THE INFERENCE OF SALVATION: ON READING THE GOSPELS

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Most of us can remember when we first read one of the Gospels with a new understanding, relinquishing notions of who and where we were which before had seemed undeniable. The structure of our conscious selves was changed, as indeed it is in the performance of any personally significant symbolic act. If we were aware of this change, we noticed to our astonishment that we had become, or at least were inclined to become, a little less self-centered. This is what one would expect from understanding as contrasted to the conceptual aggrandizement of "winning" an argument or debate, or forcing a personal interpretation onto the text we read. As students of language are more and more beginning to realize, verbal understanding especially involves abandoning, at least to a degree, accustomed notions of identity and conceptual environment in order that we may read or listen as the language of book or speaker directs.

But understanding is not merely a mechanical calibration of equivalent meanings achieved through a careful matching process involving accommodation on the part of the hearer or reader. A certain amount of give in book or speaker is necessary, too. For this reason, among others, almost all words in common use which are not technical are rather vague. We fill in their meanings as we read or listen, taking the part of the other as well as our own. The result of any reading or hearing whose object is not solely a technical exchange is an innovative making of inferences which leads to new interpretations of printed texts as well as an altered picture of one's self and the world. If "community" be defined in part as that in which meaning is created, whether by people reacting with people or with something else, we form new communities when we talk or read with understanding. Or we strengthen old ones.

Of course we interfere with the text when we read it, and we are all exegetes of what we hear. Our interference, in fact, is much more than superficial—it goes beyond the surface of the text, acknowledging recurrent logical and rhetorical patterns which give individual sentences their contextual coherence, and when we listen with care, we pick up innumerable patterned nonverbal cues in addition to recurrent verbal and conceptual patterns. And here, too, we interfere, interpreting, criticizing, bringing our personal hermeneutic to the creation of meaning.

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Exactly how these complementary processes operate to create meaning has been freshly approached in the last few years by linguists and cognitive psychologists as well as by social and literary critics. The implications of constructional, creative reading or listening for the study of communication are beginning to be realized: communication is not mere transfer, as old-line structural linguistics had assumed. In fact, psycholinguists are increasingly convinced of the two-way street theory of reading—the text interfering with us, and we with the text.[1] The implication for the study of the Gospels is clear: Gospel reading is a two-way street, too. As Rudolf Bultmann and his followers have stressed, we transform the text as the text transforms us.[2] And if that is so, if scriptural meanings are as subject to creative interpretation as the meanings of any text, where can we look for the certainty of "Gospel truth"? We look, I suggest, at how the Gospels change us. For many who read the Gospels sympathetically are affected in one fundamentally identical way: they leave self behind at least to a degree (cf. Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:32) and they grow in love at least to a degree—no matter the cultural or idiosyncratic nuances they may impose on the passages they read.

This essay makes use of a creative reading theory suggested in part by contemporary Case Grammar and in part by the theory that every sentence is shaped by logical form. These approaches to language are helpful in appreciating the apparent paradox that what often happens after we have read the Gospels with receptive understanding is behaviorally quite similar even though our verbal interpretations of the Gospel message may differ. This uniform behavioral modality is characterized by the modification, even displacement, of egocentricity by love.

Interpretations

Metanoia is an about-face to God accompanied by repentance and self-criticism. For even a degree of *metanoia,* decentering is required: awareness that our self-centered certainties are really illusory. One of the mechanisms by which decentering can be effected is paradox, the logical or semantic wedge which—but only if we are brought to accept it—drives out the wedge of self. As Norman Perrin wrote of the more unsettling sayings of Jesus, we are challenged by paradox to radical questioning.[3] The best contemporary analysis of how paradox works is provided by Case Grammar, one of whose largely ignored premises is that, in language at least, synthesis precedes analysis. The

[1]See, for example, George Marsh *et al.,* "A Cognitive-Developmental Theory of Reading Acquisition," in G. E. Mackinnon and T. Gary Waller, eds., *Reading Research, Advances in Theory and Practice* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), pp. 199-221.

[2]For summary and discussion, see I Howard Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation, Essays on Principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 313-315.

[3]Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom, Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 52.

whole of the subject must be grasped before we can analyze the subject in the way suggested by the predicate. In order to accept a paradox, we must first know the whole of which the two conflicting terms are parts. For example, if we are to believe that we will save our lives only by losing them, we must first postulate a whole of which the two obviously different "lives" are essential if contrasting parts.

A few prefatory words about Case Grammar may help. Case Grammar was first described by Charles Fillmore in 1968 though a somewhat analogous theory was developed by early Sanskrit grammarians, notably Pañini, in the fourth century B. C. It has been made a significant part of both Transformational Generative Grammar and the propositional structure of meaning recently formulated by the psychologist Walter Kintsch and his associates.[4] It theorizes that the verb in the predicate specifies the kind of semantic role to be played by other parts of the sentence. The verb is the blueprint. If you want a noun to go with it, the verb tells you what kind of noun will do. A verb like "to be" frequently requires the "Stative" role, so that we can say that water is a composition of gasses, its "state." "To build" calls for Result (she built a reputation as a scholar); "to love" implies both Experiencer and Patient (John loves Mary). The verb in the predicate specifies the kind of inference a sentence would have us make.

But we cannot construct the argument a predicate directs us to make—cannot understand the propositional content of a sentence—unless we intuit in what ways the subject is "more" or, at least, different than the predicate says it is. This is because predicates qualify their subjects, limiting them. "John loves Mary": we need to know that John is more than "Experiencer" and Mary more than "Patient" if we are to understand these roles of the "John" and "Mary" of the sentence.

Here is where drawing an inference in language differs from the analogous procedure in mathematics. In dealing with elements of an arithmetic set, one does not have to know what properties the elements may possess other than those they possess by virtue of membership in their set. They may be both prime and positive integers, for example, but we do not need to know of a set of positive integers (3, 7, 11) what else (in other sets) the numerals stand for. But in language, "John loves Mary" depends on how well we know John the man, churchgoer, and father as well as the man who loves Mary.

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[4]Charles Fillmore, "The Case for Case," in E. Bach and R. Harms, eds., *Universals in Linguistic Theory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1968). H. M. Ananthanarayana, "The Kāraka Theory and Case Grammar," *Indian Linguistics,* 31 (1970), 14-27. Noam Chomsky, *Essays on Form and Interpretation* (New York: Elsevier North Holland Publishing, 1977). Walter Kintsch, *et. al., The Representation of Meaning in Memory* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1974). The observation that, in language, terms are perceived as wholes was first empirically verified by William Labov. See his "The Boundaries of Words and Their Meanings," in C.-J. N. Bailey and R. W. Shuy, eds., *New Ways of Analyzing Variations in English* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1973).

One more, slightly different, example. If I were to tell my students that contemporary grammar is like analytic geometry as contrasted to Euclidean geometry, I would expect them to remember from their school days that the grammar they were then taught assumed a great deal that the more technical grammar they study in college makes explicit. I might even expect them to recall what they know about the different kinds of grammar, prescriptive, traditional, and so on, in order to understand my comparison. I assume that they have a whole picture of "grammar" in their heads.

In language, at least, understanding presupposes synthesis and, in a sense, some kind of synthesis must precede understanding. Language formalizes, even simplifies, the manifold, dense realities we move among. We remember, recognize, and apperceive reality as a complex of wholes (of which our memory of school grammar is a part) before we distinguish its precise dimensions and relations. At the same time, we become aware of logical resonances in reality, coherent drifts in being which constitute the base picture of a symbolic order. Otherwise we would not be able to compare the different symbolic orders of mathematics and language. Another way to put this is to say that we "know" the whole from which roles are extracted for predication before we decode the predication, or we construct the whole (from clues in life or the text) on the basis of what we already know before we take it apart for the purpose of sentential analysis.[5]

Any discourse gives us clues to the whole meaning from whose parts we are directed, in individual sentences, to make inferences. What Kintsch calls a "text base," a coherent series of underlying propositions in a text or discourse, contains recurrent themes or concepts which have identical or nearly identical reference, the exactness of which differs according to the degree of precision demanded by the text.[6] (The concept *logos* in the first eighteen verses of the fourth Gospel is such a recurrent theme.) These recurrent themes ensure continuity and coherence from proposition to proposition. They are the foundation on which the sentences sit. In reading a text, we assimilate the recurrent themes and from them form a base picture of the fundamental reality the text is concerned with elucidating before we construct meaning out of the text base, the propositions made in the sentences. There are few significant sentences in any discourse without such thematic keys. They allow us to intuit the wholes represented by each significant subject before we construct particular predications.

I suggest that, in reading the Gospels, we intuit from recurrent themes what Jesus did not explicitly say in order to understand what he did say, just as we infer from what he did who he is. The clues are in the text, as they were in

[5]So Michael Polanyi has speculated in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi,* ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Werner Heisenberg reminds us that belief in such conceptual "intermediate layers of reality" plays a decisive role in philosophy from Aristotle to quantum theory. Cited in M. Jammer, *The Philosophy of Quantum Mechanics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), p. 44.

[6]Kintsch *et al., op. cit.,* pp. 14-17.

life for his disciples, but the scriptural Jesus does not always clarify their significance either for his disciples or for us. We must catch the truth by informed insight, as his first followers did—only our informed insight consists for the most part of reconstructed meanings. At any rate, having formed some idea of the thematic foundation, we read and link up collectively coherent sentences. We are able to fill in the semantic roles of the noun and pronoun in the sentence, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself..." (Matthew 16:24) because we know from the text base that this injunction is directed at those who accept Jesus as the suffering Messiah (Matthew 16:13-21).

The writers of the Gospels reflected in their different text bases the presuppositions of the communities for whom they were writing. We see this in their thematic shifts. Luke, for example, substitutes "Son of Man" for "Kingdom of God" because his Gospel interpreted "Jesus' reference to the coming of the Kingdom of God as a reference to the coming of the Son of Man."[7] And nearly two thousand years of Christianity have considerably added to the ways these Christologies can be understood. The reality we individually intuit from the text bases is guided by tradition. We cannot escape the intersubjectivity of our communities. But to read intelligently means nevertheless that we must ourselves newly create the foundational dimension which gives the gospel narrative its underlying coherence. This brings us to a familiar problem.

A Conversional Modality

Given the inevitability of individual readings of the Gospels even within the context of a community of faith, it would not seem possible to assert the existence of a single unifying impetus which would result in a commonalty of spiritual experience. Yet for nearly two thousand years a unifying impact of the Gospel "message" has been seen at work within the formal development of different Christian communities. Very well: what consistent modality could witness to that unity? What could be the "language" of human holiness other than obedience to the Commandments (cf. Leviticus 19:2) by which the Christian community demonstrates the healing transformation of the Gospels?

The Christian "language" of communal holiness emerges not only from obedience to the Commandments but from the creative interaction of members of the community of believers with the Gospels and with each other. The modality which results is a shifting of focus from self to mutuality (cf. Leviticus 19:18). This shift, to whatever degree and whether gradual or abrupt, begins with understanding the Word and being transformed by it. An understood text is a community of text and reader; dialogue between reader and reader is also community if it leads to understanding. If what we understand from the Gospel text results in even a degree of radical self-criticism, of

[7]Perrin, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

abandonment of ego and subsequent self-renovation, a new community of an identifiable kind has been created which in turn works by degrees to convert others. This community is unified by its striving for holiness—a mark of the Church according to the Nicene Creed. We discover that in abandoning the more comfortable complacencies idolized by egoism, frequently venerated as convention, we fall into the immediate and increasing unity of mutual creativity—constructive to the degree that we are unimpeded by the idolatry of ego. This is the communal dynamic of the conversional modality we are concerned with in this paper.

Individually, we are increasingly aware that we have been found—we are no longer decentered, to use the jargon of contemporary critics influenced by Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser.[8] Depth psychology and Marxism have decentered the self from its once secure place in the mythical and philosophical orders as well as the capitalist ideology. The Cartesian "I" which existed because it "thought" can no longer be so certain of its existence. Nowadays it drifts in the deconstructed ambiguities of secular social and literary critiques. The spiritual insecurity of these critiques in fact inheres in the continuous deconstruction their ideologies demand. The Gospels at first decenter us, too, for they are primary examples of interrogative texts, questioning any and all assumptions we may have made about our "selves." Abstractly considered, the text base of each of the Gospels—its foundational logical structure—is a paradox: If and only if we leave self behind may we save our selves (Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23). Of course, the narrative itself is a paradox: the Savior is killed and thus effects salvation. Paradoxes don't add up. They are disturbing, especially the kind that question foundational assumptions. Confronted with the dual paradox of the Gospels, logical and narrative, we may allow ourselves to be wrenched from our ideological and mythical securities and turned in the direction of compassion, for the message of the paradox is love. We find that we may not have a secular place we can call our own, but we have a life. We are centered.

Dialogue which creatively interprets the dual logical and narrative paradox of compassion is radically transforming in a sense quite unlike the superficial "conversion" which Stanley E. Fish sees as the result of the "dialectical presentation" of some kinds of literature. "For the end of a dialectical experience is (or should be) nothing less than a conversion." Fish tells us: "...an exchanging of minds."[9] The Christian conversion is far more than exchange. It is transformational. The very structure of language is altered. "Friends told me that I spoke differently," the evangelist Lester

[8]Jacques Lecan, *Écrits,* trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 174: Linguistic change modifies the "moorings that anchor" our being. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 218: "Since Marx we have known that the human...ego is not the 'centre' of history...."

[9]Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 2.

Sumrall wrote of his conversion.[10] There are many such examples of changes in verbal behavior, from the adoption in the early Western Church of the colloquial syntax and informal vocabulary thought to have been the usual language (*sermo usualis*) of women and slaves to the noticeable exploitation of parataxis in the prose of C. S. Lewis immediately following the death of his wife Joy in 1960 and subsequent on his second, deeper, conversion.[11]

Underlying these structural changes are changes in affective approach. We may notice, for example, a decrease in facetiousness and (among academic people, especially) a reduction of irony. Such superficial results of the transformations effected by conversion are themselves individually wrought by an increase in love and a decrease in egoism and anxiety. It is a single process, this modality/semiotic of conversion, generated in a confrontation with the sacrificial compassion of Jesus, manifested in an alteration of personality structure (with what behavioral changes such an alteration entails) and resulting in an effect on others.

It is a single process, even though the words are different. The meanings I develop in my solitary reading of the Gospel of Mark will not be those you and I might construct in dialogue about Mark which might range from the specialized formulas of liberation theology, evangelical fundamentalism, the liberal Protestantism of a university divinity school, or contemporary Neo-Thomism. No matter. Such differences identify the communal shapes Christianity has formed out of the traditional and scriptural *memoria Jesu;* the behavioral modality is fundamentally the same.

How shall we name Jesus? Christus Victor, Kyrios, Messiah, Light of Light, The Savior, The King, The Sacred Heart? It matters, certainly, for each of these expressions identifies a community. But what matters more than these verbal differences is the unifying factor whose existence may be deduced from the way we experience the Gospel. In the last analysis, the semiotic of conversion is not verbal; it is the process whereby people freely create the forms of life together and, in loving one another more than the minimal demands of mere cooperation, respond to a unity between human beings and their Creator which lifts us above self-interest. This is the unifying way Christian experience answers the herald of salvation. Textual clues may enable us to read intelligently: to infer the wholes out of which predications are made and to identify textual coherence by means of the text base, but the spirit of Jesus Christ directs the modality of spiritually healthy relationships.

[10]Lester Sumrall, "Why I Will Preach the Gospel Until the Day I Die," *World Harvest* (July/August 1978), p. 11.

[11]For accounts of such changes see Joseph Keller, "Grace and Language," *Cross and Crown,* 29 (1977), 357-369; "Conversion: The Linguistic Dimension," *Encounter,* 41 (1980), 129-137.

Albert Nolan's *Jesus Before Christianity* is a summary of one such creation of meaning. Nolan begins by discarding all assumptions about Jesus, as that he is "divine" or a savior. He reminds us that Jesus did not found an organization, though he did inspire a movement; that in the beginning of this movement there were no doctrines, no dogmas. He asserts, however, what is obvious from the records: that Jesus was experienced by his followers as *the* breakthrough in the history of humanity, and he concludes that to believe in Jesus today is to agree with this assessment. Noland ends by affirming the divinity of Jesus and arguing the praxis of his compassion.[12]

Nolan "caught" this truth and this program which is its language, its systematic expression in the world. We recognize the truth of someone's statements, he says, "if they ring true" (p. 139); and Jesus rings authoritatively true. Quite simply, this means that we see this kind of truth if we simultaneously create or recognize it in us. At some level of cognition, we are able to construct an image or pattern out of more fundamental schemas which will resemble the pattern in the text. We look—deliberately, if we are serious students—for what Edward Schillebeeckx called "meta-dogmatic clues" in these early Christian writings, clues caught from "the tenor of their language" and from the tension between the phenomenon of Jesus and the cultural interpretations his life and words evoked. (Kintsch might say that what Shillebeeckx looks for are recurrent concepts which identify the text base and make possible his readings of individual sentences.) Inescapably, Shillebeeckx says, we discern a unitive factor in the Christian oneness of community experience, a continually articulated personal decision to restructure patterns of living. By an inexplicable process, readers of the Gospels recognize the difference between how they live and how they should live: if significant enough, the conversional recognition is a "discovery phenomenon."[13] We read creatively and then we act.

Precisely the same process (noticing meta-dogmatic clues and tenor; reconstructing a text base) is followed whenever we intelligently read a portion of the Gospels. For example, Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). The immediate effect of such a self-contradictory sentence as the last one is indeterminacy: its "truth-value" is neither a logically orthodox "true" or "false." Its context is that of the evils of hypocrisy (the leaven of the Pharisees) and of apparently needless anxiety (the disciples were worried because they had brought nothing to eat). Similar self-contradictory sentences in the wider context of Matthew's Gospel are apparent apothegms

[12]Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 134-141.

[13]Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology,* trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 34, 44, 50, 56-67.

whose immediate contexts are the dangerous preaching of the coming Kingdom and the nature of that Kingdom (Matthew 10:39 and 13:12).

Of course, these clues are in contexts which may or may not accurately represent the real life situations in which such sentences were originally uttered: in reading the Gospels we are subject to the individual and cultural perspectives of their authors. Nevertheless, we have a sufficiently decentering text. It seems to suggest that, to find out who we are and what we have, we must cut ourselves adrift from our standard presuppositions and (other immediate contexts will tell us) love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 7:12) which, we can assume from Chapter 5, necessitates turning the cheek and loving our enemies. We must cut ourselves adrift from anxiety also, for being anxious about what we shall eat or drink or even about our very lives ignores the fact that we are God's children (Matthew 6:25-34). The praxis is love, which is neither fearful nor self-centered, and the rhetorical technique is to undercut the traditional symbolic foundations of ego with which we pretend to uphold the Law. In assigning semantic roles to individual words in the sentences of Jesus (the process described in Case Grammar), we discover that the self which must be denied is the self that cultivates the contraries of love, honesty, and trust. The first point to be noted is that we are not told the truth: we discover it, like the Centurian, the Canaanite woman, and Simon (Matthew 8:8, 15:28, 16:16). We construct it from clues which identify the text base, from the propositional coherence between that base and the subsequent inferences we make from the sentences; we construct it from the semantic roles we were able to assign to parts of the sentences. The second point is that the behavior modality to which these constructions lead us is precisely that increase in love and decrease in ego which, we infer from the text, Jesus was talking about.

In sum, we appreceive the whole from the textual clues and then we decode the system which depends for the communicability of its sentences on our apperception. The whole is both in us and in the book or discourse. This can mean only one thing: the whole we apperceive is not entirely something that can be analyzed because it precedes analysis. In a paradoxical text about men and women's relationships to one another and to their source, quite obviously the whole cannot be completely developed through inductive or deductive precedures. This is shown by the modality we create, or that is created in us, and which manifests itself as an attitude, an awareness, an acceptance of an Ultimacy beyond the simple rationality of common sense (because the Gospels are paradoxical). And it entails for us a more than cooperative responsibility toward one another as creatures all of whom are somehow inescapably involved in Ultimacy (common sense would merely have us exchange a good for a good).

We may conclude that despite such wildly different verbal interpretations of the Gospels as those we see in various Christian communities today, a basic modality of conversion remains the same. Men and women love one another

with a love which can be sacrificial because this is a message the Gospels direct us to apperceive. It is perhaps something we latently know, as the Apostle Paul seems to have observed (Romans 10:17), or we are able to construct this message from textual clues. Either way, because we are God's children, it is not surprising that we should recognize even in the exotic cultural forms of early Christian texts God's Word: "Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16).

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