

Social Location¹ and Theology

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In recent years, the postmodern hermeneutics of radical reader-response criticism has privileged the social location of readers as a primary factor that determines the meaning of the text. From this perspective, any interpretation of a text is more about the social location of the reader or of the interpretive community than about the text itself. In response, many evangelical theologians challenged this new method of hermeneutics while continuing to defend the practice of author-oriented interpretation. However, our caution against the reader-response approach should not cause us to overlook or neglect an important emphasis that postmodern scholarship raises: when it comes to hermeneutics, the social location of the reader matters. Our particular social location may not determine the meaning of the text as postmodernists might insist; however, it does influence how we engage it, including God's Word.

Social Location and How We Read the Word

While we believe that the entire Bible is the very Word of God, we as pastors and theologians are often selective about what themes or portions of the Bible we favor. John Stott noted that the evangelical Christian community in North America, for instance, tends to ignore major teachings in the Bible that focus on the poor, partly due to its particular social location (i.e., its primarily white, politically-conservative, middle-class background).² Emerson and Smith, in their recent sociological study of white evangelical Christians, also noted how the group's particular social location has influenced these Christians to concentrate on a limited and narrow range of Biblical and theological teachings in developing their Christian worldview.³ In short, as John Calvin noted many centuries ago, we read the Scriptures through our own "spectacles".

For Christians who deeply desire to grow in Biblical wisdom, this poses a significant challenge. For when we focus only on those themes that are relevant or meaningful to our community, we can unwittingly hinder our people from seeing and responding to the whole counsel of God. Furthermore, such a way of engaging God's Word might create certain hermeneutical blind-spots that might effectively cover our

¹ By social location I am referring to those social, cultural and historical experiences that influence and shape our identities.

² John R. W. Stott, *Human Rights & Human Wrongs: Major Issues for a New Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 21-16.

³ Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

individual as well as communal sins.⁴ Consequently, if we are to be engaged in a Biblical ministry that is both pastoral and prophetic, we need to correctly assess how our social location influences how we interpret God's word and explore possible ways to go beyond the certain limitations shaped by that influence.

Social Location and "Pentecostal Plurality"

One of the reasons why many evangelical theologians seem to distance themselves from the issue of social location is because postmodern scholarship often uses this concept to legitimize radical forms of relativism. A given interpretive community, it is argued, can and should construct its own interpretation of a text, an interpretation that is authentic to the lived experience and perspective of the community that is situated in a particular social location. Such a hermeneutical approach not only elevates the "particular" to dominate, if not eclipse, the "universal" but also dissolves any meaningful possibility of accountability of a local interpretation (i.e., no one from outside of the community can and should critique the validity of the interpretation). Such a method of hermeneutical practice is problematic for Christians who embrace the notion of the absolute and objective Truth. However, taking social location seriously does not have to lead us to the pathway of relativism.

In his recent work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Kevin Vanhoozer points to another pathway by introducing the concept of "Pentecostal plurality"⁵. Vanhoozer writes:

On the other hand, I affirm a "Pentecostal plurality," which maintains that the one true interpretation is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods and contexts of reading (italic, his). The Word remains the interpretive norm, but no one culture or interpretive scheme is sufficient to exhaust its meaning, much less its significance.⁶

In today's postmodern world, a kind of "monistic" interpretive approach that ignores the significance of social location and quickly universalizes a particular interpretation of the text, a practice that has often characterized evangelical scholarship in the past, can no longer sustain its legitimacy. Instead, as Vanhoozer proposed, evangelical Christians should strive for "Pentecostal plurality", strive for attaining "critical and multifaceted unity" as one of our hermeneutical goals. Such a practice would enable God's people to overcome the challenge of hermeneutical blind-spots and biases, thus allowing them to interpret His Word with greater accuracy and fullness.

⁴ Once again, Emerson and Smith's study illustrates this hermeneutical phenomenon in a compelling way.

⁵Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 419-21.

⁶*Ibid.*, 419.

The challenge we face as theologians and pastors is practicing and modeling “Pentecostal plurality” as an on-going hermeneutical praxis in our seminaries and congregations. On the one hand, as some of our Christian communities are becoming more diverse ethnically and racially, we have unprecedented opportunities to engage God’s word as a diverse community. However, our current practice of reading, interpreting and applying the Word of God does not yet involve intentional steps of actively listening to “others”, particularly to those voices that come from other social locations. As our society becomes more multicultural, and our world more globalized, there may come a time when the hermeneutics of “Pentecostal plurality” may become more than one of many trendy proposals but one of the most significant practices that brings all God’s children together.

Social Location and the Formation of “Middle-Range” Theology

Currently, there are two main forms of theology. On the one hand, there is a very abstract, philosophical form of theology that tends to assume its universal validity (i.e., this form of theology does not pay much attention to the “social location” of its author and its readers). The second is various types of “local” theology that are emerging from a variety of different social locations – African American, Asian, Latin, feminist, womanist etc. – reflecting the particular experiences of different groups of people in their theological reflections. In our postmodern setting, the second type of theology has received much attention and affirmation, particularly in more progressive and liberal theological communities. However, while we can gain much insight from different theological voices that emerge from different social locations, “local” theologies also encounter certain limitations. For instance, a “local” theology can easily avoid any meaningful sense of accountability to the larger Christian community and can produce a theological construct that is highly relativistic.⁷

During the 1960’s, well-known sociologist Robert Merton introduced the concept of “middle-range social theory” to the discipline.⁸ In his view, the field of sociology was being dominated by two types of social theories: (1) highly abstract grand theories that were not verifiable through empirical research and (2) those theories that were too tied to a very particular social phenomenon, verifiable empirically, but could not yield any generalizable principles or lead to larger social theories. To Merton, as a social theorist and a researcher, neither was an attractive option. Thus he proposed a new category called “middle-range social theories” that are close enough to empirical realities to be relevant to empirical researches while, at the same time, detached somewhat from the particular social phenomenon to yield transferable and generalizable theories.

Similarly, perhaps the evangelical community should think about developing and nurturing what may be called “middle-range theology”, a form of theology that is neither

⁷ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 101-104.

⁸ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, NY: Fortress Press, 1968).

too abstract and universalizing – theology that fails to take its own social location seriously – nor too particular – theology that is trapped within the boundary of its social location. Such a form of “middle-range” theology would be formed as theologians and pastors from different social locations dialogue with one another, bringing their reflections and perspectives that are influenced by their lived experiences in particular social locations. Such a form of “middle-range” theology would be able to bring together the “universal” and the “particular” and hold them in balance and tension. In doing so, such a theology would also benefit the two other types of theology mentioned above: it would influence the more abstract theology to interact more intentionally with the particular, lived experiences in today’s world while encouraging various “local” theologies to dialogue with one another, recognizing shared beliefs as well as unique particularities. In many ways, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, as it continues to attract scholars and students from different parts of the global community, is uniquely positioned to create and nurture a theological learning community in which such a form of theology can emerge.

In his recent book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf passionately called for all Christians to denounce the practice of “exclusion” – the act of seeking purity of singularity – and actively pursue the practice of “embrace” – the act of intentionally integrating “otherness” into one’s own identity.⁹ As our world becomes increasingly diverse and encounters the painful experience of fragmentation and inter-group hostilities, the church of Jesus Christ has a unique opportunity to be the light and the salt in this world. The church, as the body of Christ, can and should display the blessed reality of “unity in diversity” that our Savior prayed for in John 17. Such an expression of unity can take on a variety of forms. However, for evangelical Christians, for the people of the Book, such an expression of unity cannot fail to include how we engage God’s Word, how we do our theology.

⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).