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A Good Investment? Speech Acts and Biblical Interpretation

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Introduction

There's a big gap between the Bible and today. The names of this gap are legion: history; culture; worldview; language; and, depending on one's theological stripe, theology. Across the gap lie various bridges, or, perhaps better, bridges in various states of completion. The bridges in turn are known as hermeneutics, and indeed sometimes as 'biblical hermeneutics', depending on their point of departure. A good bridge links the reader with the text, attempting to do justice to each. Many bridges develop structural faults, at the level of supposing the text to be an unproblematic string of assertions, and thus thinking that the hermeneutic involved is simply one of trying to 'apply' or 'contextualize' these assertions into today's world. This paper takes a different approach to understanding what makes up a text, considering it rather as a series of 'speech acts' that involve the reader. In response, the reader invests herself in the text. The resulting bridge I call a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement'.

In this paper I will introduce speech acts and speech act theory, and then outline this hermeneutic and offer some illustrations of how it may help us to explain what is going on in biblical interpretation. A speech act hermeneutic is not the only bridge in town, but in certain cases, for particular types of text, it is the high road from *there* to *here*.

What are Speech Acts?

The subject of 'speech act theory' is neatly captured in the offbeat title of its first and most famous discussion: J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*. Language, says Austin, is fundamentally 'performative'. It does things. More precisely, when we speak or write, we do things with it; performing acts such as promising, hinting, arguing, blessing, condemning, announcing, evoking, praising, praying, telling, and joking. This simple insight has far-reaching implications. One recent study painstakingly classifies over 270 'performative verbs' and analyses how the speaker and hearer are related in them, according to whether the speaker is declaring something; committing himself to some course of action; directing the speaker in some way; asserting something; or expressing some psychological state.¹ Once we accept that language is irreducibly dynamic in this way, it is a short step to realising that 'the meaning of what a text states' is one dimension only of its significance and relevance to us today.

Some people like to suppose that such a view of language is best labelled 'postmodern'. Well, it's a free country, and whilst postmodernism certainly comes cheap these days, there is no obvious reason why Austin's view has anything to do with postmodernism. The confusion seems to rest in a misreading of Austin's basic argument. Austin starts by proposing a difference between statements and performatives, and then explores the fact that it is impossible to draw a rigid distinction between them. His conclusion: a statement is a kind

of performative too. To state something is, in other words, to do something. But, in Austin's view, a statement is still a different kind of act from, say, a promise or an exclamation. Those keen to find some kind of performative pay-off from speech act theory rush to suggest that Austin has reduced stating a fact to the act of trying to convince somebody. Truth becomes rhetoric, and all prose turns out to be persuasion. It is no use denying that one can take this path with speech act theory: it has been taken, and indeed has sometimes seemed to be its noisiest development.² But it would be a great pity to let it obscure other hermeneutical options.

Although Austin died before developing anything like a full theory of speech acts, various of his collaborators and students have continued his work. Thus, building on a proposal by Geoffrey Warnock, one may distinguish between 'strong' and 'weak' types of speech act depending on whether we have in view the performative (strong) act as Austin discusses it, or the descriptive (weak) act.³ There are conventions involved in both types, but in the latter case these conventions are mainly linguistic ones. In the former case, all kinds of non-linguistic criteria are relevant. The Queen is to name the ship 'The Titanic', but I steal in the night before and, smashing the champagne bottle on the hull, name it the Manchester United. Alas, I am not so authorised, and the ship remains the 'Titanic'. That's a fact: it's the kind of fact philosophers call an 'institutional fact'. As a matter of brute fact, the ship, unlike Manchester United, goes down anyway. Speech acts can create institutional facts, but not brute ones, a distinction which postmodern approaches in turn ignore to their (ocean-going) peril.⁴

In short: all speech acts are performative, but some are more performative than others; or, as the technical version would have it, some are more *interesting* than others.

Speech Act Theory as a Model for Biblical Interpretation

Acts performed by written texts are subject to at least the same array of interpretative possibilities as spoken ones. The above results carry over: all texts may be speech acts in written form, but speech act theory will be an *interesting* hermeneutical option in those cases where

'strong' speech acts occur, and where the facts in view are correspondingly institutional.

One further possibility is perhaps introduced by the written form of speech acts: the notion that in *construing* a text we are basically being called upon to make some kind of interpretative judgement concerning the nature of the speech act. 'I am with you always' says Jesus at the end of Matthew's gospel. Do we read this (or *construe* it) as a statement or a promise? The two look the same of course, and in this case it hardly seems controversial, in context, to see the words as a promise. On reflection, many disputes of biblical interpretation turn on precisely this issue of construal: the text may be agreed but its performative force, or the kind of speech act which it is, remains disputed. 'It is good for a man not to marry', says the NIV Paul (in 1 Cor. 7:1). But is it Paul who advocates this? Is it irony? Is it a quotation of the Corinthians? The words of the text are clear, but which speech act is Paul performing?⁵ In general, 'strong construal' we may take as the case where the text itself invites or requires some kind of interpretative decision of this nature.

We are now in a position to make a proposal concerning a speech act hermeneutic: texts which are strong speech acts need to be interpreted with reference to the various conventions they require, and these conventions will typically relate to non-linguistic states of affairs. In terms of biblical interpretation: biblical texts which operate as promises, blessings, praises, and so forth, invite a speech act approach. In particular, I suggest that they require the reader to be invested in the states of affairs that lie behind the speech act. It is not that this is an option for those who would like to feel particularly influenced by such texts. Rather, it is in the nature of the speech act concerned that it simply fails to function if the conventions are not satisfied.

For example, the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11), while it may perhaps function as a description of a state of affairs, is fundamentally doing much more than that. It is reflecting the conviction of the speaker, that the speaker takes a public stand on the issue of who Jesus is. As a confession, it is a performative speech act which creates (or recre-

ates, or sustains, or modifies) the world in which the speaker stands under the lordship of Christ. Creeds perform the same function in churches today. Creeds do not (at least primarily) recite facts. They provide public testimony that the one reciting the creed adopts a stance in the public sphere of commitment to the consequences of confessing this faith. What is true for credal and confessional language, which has often been recognised to be performative in various liturgical studies, is simply one special case of what I call a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement'.

The Logic and Hermeneutics of Self-Involvement

Donald Evans, one of Austin's own students, investigated the various logical conditions of possibility for successful performative language in religious and biblical contexts. His work was entitled *The Logic of Self-Involvement*,⁶ and in it he examined the kinds of commitments called forth by the requirements of performing a successful speech act such as 'God is my Creator' in what he termed the 'biblical context'. Such a speech act involves the self in all manner of behaviour and attitude commitments, far removed from the prosaic utterance of a sentence such as 'Jones built the house'.

More honoured in the neglect than the observance, it has been widely supposed that Evans said all there was to say on the subject. In fact, since his work pre-dates almost all the well-known development of speech act theory, the time seems ripe to explore once again the points he made. With the benefit of hindsight, and in particular with some such view of strong and weak speech acts and construal as I have sketched above, I suggest that what Evans boldly claimed to be a logical inference concerning self-involving speech acts is best understood as a hermeneutical link between speaker and speech act. The link is not always there (in weak speech acts, for instance, it is not going to be particularly illuminating). It is rather a function of particular types of speech act which involve conventions that, as it were, draw the speaker into the three-dimensional world of the text.

Such a claim is not new, and may be traced in outline to Wittgenstein's discussion of my own relation to my words: 'I am in pain' carries a dif-

ferent kind of logical implication from 'I love you': the first may fade away in a moment, but the second...? On the other hand, 'he is in pain' and 'he loves you' stand equally removed from my own self-involvement.⁷ However, despite an increasing range of voices claiming that speech act considerations of these various kinds may be helpful in illuminating the task of biblical interpretation, little progress has been made in actually working out how speech act ideas or categories can make headway with particular biblical texts. Meanwhile, hermeneutical discussion persistently reduces to a polarised debate. On the one hand there are those who like to see an objective text unrelated to a subjective reader, and who pursue the kind of 'application' or 'contextualization' hermeneutics mentioned earlier to get from one to the other. On the other hand, there are some who, odd as it may seem, seriously propose that the self is entirely 'constituted' by the act of reading the text, and that we do not know who we are until we are revealed to ourselves in the act of reading. Mediating between these two extremes comes a hermeneutic of self-involvement: we invest ourselves in the text and in the process we are changed; acted upon by its speech acts. When the speech acts are strong, and when the conventions are in place, it is a good investment.

Investing Ourselves in the Text and its World

As an example of just one way in which a hermeneutic of self-involvement might operate, let us consider the speech act of forgiveness. We may tell ourselves that 'sticks and stones may break our bones/but words will never harm us,' but we clearly do so precisely because words possess just such a power. However we are hurt, words similarly possess the potential for healing. But what act is performed when we say 'I forgive you' and what conventions are to be in place for such a (speech) act to be successful?

I suggest that the successful performance of this speech act involves the notion of (re-) admitting the sinner into 'membership' of one's community, whether this be an official community such as a church or an informal one such as 'the group of people with whom I am on speaking terms'. In this connection we may explore also the speech act of binding and loosing in Matthew 16:17-19, where Peter is given the keys

which are, perhaps, to regulate precisely this aspect of forgiveness. But prior to the issue of 'membership' is that of the stance of the one who is to forgive. A successful speech act of forgiveness requires the forgiver to re-construe the world and in particular the relationship with the one to be forgiven. Various speech act discussions of forgiveness have concluded that fundamental to the act is the overcoming of resentment on the part of the forgiver. When Matthew 6:14-15 offers us the words of Jesus,

'If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses'

what is at stake in the text is the willingness to waive one's right to be 'repaid'. To forgive I must reconstrue the world and my relationship with the offender. By learning this ability, I am moved from a world ruled by repayment and invested instead, through this self-involving speech act of forgiveness, in a different world, where my heavenly Father will construe my own deeds with the same reconfiguration of debt and pardon. It is not that God's forgiveness is offered after human forgiveness has taken place. Rather, I am myself remade in my involvement in the act of forgiveness.

The hermeneutical bridge holds in this case, if hold it does, because forgiveness is a 'strong' speech act. If I am not willing to invest in this text, then it will not change me, and I am back on the other side of the hermeneutical question, wondering how to 'apply' or 'contextualize' these words of Jesus. When the words themselves are performative acts, then speech act theory gives us a better way.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Daniel Vanderveken, *Meaning and Speech Acts, Volume 1, Principles of Language Use*, Cambridge: CUP, 1990, 166-219.
² Prominent figures on this path include Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1980, especially 197-245 and 268-92; and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (ed. Gerald Graff), Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
³ G.J. Warnock, 'Some Types of Performative Utterance' in Isaiah Berlin et al., *Essays on J.L. Austin*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, 69-89.
⁴ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, London: Penguin, 1995, looks set to be the discussion of this topic, and builds directly on Searle's own influential development of Austin's work in his *Speech Acts*.
⁵ For the record, the 'clear' words of the text are not quite as the NIV has them, and it is all neatly dealt with by Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation), Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997, 113f.
⁶ Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement. A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator*, London: SCM, 1963.
⁷ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Oxford: Blackwell, ²1981 (1967), §504 as well as the key discussion in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, ³1967 (1953), pp.190-92.

For Further Reading

- J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J.O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa, Oxford: Oxford UP, ²1975 (1962).
John R. Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969.
James Wm McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994.
Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics', in Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout, and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999, 133-239.

Some of the few works which have explored other ways of making use of speech act theory in biblical and theological studies are listed by Timothy Ward in his *Whitefield Briefing* paper, *The Bible Between Modernity and Post-Modernity* (July 1999, Vol 4 No 4).

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