

Hermeneutic Distance

Sermons on the Subjects of the Day (5)

The fifth in a monthly Fulcrum series of seven sermons for the web by Oliver O'Donovan

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it (Hebrews 2:1).

A discipline of biblical “hermeneutics”, *ie* of interpretation, has no point unless we are resolved to be obedient. That will serve as a summary of the argument of the fourth of these *Sermons* – and if it seems to leave a number of loose ends hanging, let them hang a bit longer while we press on to the other side of the matter; for without seeing both sides we cannot get the question of Scriptural authority properly in view. The other side is this: obedience is a duty that *needs* the discipline of hermeneutic reflection if it is to be carried through. We cannot “obey” in a vacuum of understanding.

To get a purchase on the point, let us begin from the case that seems to belie it: what we sometimes call “implicit” obedience. That epithet suggests that there is no room to stop to think. The command is barked out, and the troops leap to it, as in the old sergeant-major’s quip, “When I say ‘jump’, you jump, and ask how high on the way up!” Is this not the right model, after all? Must we not obey God blind, acknowledging that the ways of providence are beyond our grasp? The story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac would hardly make sense if there were nothing laudable in simply doing what God commands, questions set aside.

Yet even “implicit” obedience demands a measure of understanding. There is an old (and over-familiar) joke about a man who sought guidance by opening the Bible at random; and coming at first attempt on the statement that Judas went and hanged himself, arrived on the second at “Go, and do thou likewise!” It is not a very funny joke; but a joke it is, not a tragedy. What makes it a joke? Jokes are about fools, and the hero of this joke is certainly a ripe fool, who did not understand something very elementary about commanding and being commanded. Commands are events that occur within a relationship. They are given *by* somebody *to* somebody at a particular juncture. The order barked out at the new recruits by the sergeant-major needs a parade-ground for its context. There must be an understood relation between barker and barked-at. Otherwise what is barked can have no reference, and if it has no reference, it cannot be obeyed. Imagine walking quietly down the street and hearing a voice mysteriously borne through the air: “Present arms!” What are you to do? You will probably suppose you have overheard something not intended for your ears, from a nearby military installation or a film-set. Possibly, though, you think it was the voice of an angel sent to warn or command you - but then you will have to give your mind seriously to interpretation. The one thing you cannot do is simply present arms, like recruits on a parade-ground. You don’t have arms, only an umbrella. They can obey “implicitly”, you can’t. And they can only obey by virtue of what is understood within their situation: that they are recruits in training, that they are standing on a parade-ground, that the loud-voiced man with the red face shouting at them is their sergeant-major, and so on. Implicit obedience needs a frame of reference. Even Abraham had to reckon that this was YHWH speaking to him, the same YHWH whose promise had led him out of Mesopotamia to the land his descendants were to occupy, who could bring his purposes to bear in the teeth of seeming contradiction. The point is emphasised by the writer to the Hebrews: “He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead” (11:19). That “considering” did not *detract* from his implicit obedience; it made it possible.

I knew someone who had a curious experience in the course of her early education when, seated at the back of a classroom next to an unsoundproofed partition, she ended up learning the next-door class’s lesson instead of her own. If a child is to obey when the teacher says “get out your poetry books!”, she must be able to tell whether it is *her* class that is being

spoken to and *her* teacher who is speaking. To obey we need a context, and we need to relate ourself correctly to the context. The fool in the joke does not know how to relate himself to the commands he reads in the Bible. The problem lies not in the commands, but in a failure of practical reason in himself. We may be tempted to call him "literal-minded", but that doesn't quite get to the bottom of the problem. The Biblical texts he landed on make perfectly good literal sense when read on their own terms; nothing would be gained by trying to read them figuratively or allegorically. But he is unable to read them on their own terms at all. Preoccupied with finding a reference to himself, he diverts their literal sense from its proper context into his, and so arrives at a conclusion that they could never, literally or otherwise, have intended.

Commands are acts, and acts are performed at certain times and in certain circumstances for certain definite purposes. Divine commands are acts of God. They exert a claim upon their own historical context primarily, on those to whom they are directly addressed. But because any act has a certain intelligibility in its context, and the context of God's acts is his constant will to bless and redeem the world, God's commands may always have implications for other times and circumstances. The Decalogue was not of interest *only* to a barbarous people gathered at the foot of a mountain in Arabia long ago. We, too, in our time and setting, have ways of honouring our father and our mother and of not coveting our neighbour's goods. But in order to judge the bearing of these commands on other times and circumstances, we must observe their place in their historical context first. If we say, "That applies to us, too!" we are *already* engaged in moral reasoning.

Some of the commands in the Bible are so very "bare", so free of wider implications, so wholly defined by their historical situation, that they could never be obeyed more than once, even analogously. "Go into the village opposite you," Jesus told his disciples, "and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me." It might be an edifying liturgical innovation if on Palm Sunday a village congregation would walk across the fields to greet its neighbours and be met there with a suitably domesticated beast of burden for the minister to be escorted back on, all waving palms and singing "All glory laud and honour"! Not even on the widest construction, however, could this be *obedience* to the command that Jesus gave his disciples. That command cannot be obeyed now. On the other hand, there are commands whose content can always make some claim upon obedience, however different the circumstances. Consider the passage in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48) where Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...Be reconciled to your brother...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off...Do not swear...Do not resist one who is evil...Love your enemies." These are not at all like "untie the colt". They claim to direct our action in certain *kinds* of situation that arise recurrently.

But these again divide into two types: *moral rules* and *public laws*. The moral rules in the Sermon on the Mount are concerned with dispositional attitudes – conciliatoriness, self-discipline, restraint, forgiveness and so on. They are radically and surprisingly expressed, without much interest in whether we will find them easy to obey or not. They have nothing much to say to such dilemmas of practical casuistry as, "What if my brother refuses to be reconciled unless I join him in a solemn oath of undying hatred to our enemy?" Such questions are left, as it were, for later. As a result, these moral rules are capable of directing our conduct in a wide variety of circumstances and producing a very varied style of conformity. By contrast, public laws are designed to be straightforward and easy to keep with a measure of uniformity in execution. We have an outstanding example of a legal code in Deuteronomy chapters 14-23. Shaped, very evidently, out of pre-existing legal traditions, it aims to maintain a practical continuity with these while achieving certain dominant reforming aims. It chooses its topics apparently randomly, in the light of questions that have come up and legal rulings that are to hand. It has a lot to say about detailed dilemmas, comparatively little (though not nothing) about underlying attitudes. Moral rules and public laws look different, and they do different jobs. In obvious ways moral rules are more "portable", more easily applied to changing situations. We still have brothers to be reconciled to, even if there is no temple to leave our gift in. We would have considerable difficulty in obeying the Deuteronomic law of slavery, however sympathetic we might be to its intentions.

These two types of generic instruction, as they appear in the Bible, share a common feature. They are framed by a narrative context. The metaphor of “framing” could be misleading, though, for a picture-frame is designed to display the picture, and may be taken off and changed, but this framework is integral. Narrative is a constituent element in these texts’ moral claim upon us. The legal code of Deuteronomy 14-23 is preceded by twelve chapters of mixed narrative and exhortation, explaining how this law-code originated in the birth of the nation and the ministry of Moses, and why a code originating in Israel’s nomadic past should have authority over a settled agricultural society governed by a monarchy and civic institutions. This setting is continually relevant for understanding the commands as they arise. When told that we must leave the gleanings of the grape-harvest for the stranger passing by, we are reminded that God heard our cry when we were strangers in the land of Egypt. The Sermon on the Mount, similarly, is situated in St Matthew’s Gospel as a prelude to Jesus’s ministry and as a climax to the account of his birth and commissioning. This, equally, is not irrelevant to those who come to this text for guidance. When we are told to resist not evil, we are prepared to hear how Jesus refused to call on legions of angels to resist arrest in Gethsemane. The difference in the content of the two texts corresponds to the difference in the narrative that supports them: on the one hand, a narrative about the founding of a holy nation; on the other, a narrative about the fulfilment of history and the redemption of the world. Neither is “timeless”, if by that we mean indifferent to any historical context. But there is a sense in which we can call the Sermon on the Mount “timeless”, while Deuteronomy is not. Here is the point at which the particular history of a nation with which God dealt is taken up into God’s all-embracing act of world-redemption; here is the event in which we are all in every age involved, and here are the commands that belong to that all-embracing event. At the centre of the biblical message is an announcement of what God has done in history - “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son...” (Galatians 4:4) – and in that announcement all the authority of the biblical texts finds its source. Biblical commands speak with authority to us because that deed of God in history speaks with authority to us. Let us sum it up like this: it is not *the commands the Bible contains* that we obey; it is *the purposes of God that those commands reveal*, taken in their context. The purposes of God are the ultimate reason why anything at all is good or evil to do. The Bible is authoritative for ethics because it speaks of those purposes and demonstrates them through God’s acts in history.

We began from commands because they are a limiting case, raising the question of “implicit” obedience most sharply. There are, of course, other forms of moral instruction in the Scriptures. An ancient and uncouth tradition of hermeneutics looked exclusively to commands as a source for ethics. A fifth-century work called *Speculum ‘Quis ignorat?’*, wrongly attributed to St Augustine, begins: “Who does not know that within Holy Scripture there are propositions to be understood and believed, and commands and prohibitions to be observed and acted upon?” and proceeds rather tediously to attempt a list of all the commands in Scripture, so that we may have a compendious code of instruction from which nothing is omitted. It is a model of how not to approach the question, for the effect, of course, is to omit what must on no account be omitted from any view of the Bible’s moral instruction: stories, hymns of praise, prophecy, wisdom, parables, lists of virtues, and so on. These all teach us to direct our ways pleasingly to God. We can learn of the wrong of adultery from David and Bathsheba, and not only from the seventh command of the Decalogue. But of all these other styles of moral communication the same must be said as was said about commands: they lay claim upon our action by virtue of what God has done for us and with us.

Is that to say that *everything* in the Bible is ethics, and that there is no specifically moral teaching, distinct from history or doctrine? No. There is moral teaching as distinct from doctrine in the same sense that there is practical reason as distinct from theoretical reason. The narrative of how Abraham took his men and chased after the four kings to recover Lot is, viewed in isolation, simply a factual proposition with no term beyond itself. But it does not stand in isolation. It is integrated into the Pentateuch, and the Pentateuch is integrated into Scripture. Our reading of Scripture, viewed as a whole, always tends towards a practical term, how we are to live before the living God of Abraham. There are texts which focus especially upon this practical cutting-edge; yet everything in Scripture has a bearing towards it and nothing is simply irrelevant to it. Yet it is not wrong to treat those texts where narrative and

doctrine and liturgy crystallise into direct moral instruction as having a special interpretative weight. For these afford a paradigm of how faith works in action, and so serve to protect our moral reflection from falling into a kind of speculative hermeneutical fancy. They are a check on what we are doing with the Bible. If we cannot make our interpretation accommodate the passages where the biblical authors give direct practical guidance, something must have gone wrong. That is why such texts as the condemnations of homosexuality should continue to demand our careful attention, even though they should never be treated alone and in isolation. They are a test of our capacity to achieve a faithful overall reading of the Scriptures. If we can make nothing of them, we should go back to the beginning and start again.

All this takes us a considerable distance from "implicit" obedience, a response that requires no thought or consideration but only immediate conformity. There are occasions on which nothing but implicit obedience will do. But recognising those occasions depends on a general understanding that we have to think through patiently and reflectively. And when the church is at sea, for one reason or another, over how to read the message of the Gospels, only patient attention to reading, interpretation and obedient thought will bring it to harbour. A shrill call for implicit obedience never substitutes for careful exploration of what it is that must be obeyed.

Is all this just another way of intellectualising the demand of God? Does it subvert the call for obedience, which ought to be a matter of immediate devotion? To the first of these questions we should answer, Yes - in a way; to the second we may answer, No. Yes, in that our obedience *must be thoughtful obedience*. This "must" is, in the end, not so much an obligation as a simple necessity. Moral instruction is directed to what we "do", and nobody "does" without thinking. If obedience is what is required, thought is what is required - thought about how we may frame our action obediently to the demand. But thoughtful obedience does not exclude immediate encounter with the commanding God. Moments of fear and trembling may befall us; and these are not an *alternative* to the "rational worship" of Romans 12:1f, by which our minds are renewed to "appreciate distinctions". It is really just another way of saying that the obedience to Scripture that is required of us is the obedience of faith.

And in that obedience of faith there has to be a "hermeneutic distance". That term refers to the gap between the reader and the text, the gap that understanding has to bridge. This "distance" is often misunderstood. It is not *historical* distance - that particular turn in hermeneutic theory led, in my view, into a blind alley. There is no reason why I should find the gap wider when reading Plato than when reading Lévinas. Of course, texts that come from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds present special tasks; but if we are ready to take up those tasks and familiarise ourselves with their backgrounds, they need not be any more alien to us in the end. Possibly they will be less so. We may suppose all too carelessly that just because we are contemporary with Lévinas, we shall understand his meaning and objectives without much effort. The distance we have to insist on, rather, is that which secures the objective standing of a text, and especially of a text that claims to speak to us in the name of God. The distance between the text and ourselves can never be, and should never be supposed to be, swallowed up by our understanding. Whatever I may have concluded from my reading of the Scriptures, my conclusion must be open to fresh scrutiny on fresh reading - and will in fact always be, whether I know it or not, because the Scriptures will be its judge. If, after reading the Bible faithfully, I am so confident as to make a ringing declaration of what I have understood, and if my confidence is wholly justified as far as it goes, that still does not mean that my declaration is simply identical to what is contained within the Bible. I may declare that the eternal Word of God, consubstantial and coeternal with the Father, was incarnate of the Virgin Mary; I may be perfectly entitled to think my statement "biblical". as well as "catholic" and "orthodox" and whatever other epithet may underline its authenticity as an expression of Christian belief; and yet it remains the case that those words are not in the Bible, and their authority is always a matter of demonstration and argument in the light of other words that are in the Bible. The authority of Scripture cannot be made over in its full plenitude to my words, or to any other statement or formulation.

There is, of course, a proper authority attaching to a faithful formulation. Creeds, declarations of church councils, Reformation articles and confessions, even the propositions of major

theologians have exercised wide authority in the church, and deservedly. Are there moral formulae that have equivalent standing to these doctrinal formulae? Probably. But the drafters of these formulae were not appointed eye-witnesses of the Incarnation, as Peter and James and John were eye-witnesses of the Incarnation, and so the question whether they have adequately caught the Scriptures' implication at this or that point will always be worth discussing, even if the result of the discussion is the same every time. A seriously-meant enquiry into what the Bible means and how it may apply to us can never be out of place in the church. We must not, then, in the supposed defence of a "biblical" ethic, try to close down moral discussions prescriptively, announcing that we already know what the Bible teaches and forbidding further examination. It is the characteristic "conservative" temptation to erect a moment in Scriptural interpretation into an unrevisable norm that will substitute, conveniently and less ambiguously, for Scripture itself. The word "authority" means, quite simply, that we have to keep looking back to *this* source if we are to stay on the right track. Anything else is unbelief - a refusal to open ourselves to the question, what is God saying to us through his word?

The three temptations of Jesus, temptations, as St. Luke recounts them, of body, soul and spirit, culminate on the pinnacle of the temple where the devil invites Jesus to demonstrate his belief in Scripture as God's word. Jesus replies, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." The fulfilment of the word is sure; but it is not for us - not even for Jesus - to impose on God the manner and time of its fulfilment. At the point of greatest confidence between God and man, where God has shown to man his mind and his purpose, the Son of Man stands back, refuses to seize the initiative and waits upon the unfolding of the Father's purposes that have already begun to unfold. The interpretation of Scripture is a matter in which we wait upon God - not, of course, as though we had understood *nothing* of his mind, but simply because we have not understood *everything*. The text and my reading of the text are two things, not one, and the first is the judge of the second. I can always read further, study harder, think deeper. To precipitate myself from the pinnacle of the text, and demand that angel wings shall bear my interpretation up, is to cut short the task of waiting and attending; it is to tempt the Lord my God.

Why should we find this so difficult to accept? We are anxious for the church. We are anxious for ourselves. We are anxious about the consequences of admitting any indeterminacy in our understanding of the text, which might give a hostage to fortune. Once we acknowledge hermeneutic distance, we fear, "anything goes". A host of false prophets will take advantage of our respectful distance; they will rush forward to wrest Scripture from its plain sense, pervert it into authorising what cannot be authorised. And, of course, this fear is, in the short run, likely to prove well grounded. The public discourse of theology is, indeed, one where anything has the habit of going. False prophets are, and always will be, quick to rush forward. So we must simply expect to hear abominations and absurdities put forward with implausible but brazen claims to be consistent with, or authorised by, Scripture. To this annoyance we are called, as Christ warned and as generations of the faithful have since proved. The question is, what sacrifice of faith we would make if, to avoid this annoyance for ourselves and to spare the church its turmoils, we were to close down on the reading and interpretation of Holy Scripture, if we were to declare that there was nothing to discuss any more. To our fears, all too well-grounded in the short term, we must reply with the question: is the Spirit of the living God an adequate match for human perversity? Is Jesus's promise about the gates of hell meant seriously enough to be relied on? Are we prepared to encounter false interpretations with the weapons of true interpretation, the weapons that are "not worldly, but have divine power to destroy strongholds...(taking) every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4f)? Precisely those weapons - hand-to-hand, thought-to-thought, unpicking the web of error strand by strand - cannot be used without discourse, without argument and debate, without proper distance on, and attention to, the text in itself, without the waiting and searching that every true work of interpretation demands.

Granted that this is what we are called to, we may ask: - Do we, does the Gospel, then, have no *formal and institutional* defence against indefinite prevarication and distortion? Indeed we do, and it does. There is within the church the *ministry of the word*, which has the duty of ruling false interpretations out and ruling true interpretations in. That is what our priests and

bishops are charged with, and they do it not by suppressing or forbidding the discussion of the Biblical witness, but by waiting on the mind of the church where it is genuinely seeking to understand, and by confirming the mind of the church where there are well-established lines of understanding. In a situation of controversy this ministry will exercise a proper caution, and refuse to allow the church to be swept off its feet by sudden enthusiasms or shamed out of its traditional judgments by the power of new fashions. It will create and hold open the space for properly disciplined and biblically founded common enquiry.

And may it also from time to time pronounce, as Richard Hooker hoped it might, a "judicial and definitive sentence, whereunto neither part that contendeth may under any pretence or colour refuse to stand"?¹ The difficulty is, as Hooker himself was forced to recognise, that if the mind of the church is in fact unsettled and uncertain, declaring that a pronouncement is definitive will not settle it, but will only heighten the tension. In James Joyce's story "Grace" the ideal of a judgment that settles everything is subjected to some teasing, as an enthusiastic Irish layman, aiming to save the soul of a dissolute colleague, gathers with some friends round his bed and re-narrates, suitably reinforced by some "special whisky", the history of the ratification of the infallibility-dogma at the First Vatican Council:

"In the sacred college, you know, of cardinals and archbishops and bishops there were two men who held out against it while the others were all for it...

"Ha!" said Mr. M'Coy.

"And they were a German cardinal by the name of Dolling...or Dowling...or –"

"Dowling was no German, and that's a sure fire," said Mr. Power, laughing.

"Well, this great German cardinal, whatever his name was, was one; and the other was John MacHale."

"What?" cried Mr. Kernan. "Is it John of Tuam?"

"There they were at it, all the cardinals and bishops and archbishops from all the ends of the earth and these two fighting dog and devil until at last the Pope himself stood up and declared infallibility a dogma of the Church *ex cathedra*. On the very moment John MacHale, who had been arguing and arguing against it, stood up and shouted out with the voice of a lion; "*Credo!*"

"*I believe!*" said Mr. Fogarty.

"*Credo!*" said Mr. Cunningham. "That showed the faith he had. He submitted the moment the Pope spoke."

"And what about Dowling?" asked Mr. M'Coy.

"The German cardinal wouldn't submit. He left the Church."

Mr. Cunningham's words had built up the vast image of the Church in the minds of his hearers.

But precisely "the vast image" of church authority is the problem. The bishops cannot and must not substitute their own pronouncements for a hard-sought unity of the Spirit. Yet that does not mean that the bishops have nothing to contribute. What they may and can do - in support of the search for unity, not in suppression of it - is to secure the *tradition* of interpreting God's word as a critical point of reference, and so defend the identity of the community as grounded in faithfulness to the word of God. In this way they may restrain the tendency to anarchy and strife that naturally attends on excitement and uncertainty; they may give structure and order to the processes of faithful enquiry, by keeping before the church's eyes a clear sense of what comes first and what comes after, what is legitimately in doubt and what cannot be in doubt. And in this context - not to suppress dissent or preclude discussion, but to give the discussion the direction it needs in the service of the Gospel - they may perhaps declare that some aspect of a question that was once open is now closed, or that some other aspect of a question cannot be opened until more fundamental questions have been dealt with. In these conditions their gift of the Spirit will be shown, by facilitating real convergence, to have served the search for unity in God's will.

The Anglican Bishops at Lambeth 1998 sought to exercise this gift – and though, perhaps, they did not exercise it perfectly, they spoke with a degree of coherence that was remarkable considering the reports of procedural mayhem that surrounded the occasion. In "rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture", they clearly did not suppose they had

achieved a simple closure of all the moral questions; they had simply provided a reference-point in Scripture to which all answers to these questions would be responsible. They sought to establish some practical conditions for an orderly exploration. Chief among these, they “could not advise” the blessing of same sex unions or the ordi²nation of those involved in them. An open exploration could hardly go forward if new facts were deliberately being created on the ground by unilateral action. There was, of course, no leonine roar of *Credo!* from the opposition. That was hardly to be looked for, or even desired. What could have been looked for and desired was some patience and restraint. Those who thought it too much to show *that* degree of deference to the authority of the church’s ministry, refused something far greater than poor Dr. Döllinger ever did. But the last word has still to be spoken in response, and the effect of the Lambeth bishops’ service still to be seen.

Meanwhile here we are with five Sermons behind us discussing the questions of the church’s order, the influences to which it has been subject and the authority that it must confess. It is quite enough. In the two that remain we shall turn our eyes back, and forward, to the content of the interrupted exploration, and to some questions that are certainly at issue in it.

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¹ *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, preface 6.1.