Introduction to Post-Modern Approaches

We finished a few sessions talking about text-center approaches to interpretation, and in the last session I indicated we would move on to a different facet or the third aspect of communication, that is, reader-centered approaches. We also said that structuralism, which was one of the characteristic approaches under or text-centered approaches, gave way to post-structuralism which manifests concerns beyond structuralism, and often post-structuralism is identified with more post-modern approaches to hermeneutics and to biblical interpretation. For example, although much more could be said to summarize post-modern approaches to interpretation are often seen as characterized by a number of things; I’ll just highlight three of them.

Number one is pluralism, hermeneutical pluralism in approaching a text, that is approaching knowledge and meaning, where there is no worldview, no religious belief, no interpretation of reality that emerges as the correct one, but instead, instead of a hierarchy, there is a leveling effect where there is no interpretation of reality or meaning that emerges as the correct one. Often according to post-modern approaches, meaning is often seen as power and it is often seen as the abuse of power to assert that there is one correct meaning. So there’s a leveling effect that there’s no correct meaning or approach to interpretation.

Second, under post-modern approaches one of the things they have in common is meaning is seen as value-laden, that is, there’s no such thing as an objective-neutral interpretation of a text, but one brings one’s own predispositions and one’s own viewpoint and one’s own perspective to interpret the biblical text. What one values, what one finds in the text is what one wants to find.

Then third, reading communities shape our perspective in the way that we interpret biblical text. And so, again, our culture and the communities we belong to will inevitably influence and determine the way that we read a biblical text.
Reader Centered Approaches

But within the post-modern approaches or post-structural approaches to interpretation, I want to in this section focus on one approach in particular, that is, reader-centered approaches. That is, we said that to rehearse again sort of historically and logically how hermeneutics and biblical interpretation has developed. Hermeneutics has moved logically and historically through the three main facets of the process of communication, beginning with historically and author-centered approaches that emphasize the production of the text and the author’s role in producing the text. The goal was to uncover the author’s intended meaning. Because that was deemed unrecoverable or unnecessary or even impossible, the focus shifted to text-centered approaches where the text itself became the locus of meaning but yet because of some of the difficulties surrounding that and the failure of any methodology to emerge as central or the final reading or meaning of a text or objective reading of a text to emerge, that gave way to reader-centered approaches that we’ll begin to talk about.

Now the primary locus of meaning is the reader and the reader’s ability to interpret text. So reader-response criticism, as this approach to interpretation is often called, encompasses a number of approaches that we’ll look at. There are a number of possible approaches, but the main focus of all forms of reader-response criticism is that readers make sense of texts. Again the failure of text centered approaches and even author centered approaches to provide objective meaning now gives rise to reader centered approaches where meaning must be the result of the reader’s interaction with the text. It’s the readers that make sense of text.

Another way to put it, according to author-centered approaches, is the text had a life given to it by the author. The author was responsible for the life of the text and the production of the text. So with author-centered text approaches, the author gave life to the text. According to text-centered approaches, the text had a life of its own. But according to reader-centered approaches, texts have no life until the readers give them the life by reading the text. In other words, the reader is responsible for determining meaning, for
finding meaning in the text, or even creating meaning in the text. The reader is responsible for determining what is found in the text, hence the use of reader-response criticism or reader-response approaches to interpretation.

Again, under this approach at best, the text only has meaning potentials, the text only has the potential for meaning that the reader must now discover or create. In other words, under historical approaches, especially author centered approaches, but more accurately going back even further to more enlightenment or rational approaches, the reader was often seen as objective, almost a passive observer. Remember we talked about a couple of models of a reader having a blank mind or being a blank slate, waiting to receive sensory perception from the text or the reader being like a blank slate or dry sponge waiting to soak up data, through pure inductive reasoning. One could simply interpret with pure induction the text and one’s interpretation would correspond to what was found in the text. So the author was almost seen as a passive observer, whereas in reader-response approaches the reader is more active in reading the text and in interpreting it. The reader is an active agent in creating meaning in the text.

**Reader-Response Approaches**

Now most would agree that there are at least two, and I would add perhaps a third, approach that could fall under the category of reader-response criticism. Two important approaches that have emerged, that at least most would admit, two possible approaches to reader-response criticism are a more conservative approach as it’s often labeled and a more radical approach that we’ll look at those in just a moment.

But I think there’s also a third approach and that is that reader-response criticism could choose to focus on the historical reader, that is, the original readers for whom the text was intended. So one could ask the question: What would the readers of the book of Isaiah or the original readers of 1 and 2 Kings, or the original readers of the book of Matthew, or Paul’s letter to the Galatians, what would the original readers have made of the text, how would they have understood it? So from that perspective reader-response criticism could encompass the historical readers, the original readers of the text, and ask
how they would have understood it and how they would have interpreted the text. So that’s sort of a first century or fifth century BC reader-response criticism asking the question of the historical readers.

However, more prominent is reader-response criticism has been what some have labeled a more conservative reader-response which is often associated with the literary critic Wolfgang Iser, and what he suggested is what some have labeled more of a text-guided reader-response or almost an author guided reader-response criticism or approach to interpreting text. That is, the text itself guides the reader as to how the text should be read. In other words, there are constraints as to what the reader can do with the text. So Iser thought that the author and the readers that are involved in meaning and discovering meaning and they should be creative but there are constraints imposed by the text itself. According to Iser, texts have gaps in them, left there by the author, that the reader is required to fill in order to make sense of the text. And the reader must fill in those gaps so that meaning can emerge from the text. But again, the text itself provides the constraints for how that takes place. The text itself establishes limits for the reading process.

Iser also introduced the notion of the implied reader or the ideal reader, that is, the reader that is assumed by the text, that the physical reader must identify with to read the text. Again some have called this more of a text guided reader-response criticism or an authored guided reader-response criticism, that is, the reader is not completely autonomous, the reader is not completely free to do whatever he or she wants to do with the text. Meaning and reading is not a free-for-all or what is simply in the eye of the beholder, but the author invites creative interpretation on the part of the reader.

**Birth Narrative Example**

An interesting example of how that might work especially in terms of filling in the gaps of the text is what that might mean in reading a text such as the birth narrative of Luke chapter two, or the so called Christmas story. When you think about it and you go back and read it, it’s interesting how many gaps we have had to fill in to make sense of
the text. So you start with a text that places the events of Jesus’ birth within Greco-Roman history. So it begins in those days, Caesar Augustus was the emperor of the world. Then a call goes out for the taxing of the entire world at that time. And Quirinius is the governor of Syria during that period as well. So it sets the historical background, but then it begins to jump, the text begins to jump along rather quickly and leave a number of gaps that readers have filled. It begins with Joseph coming up from Galilee from the city of Nazareth to Judea, ultimately to the city where David was born called Bethlehem. He comes with Mary his wife who has, is pregnant with child, but then the very next thing is while they were there she gives birth to a child. It tells you nothing, it tells you nothing about how the gap or how long, about they got there. We often fill in those gaps by envisioning, did Mary and Joseph ride in a caravan, or did they go by themselves? We often construct a picture of Joseph leading a donkey along with Mary. Did Mary give birth when she arrived immediately? Were they there for a long period of time? The text doesn’t tell us, and we often fill in those gaps.

When it tells us that the baby was wrapped in clothes and laying in a manger, we’re not told how they got to that manger. We’re not told where that is, so we have to fill in the gaps by constructing various scenarios, sometimes based on tradition or based on our own experience. But somewhere there was a manger, a barn, or a shed that Mary and Joseph would have gone to. But the text doesn’t tell us when they did that or why they did that. Due to a mistranslation of one of the words in the text, we often envision Mary and Joseph going to an inn, a hotel, but there’s no vacancy left. We’re not told exactly why that’s the case but we can envision a scenario where they go to perhaps somewhere close to the inn, they go to a barn or this stable that has a manger where Jesus is finally born. Interestingly though, that word that’s translated “inn” is a word that’s used elsewhere in Luke to refer to a “guestroom.” So, more likely it was possible that Mary and Joseph would have gone to a relative’s house and stayed in a guestroom.

Furthermore, we’re not told, although the baby is laid in a manger, we’re not told exactly where that was, we’re not told that they stayed in that manger the entire time. We
often envision Mary and Joseph being in the manger the entire time they’re in Bethlehem giving birth to Jesus, but is it possible that they stayed in the guestroom and when it came time to give birth they would’ve gone to the only isolated place they could find and that would have been a stable that would have contained this manger, this feeding trough. Some archeological discoveries suggested that it would have been a closet or lean to against the house. So again, we’re not told. Did Mary and Joseph spend the entire time there, were they in the guest room? Then the text says that when the time came to give birth she gave birth to a child, laid him in a manger because there was no room in the guestroom. Is it possible that they stayed in the guestroom for some time and then when the contractions got closer and it was time to give birth that the guestroom would’ve had other persons in it and it was too crowded and they went to the only place that would’ve had any privacy and that was to this stable? So again we’re not told exactly, there are a lot of gaps that we necessarily fill in to make sense of the text as we read it. My point isn’t to suggest how we should read the Gospel of Luke and the narrative, the birth narrative, but to demonstrate how, as readers, we creatively fill in the gaps and try to make sense of the story in Luke chapter two.

To give a couple of examples of a more conservative approach to reader-response criticism, again, primarily using New Testament examples. One individual named Robert Fowler, a New Testament scholar, has analyzed the feeding narratives, the feeding of the 4000 and the 5000 in Mark, chapters 6 and 8. He analyzes it from the standpoint of a reader who comes of the text for the first time and what it’s like to read the text for the first time. One common approach to Mark as well the other Gospels, to the feeding narratives where Jesus feeds the 5000 or in Luke the 4000 or the 5000 is to read it in a Eucharistic context as having Eucharistic connotations that is having reference to the Lord’s Supper. Fowler again is wanting to ask the question: What is it like to read the text from the standpoint of a reader who comes to it for the first time? He draws attention to the fact that the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper does not occur until later in the narrative in the reading process and that is until one gets to Mark, chapter 14. So,
according to Fowler, it’s illegitimate to come to the text and read it from the perspective of the first time reader to read the feeding of the 4000 and the 5000 in Mark from a Eucharistic context or Eucharistic setting since that does not come until later on in the reading process.

**Revelation as an Example**

Another example would be, the book of Revelation assumes an ideal reader. It’s as if the author assumes a certain reader that he wants actual literal readers to identify with. That is, one who is able to read the book of Revelation in constant intertextual relationship to the Old Testament. So the ideal reader or the competent reader of Revelation that the author assumes is one who can draw connections to the Old Testament text and one that will realize and pick up on the Old Testament allusions that, and Old Testament connections that are found within the book of Revelation. In fact, the author at times even appears to build the reader’s competency throughout the book of Revelation in, in overt references to Old Testament text. One way to describe a more conservative approach to reader-response criticism might be to compare it to a dot-to-dot. Some of you might be familiar with children’s coloring books or sometimes in our newspapers in sections of the newspaper where you find crossword puzzles or cartoons you might find a dot-to-dot where you find this space in the newspaper or a page in a child’s coloring book and there will be a series of dots that are numbered. You are asked to connect the dots and then what emerges is some sort of picture. A more conservative reader-response approach might be and has been compared to doing a dot-to-dot. The dots are there but you as a reader are supposed to connect them and the numbers guide you in connecting them. Perhaps a better analogy might be that for a conservative reader-response approach this is not a perfect analogy but an analogy might be a dot-to-dot that has some of the dots numbered but others aren’t, giving you a little bit of freedom to connect them and create. In other words, you’re guided, there are constraints on what you can produce but there’s a little bit of freedom within there to produce a picture at the end of the day. In other words, you can’t create whatever kind of picture you want, but
instead you are guided by the text itself in what you discover within the text, so that not just anything goes. So that’s a more conservative approach to reader-response criticism.

**Stanley Fish and Reader-Response**

Still emphasizing the role of the reader, the creativity of the reader is needed to fill in the gaps in reading a text but still placing constraints on what the reader can do as guided by the text or guided by the author. A more radical approach to reader-response criticism is associated with one individual in particular an individual named Stanley Fish. A reading you do in reader-response criticism you’ll be introduced to Stanley Fish who is best known for a text, his work entitled *Is There a Text In This Class?* This might seem rather odd of the casual reader to have it phrased this way but it gets at the heart of this approach, that is, readers create meaning, and to go even further readers create texts. That is, according to Stanley Fish, a text and meaning do not exist on their own. So, unlike author-centered approaches there’s no text and meaning created by an author. Unlike text-centered approaches, there’s no autonomous text that exists on its own but instead according to radical reader-response criticism, as advocated by Stanley Fish, there is no text at all but instead the readers create the text. Hence the title of his work, *Is There a Text In This Class?* The class is responsible for creating meaning, for creating the text. So meaning is certainly in the eye of the beholder or of the reader. It’s readers that not just make sense of text but they actually create text, they determine what they do with the text or what they do in interpreting. To use the analogy of a dot-to-dot that we used in the last one, if a conservative reader approach, reader-response approach can be compared to a dot-to-dot that has some numbering to guide you with how you connect them, a radical reader-response would have dot-to-dots, scattered dots with no numbers at all, that you could just create your own picture according to whatever you want to do.

Another way of comparing another analogy might be the ink blot tests where one looks at it and is asked what one sees, “What do you see in this series of ink blots?” Often it’s in the eye of the beholder, the one who is reading it. So a text could be seen as like a bunch of scattered dots that one simply connects according to the way that one chooses.
So the way you connect them is going to determine the picture that is created. So by themselves the dots don’t mean anything until you connect them and create a picture.

In comparison with, when we looked several sessions ago at some of the historical roots of hermeneutics and the enlightenment and the period of rationalism and emphasis on human reason, interpretation was often seen as a subject, gaining mastery over an object. There was a division between the subject, which is the interpreter, and the object, which is the text. Under reading reader-response criticism this division between subject and object, that is reader and text, is eliminated and dissolved. Instead, texts become more, to use another analogy, a text becomes more like a mirror. It simply reflects who I am and what I choose to see in the text. It simply reflects how I perceive things, it reflects my own perspective that I bring to the text. So the text as an entity, the text as a separate object for Stanley Fish drops out of the picture.

We’ve already said that this approach in a sense is already anticipated by Immanuel Kant. We talked about him back in some of our historical study of hermeneutics and the important contribution that Kant made to interpretation but in a sense this radical reader-response criticism takes the insights of Immanuel Kant to its logical and extreme conclusion. We’ve said that Kant said that all that we can know is what he called “the phenomena.” That is, all we can know is how we perceive things. We can’t know something as it really is. We can’t know something as it is in itself, but knowledge is filtered through the grids and the categories that are already present in the mind. In other words for Kant, then one could not be certain that one’s understanding and knowledge necessarily correlated precisely objectively to how something really was. So again when I look at this book I cannot be certain that what this really is, in and of itself, but only how I perceive it. My knowledge of it, my perception of it, is filtered through the grids of the categories of my mind.

Now Kant seemed to think that generally human beings had similar, universally similar categories that allowed them to understand and make sense of things, but Fish, a radical reader reader-response critic takes this to its logical extreme and suggests then
that because things are not, because we cannot know something in and of itself as it is. Stanley Fish said then, we can’t know a text as it really is but instead it’s our understanding of it is solely determined by our perception of it. Furthermore, he suggested that every reader perceives things differently. So every interpreter, according to Fish then, every interpreter will see things differently according to the perspectives they bring to the text. Again, the text is like a mirror that reflects what I already bring to the text. According to Fish then, because we only perceive the text as a reader he would say interpretation precedes the text. The text does not exist first then we read it, he would say interpretation precedes the text. So to suggest that there is a correct meaning of the text, and that I can get at by applying the proper methods of interpretation to him is authoritarian. You can’t tell me what I can do with the text, but instead as a reader I create meaning.

So, for example, one might suggest that there are different millennial approaches to interpreting Revelation 20. In verses 1 through 6 are the result of readers finding what they want. So readers make sense of text and no interpretation is correct. So no interpretation of the millennial passage is the correct one or is to be connected with what the author intended according to this approach.

Now one obvious question that this approach raises is: Are there any limits or constraints in meaning, or is it simply a free-for-all or an anything goes? Stanley Fish did suggest that the sky is not the limit and not anything goes. He did suggest that there are constraints for correct interpretation but the question is: What are the constraints, what are the criteria for a correct interpretation? What guides or constrains interpretation? According to Stanley Fish the answer was the interpretive community that one belongs to. So the community that I belong to determines the correct way of approaching the text or determines the values and the approaches, the beliefs that I will bring to the texts and how I will read it. So our reading then is simply an extension of a community’s beliefs and a community’s values and their interest and their approach of the text. So the correct reading of the text is not one that conforms to the author’s intention, not one that
conforms to the text, but one that conforms and is determined by the interpretive community to which I belong. And again one could ask: Is that why Calvinists read Hebrews 6 in a certain way, or is that why all premillennialists read Revelation 20 in a certain way? Fish would agree it is because the community they belong to determines what they find in the text.

To give a couple examples very very briefly of radical approaches to reader-response criticism a number of interpreters have been interested in simply reading, for example, Old Testament texts like the prophets in light of Marxist ideology. Again they are not interested in trying to establish the historical meaning of a text according to the author but they’re quite happy to apply modern day ideology and modern day thinking and to see and read that into the biblical text. Or another interesting example to go back to the parables, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father, the prodigal son, and the older son are seen in one interpretive approach to correspond to Sigmund Freud’s id, ego, and super ego. And again, the goal is not what is the correct meaning of this text in light of the author and historical background or the structure of the text but simply the reader creating meaning in the text. And so when this is, this approach is often taken to the extreme, you sometimes find some very different and sometimes strange readings of the biblical text.

**Evaluation of Reader-Response Approaches**

So what should we say about this approach by way of evaluation both thinking of more conservative approaches to reader-response criticism but also in particularly more radical approaches to reader-response criticism. It seems to me that the subjective nature of the approach, sometimes the uncontrolled nature especially of more radical reader-response approaches are certainly at odds with the view of the biblical text as the inspired word of God where God intends then to communicate a meaning to his readers where he expects us to understand and he expects us to respond in obedience. Radical approaches that completely relativize meaning in the text as solely the property of the reader seem to me to be at odds with the biblical text. It is contrary to an understanding of the text as
God’s Word to his people, God acting in history to communicate to his people and expecting they will respond in obedience. So one of the questions raised then by reader-response criticism is: Is there meaning outside of myself that I am responsible to discover? Is the text a mirror that simply reflects what I bring to the text or is the text more like a window that there is meaning that I can discover however dirty the window is, however cracked it may be, however cloudy, that I can still see through it there’s still a meaning outside of myself that God expects his people to discover and respond to with appropriate in obedience?

Second, Fish’s radical approach to reader-response criticism and to interpretation, according to many evaluations doesn’t account for and does not explain how someone can actually change their mind and perspective as a result of reading a text. If the text is merely a mirror that reflects what I bring to it and I can do what I want with it, how is it that some readers are changed and transformed as a result of reading a text? It even begs the question, Why a text at all? Why would an author write a text? Why a text at all if all it is a mirror that reflects what I think and what I bring to it anyway and the meaning and the interpretation that I already possess? In relationship to that, how is it, how do you explain how readers are transformed but also how do people, to use the language of interpretive community, how can anyone shift or switch or change interpretive communities and interpretive approaches? It seems that Fish’s radical reader-response criticism also cannot account for new insight that’s gained when someone reads a text.

Third, outside of interpretive communities, there seems to be no way of evaluating a good or bad reading or a good or even better reading of a text. In fact how under Stanley Fish’s approach under a radical reader-response approach how is a community self critical, is there any room for a community to be critical of itself and its own perspective and its own viewpoint? Is there any way for another reading community or a text to challenge a reader’s interpretive community? Are there good or bad interpretive communities? Are there good or bad insights, readings and interpretive practices?

Number four, kind of as a final parting thought do reader-response critics write to
be understood and to communicate their findings? One could ask if Stanley Fish was consistent. Could his reader-response approach be applied to his own works and interpreted in light of how one wanted to do so that maybe I could read Stanley Fish’s works from a reader approach affirming that author’s intention indeed is a correct way to interpret and approach biblical texts?

**Insights gained from a Reader-Response Approach**

But are there any contributions of reader-response approaches to biblical texts? What might be the contribution of reader-response approaches to interpreting the Old and New Testament in particular? First of all, I think reader-response approaches have reminded us that we are not neutral, objective observers and passive observers of a biblical text. We are not pure inductive interpreters again simply waiting to soak up data or objective interpreters simply waiting to have our blank slates written upon and inscribed upon by the biblical text. But instead we come to the texts with influences, presuppositions, perspectives, and commitments that affect the way we read the text. We belong to communities and traditions that influence the way we read a text. The question to ask is: Are these determinative, do these necessarily distort the way we look at the text? Is there no meaning outside of me that cannot influence and change and transform the way I think? Will my perspective, my values, my own background, inevitably affect the way I read the text? But instead, text can challenge and transform readers. We can discover meaning outside of ourselves. We’re not so constrained by our perspective and our insight that we cannot find meaning outside of ourselves. That is the text is not simply a mirror that reflects what I bring to the text and reflects my interpretation but instead it is a window that again, however cloudy, however cracked, or dirty still allows us to see and have insight into another world and meaning outside of our own.

A second insight of reader-response criticism would be that the reader is involved in the interpretive process. Reader-response criticism reminds us that the reader is not simply a passive observer sitting on the sideline simply observing what takes place but the reader is actively involved in discovering meaning in the text. The reader actively
engages in a dialogue with the text. So the goal of the reader is in some respects to
discover and identify with the implied reader and the text with the ideal reader that the
text itself assumes, that the author assumes. Our goal is to identify with that, not simply
as, to become passive observers, neither to simply to find in the text what I already bring
to it. That is, communication does not happen, in some respects until all three facets of
the process of communication takes place: the author producing the text and a reader
reading it. That’s why authors write, to communicate something to a reader that they will
make sense of and appropriate. So in one respect communication does not happen
without the reader interpreting and making sense of the text.

A third insight that I think of reader-response criticism is to remind us of the need
for humility. Reader-response criticism can engender humility in the reader rather than
thinking that somehow I can objectively absorb the data and come up with an
interpretation that perfectly and automatically corresponds to the meaning that the author
has placed in the text. Reader-response reminds me of the need to approach interpretation
with humility to recognize the danger of my own shortsightedness and the assumptions
that I bring to the text. It reminds me of the need to be open to hearing other perspectives
and other readings that might challenge my own. It calls on me to be open to being
challenged by the text and being willing as a reader especially in light of the text and
others who have read the text to help me overcome my own hermeneutical myopia and be
willing to see other perspectives in the text that might help uncover blind spots in my
own reading. It helps me uncover my own tendency to impose my own perspective,
insights and values on the text.

Number four, and finally as far as contribution is a reminder that reader-response
approaches can help us by reminding us of the role the historical reader and focus on the
implied reader, that there are limitations to meaning. There are limitations to what I find
in the text. The historical reader or focus on the historical reader can help us to uncover
what the author intended to do with the text in its original context. A focus on the implied
reader can help us identify what the reader assumed in the text, the ideal reader that the author assumes we will participate with and associate with.

**Reader-Response Conclusion**

So from that perspective and given those suggestions, I think reader-response criticism has much to contribute in some respects when carefully approached and carefully controlled to the process of interpreting biblical texts. To conclude by simply summarizing what might a reader approach might look like or what might be an appropriate reader approach to the text. First of all, in approaching a biblical text as readers we should recognize the assumptions and presuppositions that we bring to the text and the possibility of those distorting and influencing the way we look at a text, influencing for good and for bad. I’ve already suggested that one common response by many Christians to interpreting a text suggest is, “Well I simply sit down and read the text. I come to it with an open mind and I read the text without any biases or any presuppositions. I simply let the text speak.” Again the difficulty with that approach is that it’s probably in much more danger of distorting the text because that person is probably then not going to be aware of how his or her assumptions, predispositions, influences and values will indeed have a bearing on how they read the text. So a reader approach should start with the realization that we do come to the text with assumptions and values and presuppositions as part of interpretive communities and that will influence the way we read the text. So it warns us to be aware of the possibility of distortion or even the possibility of how that might be productive in the way we read a text.

As we’ll see later on in subsequent sessions at times I’m convinced that there are certain persons especially in third world countries, especially those who read the biblical text from a position of poverty and a position of oppression and disenfranchisement that probably will read the text in a manner that is closer to how the original authors would have read it. That is, they read from the situation that is very close to the situation of the original biblical text and the original readers. So sometimes one’s presuppositions don’t necessarily distort the text when they correspond with the original situation of the text,
the original situation of the readers, it might be productive and fruitful. I’ve learned the
most over the years of interpreting text, from my students from third world countries who
have over and over again reminded me of how and where I might be reading into the text
my own 21st century North American middle class white male perspective. Sometimes by
listening to those that come from a third world country from a prospective of oppression
who are reading from a location of dislocation, reading from a situation of poverty, they
may be in a place where they can actually understand the text better because they’re in a
situation and context that corresponds more closely to the original context of the biblical
writers at times. That may uncover a blind spot in my own reading. It may demonstrate
how my own culture and situation living in a North American, western, middle class
socio-economic environment might affect the way that I read the text.

This leads me to the second one. I must then allow those assumptions and
presuppositions and values and my background to be challenged and corrected by the text
that I would also say by other readings of the text, by others that may be in a better
position to at times hear it. I need to be open to those and to allow the text to challenge
and correct.

Third what that means is I must approach the text with humility. There’s no place,
for authoritative or authoritarian readings that simply reaffirm and reassert my power
over others and exclude others who have read the text. Finally, again, as I’ve said, we
need to listen to the readings of others. We need to allow the readings of others to correct
our shortsightedness when it comes to interpreting a text.

So, again, reader-response criticism when utilized carefully I think is an important
part of the interpretive process. It helps us come to grips with understanding how our
background, influence, values, culture and even theological traditions from the
communities we belong to might influence the way we read the text. Reader-response
criticism therefore reminds us of the need for humility, the need to listen to other voices.

Deconstruction: An Introduction

Yet at the same time we need to recognize that the text still can function to correct
us. There still is meaning outside of ourselves that can transform, challenge and correct how we think. Reader-response criticism, especially more radical forms of reader-response criticism then logically could be pushed even further and especially radical reader-response criticism logically moved into what is known as deconstructionism, that is approaches that go even beyond reader approaches to find that there is simply no meaning there at all. Meaning is completely unstable, texts are unstable, and the result is that there is nothing to tie meaning to. There is no center. Meaning then becomes a free-for-all. It amounts to little more than at times just playing with a text and doing whatever one wants. More radical approaches of reader-response criticism have then begun to move, in that direction so in the next session we will spend a little bit of time talking about deconstructionism as an approach to interpretation that falls again within post-structuralism. We’ll look at a couple of the major figures surrounding that, and also evaluate it asking what it might contribute to hermeneutics and interpretation of biblical text, what are the dangers to be avoided, and also introduce briefly ideological approaches to biblical texts. We’ve mentioned that already but reading texts from certain locations and reading the biblical texts with the intent of critiquing its ideology, the values and perspectives that produced it. We’ll focus on, for example, feminist readings of biblical texts, again just to introduce you to where hermeneutics and interpretation is going, always with a critical eye on asking what might be the value of that approach but the shortcomings and dangers as well. So in the next session we’ll turn to deconstructionism and also dabble in ideological approaches to interpretation as well.

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