Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 15, Reader Response Criticism
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We finished a few sessions talking about text-centered approaches to interpretation. In the last session, I indicated we would move on to a different facet of the third aspect of communication, that is reader-centered approaches. We also said that structuralism, which was one of the characteristic approaches under text-critical 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, just to, although there is 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.

That is, there is no worldview, no religious belief, no interpretation of reality that emerges as the correct one, but 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 is often seen as the abuse of power to assert that there's one correct meaning. There's a leveling effect that there's no correct meaning or approach or interpretation.

Second is, 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, what one wants to find. And then third, reading communities shape our perspective and the way that we interpret biblical texts. So again, our culture, the communities that we belong to will inevitably influence and determine the way that we read a biblical text.

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 historical 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 to, of any methodology to emerge as central or 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. That is, the primary locus of meaning is now the reader and the reader's ability to interpret text.

So, reader response criticism as this focus or this approach to interpretation is often called, encompasses a number of approaches that we'll look at, a number of possible approaches. But the main focus of all forms of reader response criticism is that readers make sense of texts. And 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 a reader's that makes sense of text. According to author-centered, another way to put it, according to author-centered approaches, 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 approaches, the text, 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 a 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, 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 an objective, almost a passive observer.

Remember we talked about a couple of models, the 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, a 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 found in the text. So the author was almost seen almost as a passive observer.

Whereas in reader response approaches, the reader is more active in reading the text and is interpreting it and is an active agent in creating meaning in the text. Now, most would agree that there are at least two, and I would add perhaps a third approach that could come up fall under the category of reader response criticism. And 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.

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 original readers of the book of Isaiah, or the original readers of the book of Kings, first and second 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 in his 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 a more of a text-guided reader response, or almost an author-guided reader response criticism, or approach to interpreting the 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, yes, the author, the readers are involved in meaning and

discovering meaning, and they should use creativity, 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.

And again, some have called this more of a text-guided reader response criticism, or an author-guided reader response criticism. That is, it's not, 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 eyes of the beholder, but the author invites creative interpretation on the part of the reader.

Just as 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 something, a text such as the birth narrative of Luke chapter 2, or the so-called Christmas story. And 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 that begins in those days when Caesar Augustus was the emperor of the world, and a call then 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 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 of David called Bethlehem, and he comes with Mary, his wife, who 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, it tells you nothing about how they got there. We often fill in those gaps by envisioning, did Mary and Joseph ride in a caravan? 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. Again, we fill in the gaps by constructing various scenarios, sometimes based on tradition, based on our own experience, that somewhere there was a manger, a barn, or a shed 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 texts, we often envision Mary and Joseph going to an inn, a hotel, but there's no vacancy left, and we're not told exactly why that's the but we envision a scenario where they go to a barn or a stable that has a manger where Jesus is finally born.

Interestingly, though, that word that's translated in is a word that's used elsewhere in Luke to refer to a guest room. So more likely, is it possible that Mary and Joseph would have gone to a relative's house and stayed in the guest room? 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 would have stayed in the guest room, and when it came time to give birth, they would have gone to the only isolated place

they could find, and that would have been a manger, or I'm sorry, that would have been a stable that would have contained this manger, this feed trough.

Some archaeological discoveries have suggested that that may have just been sort of a like a closet or a 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? And 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 guest room. Is it possible that they stayed in the guest room for some time, and then when the contractions got closer and it was time to give birth, that the guest room would have had other persons in it, and it was too crowded, and they went to the only place that would have had any privacy, and that was to the 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. And again, 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 2. 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 4,000 and the 5,000 in Mark chapter 6 and 8, and he analyzes it from the standpoint of a reader who comes to the text for the first time and what it's like to read the text for the first time.

And one common approach to, in Mark as well as the other Gospels, but one common approach to the feeding narratives where Jesus feeds the 5,000 or Luke the 4 and the 5,000 is to read it in a Eucharistic context, is having Eucharistic connotations, that is, having a reference to the Lord's Supper. But Fowler, again, is wanting to ask the question, what's it like to read the text from the standpoint of a

reader who comes to it for the first time? And 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, he says it's illegitimate to come to the text and reading it from the perspective of a first-time reader to read the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000 in Mark from a Eucharistic context or a Eucharistic setting, since that does not come until later on in the reading process.

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 readers, actual literal readers, to identify with, and 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 illusions and Old Testament connections that are found within the book of Revelation.

And in fact, the author at times even appears to build the reader's competency throughout the book of Revelation 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 sometimes children's coloring books or sometimes in our newspapers and in sections of the newspaper there where you find crossword puzzles or cartoons, you might find a dot-to-dot where you find this space in the book and there will be a series of dots that are numbered and you are asked to connect the dots and then what emerges is some sort of a 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 the 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. Still emphasizing the role of the reader, the creativity of the reader, 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. And Stanley Fish is best known, any reading you do in reader response criticism you'll be introduced to Stanley Fish, who is best known for his work entitled, Is There a Text in This Class? This might seem rather odd to 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 text that exists, 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 response approach could 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 what you want to do. Or another way of comparing another analogy might be the inkblot test, where one looks at it and is asked what one sees. What do you see in this series of inkblots? 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 in 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, text becomes 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. That is, we 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 to objectively 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 grid and the categories of my mind. Now, for Kant, he seemed to think that generally human beings had similar, they're universal, similar categories that allow them to understand and make sense. But a fish, a radical reader response criticism takes this

to its logical extreme and suggest them because things are not because we can't 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. And furthermore, he suggested, though, that everyone, every reader perceives things differently.

So every interpreter, according to according to fish, then in every interpreter will see things differently, according to the perspective 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 proceeds the text, the text does not exist first, and then we read it, he would say interpretation proceeds the text.

So to suggest that there is a correct meaning of the text that I can get at by applying the proper methods of interpretation, to him is authoritarian to 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, one might suggest that the different millennial approaches to interpreting Revelation 20, and the verses one through six, 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 and 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 there, 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 belongs to determines the correct way of approaching the text, or determines the values and the approaches, the beliefs that I will bring to the text, 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 to the text. So the correct reading of a text is again, 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, is that why Calvinists read Hebrew six in a certain way? Or is that why amillennialist or premillennialist read Revelation 20 in a certain way? Because the community they belong to determines what they find in the text.

To give a couple examples, very, very briefly of a radical approach is to read a 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're not interested in trying to establish the historical meaning of the text according to the author, but they're quite happy to apply modern day ideology and modern day thinking and to 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 superego. And again, the goal is not what is the correct meaning of this text in light of the author and the historical background or the structure of the text, but simply the reader creating meaning in the text. And so when this approach is often taken to the extreme, you sometimes find some very different and sometimes strange to us readings of the biblical text.

So what should we say about this approach by way of evaluation, both thinking of more conservative approaches to read a response criticism, but also in particularly more radical approaches to read a 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, 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, an understanding of the text as God's word to his people.

God acting in history to communicate to his people and expecting that 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 might be, however cloudy, that I can still see through it and there's still a meaning outside of myself that God expects his people to discover and respond to in 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 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, not only 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 can't 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, 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 and readings and interpretive practices? Number four, kind of as just a final parting thought, is reader response critics, interestingly, write to be understood and to communicate their findings. Though presumably one could ask if Stanley Fish was consistent and his reader response approach could be applied to his own works and interpreted in light of how one wanted to, 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. 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 and objective interpreters simply waiting to have our blank slates written upon and inscribed upon by the biblical text. But instead, we come to the text 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, though, to ask is are these determinative? Do these necessarily distort the way we look at the text? Is it impossible, therefore, to, is there no meaning outside of me that cannot influence and change and transform the way I think? Will this inevitably, will my perspective, my values, my own background, etc., will it 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 again that the reader is not simply a passive observer sitting on the sidelines simply observing what takes place, but the reader is an active, is actively involved in discovering meaning in the text. The reader actively engages in a dialogue with the text. And so, the goal of the reader is in some respects to discover and identify with the implied reader in the text, with the ideal reader that the text itself assumes, that the author assumes.

Our goal is to identify with that, not simply to become passive observers, but also not simply to find in the text what I already bring to it. That is, communication does not happen. In some respects, communication does not happen until all three facets of the process of communication takes place.

The author producing a text, but 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 have, 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 short-sightedness 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 to, as a reader, especially in light of the text and others who have read the text, to help me overcome my own hermeneutical biopia and be willing to see other perspectives in the text that might help uncover blind spots in my own reading, might uncover my own tendency to impose my own perspective and insights and values on the text.

Number four, and finally as far as contribution, I think one important contribution is the reminder that reader response approaches can help us by reminding us of the role of the historical reader and the focus on the implied reader, that there are limitations to meaning. There are limitations to what I find in the text. The historical reader, a 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. 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 text. To conclude by simply summarizing what a reader approach might look like, what a reader perspective 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 is to suggest, 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 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 and predispositions and influences and values will indeed have a bearing on how they read the text. 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.

It allows 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 a subsequent session, is 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 a 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 but in that they correspond with the situation, 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, I've learned the most from my students from third world countries who have over and over again reminded me of how and where I might be reading the text from reading into the text my own 21st century North American middle class white male perspective.

And sometimes it's by listening to those that come from a third world country from a perspective 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 are in a situation and context that corresponds more closely to the original context of the biblical writers at times. And whereas I may, again, that may uncover a blind spot in my own reading that may demonstrate how my own culture and situation, again living in a North American western middle class, socioeconomically middle class environment, might affect the way that I read the text.

Which leads me to the second one too then, I must then allow those assumptions and presuppositions and values in my background to be challenged and corrected by the text, and 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 to allow the text to challenge and correct. Third then, what that means is I must approach the text with humility.

There's no place, again, for authoritative, authoritarian readings that simply reaffirm and reassert my power over others and excluding others who have read the text. And finally, again, as I've said, we need to listen, we need to listen to the readings of others. We need to allow the readings of others to correct our short-sightedness 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 we might, our background and influence and values and culture and even theological traditions or 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, 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 and 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 the text and doing whatever one wants.

More radical approaches to 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 might it contribute to hermeneutics and interpretation of biblical text.

What are the dangers to be avoided? And also introduce briefly ideological approaches to biblical text. That is, we kind of mentioned that already, but reading text from certain locations and reading the biblical text with the intent of critiquing its ideology, the values and perspectives that produced it. And again, especially focusing on, for example, feminist readings of biblical text.

And again, just to introduce you to kind of where hermeneutics is going and interpretation is going. And 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 just kind of dabbling in ideological approaches to interpretation as well.