, *Luther*, 99.

what is in motion is contextualization, our experience of the text and its meaning. Yet the text's meaning remains a stable and determinate reality.[67]

That last sentence provides us with the second thing we can say about meaning: that biblical meaning as an inscribed divine-human communicative intent does not change. This is especially important to keep in mind when confronted with the fact that we are vastly separated in time and space from the original audiences of the biblical texts. "Yet [our] new context does not change the meaning of [Scripture]. The meaning remains stable; it is the *intersection* of textual meaning with a new situation that differs from the meaning's intersection with its first context."[68]

This "intersection" of the text's meaning with modern contexts, also called *contextualization*, is worthy of one more point to consider:

> This formulation of meaning and contextualization avoids the critique leveled at certain views of application "that a text can have only one normative meaning but many possible applications, which can never become normative." In my formulation, Scripture's meaning, understood in all its complexity, is normatively addressed to its particular context yet can normatively address other contexts as well. The text is able to speak into different cultural contexts without losing its normativity. Thus, if we are serious about contextualizing the biblical message in our settings, we will pursue this as a normative task. My attempt is never a guarantee that I have rightly contextualized the biblical message in practice, but it does mean that we ought to be able to claim normative status theoretically for contextualization on the grounds that the biblical message will speak authoritatively into new contexts.[69]

The word of God gives us the best of both worlds. Not only does Scripture's meaning remain unchanged forever, but its meaning is also deep enough to be just as applicable and necessary for all people of all time, while still being accessible to subjective creatures such as ourselves. It imparts to us all we need for life and salvation, as promised by God himself.

---

67. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 78.

68. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 108–9.

69. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 109–10.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, I stated that what followed was a relating of my personal apprehension of truths gleaned from both prior and present study, all in the hope that it might benefit those with similar searching minds and give as thorough an answer as possible to that question that is fundamental for everything else: "What is the word of God?" Here, at the last, is what I have learned.

It could be that, with the relevance-theoretic model offering explanations for which the code model cannot account, communication is a far more imprecise thing than we might like it to be, even when it comes to biblical communication. And yet we should be "okay" with that. The reason, as we have seen, is that God has *chosen* to speak to us through words, and however much potential for imprecision and ambiguity that human communication may contain, that is still God's perfect design for revealing his truths to us. There is no "better case scenario" than that; what we have is the "best case scenario." And that all falls back on faith, first and ultimately: our God-given trust that he will not lie to us or deceive us and that he wants to lead us into all truth.

Two sentences now remain with me as my comfort and guide. The first is from Scripture itself, from 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." The second is from Luther's simple yet firm conviction of the word: "Thus we must firmly maintain that God desires to do nothing with us men except through his outward word and sacrament."[70] These two sentences remind me that, if the word is the means through which God in his wisdom chooses to communicate with me, then that is more than enough for me.

---

70. Ebeling, *Luther*, 109.

I reach the end of this paper and I find I have not moved. I am no further now than when I began: in a position of trust in God that his word is what he says it is and that it is enough for my salvation. All other rational arguments have in my mind been exhausted, and I am left with nothing but faith. And that is the best place to be.

If I have "moved" at all from the beginning of this study until now, it is that my roots have been sunk even deeper into this spot of faith, it is that I have been led even more to refuse to move from this spot, it is that I have ruled out in my mind any possible stance toward the Scriptures that does not start with faith. I have ruled out to my own satisfaction any possible reason to operate with the Scriptures apart from faith. To what extent this paper has led you to feel similarly satisfied in that conclusion, I now leave that for your reflection.

As for me, I feel that once my life is done and after I've plumbed the depths I'm able of this topic, I will have gone no deeper than the simple gospel sung by children, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so." Let this be our song throughout all eternity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bosworth, David A. "To Mourn or to Dry? *'abal* in the Prophets." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Denver, CO, November 19, 2022.

Branton, Emily. "Full and Empty Words: Unpacking Cognitive Metaphors for Speech in Biblical Hebrew." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Denver, CO, November 19, 2022.

Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021.

Cherney, Kenneth A., Jr. "To Equivalence and Beyond: Reflections on the Significance of Eugene A. Nida for Bible Translating." Pages 265–305 in *Heritage and Hope: Essays in Honor of the 150ᵗʰ Anniversary of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*. Edited by Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr. Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013.

Ebeling, Gerhard. *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. Translated by R. A. Wilson. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970.

Green, Joel B. "The (Re-) Turn to Narrative." Pages 11–36 in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation*. Edited by Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

Gutt, Ernst-August. "Translation and Relevance." Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1989.

Hart, Trevor. *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996.

Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

Paustian, Mark. Sermon at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chapel. Livestreamed 28 June 2022. https://www.wisluthsem.org/wls-chapel/daily-chapel-june-28-2022/.

Wilson, Deirdre. "Relevance Theory." Pages 1–25 in *Oxford Handbook of Pragmatics*. Edited by Y. Huang. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Wilson, Deirdre, and Dan Sperber. "Relevance Theory." Pages 607–32 in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Edited by L. R. Horn and G. Ward. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

Zimmermann, Jens. *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.