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First part of fifth lecture

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This morning we shall begin speaking of particular functional specialties. And we shall treat research and interpretation and perhaps start on history.

With regard to research, one may expect me to set forth precise instructions on how to do it. That's not possible. Research is always a concrete, particular, individual task, and it is guided not by abstract generalities but by the self-correcting process of learning which generates common sense, the common sense of one's own place and time or the common sense of another place and time.

If one wants to learn how to do research, one picks one's field and goes to the master in the field, and does a seminar under him, and writes a dissertation under his direction. And in the seminar you learn all the tools that are employed, and you figure out all the steps, just why he does each of the steps he takes; it is a matter of learning, an apprenticeship. One learns research not by reading a book – that also helps – but seeing in the concrete just how someone goes about it. And the better the man you have directing you, the man you are working under, the more you will learn, and the more fruitful it will be.

The importance of that, if I can illustrate it without causing any animosity: the Franciscans put out editions at Quaracchi of Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Scotus, that were absolutely first class; and they did so because they first of all sent their men to Louvain to learn how to do it; not all medieval editions are of that high caliber. But it is important above all, if you are going to do research of any kind, to learn how it is done in the best circles available. So that is the fundamental point about research.

Now one may also expect that I give in this chapter some account of the data on which theologians do research. Insofar as that question is methodological, I shall say something; but it is much more a theological question. It is a question of doctrines, and we have to leave it to another functional specialty, doctrines. One can distinguish human studies, religious studies, Christian studies, Roman Catholic studies. All have data. Data for human studies are much broader than for religious studies; religious studies are much broader than for Christian studies; Roman Catholic studies have certain privileged areas and a way of placing these privileged areas in a hierarchy. Later, in the section on communications, we will have something to say on the relation of theology to religious and to human studies.

The data for theology in the different Christian communities differ. Everyone accepts scripture. Some want scripture alone; some want scripture and tradition; and tradition itself is understood in many ways. It can be the apostolic tradition, what was taught by the apostles; it can be the ongoing tradition of the church up to Nicea, or up to 1054, when you had the split between the East and the West, or up to Scholasticism, when a whole new type of theology came into existence, or up to the Reformation, or up to Vatican I – the old Catholics split off then – or up to Vatican II, and so on.

Now, to settle those questions on what are the data, what are the privileged areas, and so on, is not a question in methodology; it is a question in doctrines. Methodologically, then, what do we say? Let everyone follow his present practice. Theologians already differ not only in the determination of privileged areas of data but also in interpretations, in accounting for movements, in doctrines, and in systematics. These differences reduce to different causes; those causes come to light in dialectic; the sources of error are eliminated by foundations. The method

tends to bring about a unity in doctrine, insofar as it is successful. And it is successful insofar as people are converted intellectually, morally, and religiously. We will see more about that, the way things work out, in the subsequent sections, but the section on research is not very informative. It tells you where to go to learn it and how these problems with regard to doctrines work out.

Notice, we are setting up theology as an ongoing process. You start from where we are at the present time. You do the work that is being done according to these different sets of operations; and the process is ongoing. It is not a question of a *Summa theologiae* to be written; it is a question of organizing cooperation in the division of labor and the ongoing process that is theology. That is theology in a modern setting.

Our next topic is interpretation. A common distinction made is between hermeneutics, principles of interpretation, and exegesis, the task of interpreting this or that particular text. Again, with regard to hermeneutics, one can conceive interpretation in all its aspects; and then one goes on to dialectic, to foundations, to doctrines, to systematics, to communications. That very broad interpretation of hermeneutics you will find in Betti's *Teoria generale della interpretazione*; it also exists in German; it was written in Italian. And Gadamer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, a first edition in 1960 a second in 1964. Gadamer, for example, will say: finally, you arrive at the real meaning of a text when you tell someone today what it means in his life; and theology does that insofar as it comes to communications. But we are conceiving hermeneutics, interpretation, as a functional specialty, as one task out of eight different tasks constitutive of theology. And, consequently, we are taking it in a narrow sense.

What is the matter on which one applies hermeneutics, what is the thing that one is working on? In general, the more systematic a presentation is, the less there is a need for any type of hermeneutics, any problem of interpretation; because a systematic presentation provides you with all the clues you need. You may have to slave to come to understand it, but the problem is not the hermeneutic problem there. The hermeneutic problem arises from the nature of common sense. In one sense, common sense is common universally; it is one and the same procedure of developing intelligence, which builds up a nucleus of insights that is like a multiply adjustable tool, and you always have to make an adjustment before you use it; you take a good look at the current situation before starting to act. But that provides the main lines of your behavior and your speech. Now common sense is common in that sense in that it is a way of proceeding. But in the sense that it is common to many, common sense is the common sense of this community, this or that community; and the fellow from the village over the hill is a stranger, he hasn't got the same brand of common sense. And from one nation to another you get great differences in common sense, you find them very strange, and very funny, perhaps, or very dour or whatever it is. Russian common sense and American common sense are two entirely different brands. So not only are there differences in common sense spatially, geographically, nationally; there are also variations in common sense over time. Common sense in the nineteenth century and common sense in the twentieth century are two brands. The problem of hermeneutics is to move into the common sense of another people, another place, another time, to understand their common sense. And the operations are operations of the commonsense type, of a growing body of insights. You catch on to this and

that and the other thing, and finally you begin to feel at home. Just what the process is we will go into in more detail later.

Now, hermeneutics has become a complicated problem at the present time for four reasons. First of all, at the present time we have world consciousness; we are aware of different nations because of the facility of travel, because we can turn on the wireless and listen to people talking in foreign languages at any time. We have historical consciousness; we are aware not only of cultural differences today but of cultural differences between today and the past. Secondly, we have human sciences; human living has as constitutive meaning. Consequently, hermeneutics, which is concerned to determine what the meaning was, is a fundamental tool in the human sciences. Dilthey's distinction between the human sciences and the natural sciences, the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*, was precisely that, that the human sciences had as part of their object meanings. Thirdly, interpreting is a matter of knowing a meaning, but there are great difficulties at the present time in cognitional theory and epistemology; and consequently, all these difficulties can be transposed into problems in hermeneutics. Heidegger wrote a hermeneutical phenomenology, *Sein und Zeit*, or a hermeneutical ontology also, but that element of the interpreting of human living is shoving philosophy into hermeneutics.

Finally, the modern world; what is it? It is the liberation of man from traditional authorities; it is new interpretations of everything; and consequently, hermeneutics is in the foreground.

Now, so much for a general introduction: what is the matter and what are the problems, and so on.

[Basis Exegetical Operations]

The basic operations, then, in an interpretation, then, are first of all coming to understand the thing the text it is talking about; understand the words the text uses; understand the author of the text; and understand yourself, what you are up to. So four aspects of understanding. Second, judging the correctness of your understanding. And, thirdly, stating the interpretation you have arrived at.

First, then, understand the object, the thing. You have to distinguish between the student and the exegete. The student will use a text to come to know about things that he doesn't know about yet. The exegete is not using a text to come to know about things; he uses the text to come to know about an author's mind, an author's intention. He may know all about the things that the text is speaking of, but his job is not to say what the things really are; his job is to understand, come to grips with, the object, real or imaginary, that the writer is speaking about.

The second point is that the more the exegete knows about the thing the better; the wider his experience, the fuller the development of his intelligence, the greater the balance of his judgment, and the finer his sensibilities and his sense of duty, the greater the likelihood that he will hit upon the meaning intended by the author. And, inversely, the less his experience, the less developed his understanding, the less balanced his judgment, the less refined his sensibilities and moral sense, the greater the likelihood that he will attribute to the author something the author never thought of. In other words, we are rejecting the well-known principle of the empty head that contrasts exegesis with eisegesis; exegesis is finding and seeing what is there in the text, eisegesis is reading something into it. But all that is there is a series of black marks on white paper, and if you are going to do anything more than give a new edition of the same marks in the same order it

is going to be by drawing on your experience, your understanding, your judgment, and your methods, your decisions and procedures.

The principle of the empty head says that if you are not to impose an alien meaning on a text, you just have to forget everything in your mind, let the text speak for itself, let the author speak for himself; but they say nothing; it is just marks on paper. It is only insofar as you have a breadth of experience and a depth of understanding and a refinement of judgment that it is going to start saying something. The principle of the empty head rests upon a naive intuitionism; it overlooks the fact that really what the interpreter has to do is understand the thing, understand the words, understand the author, understand himself, make a correct judgment on what is probable and what is certain in his interpretation, and then find a way of stating it that is suitable for the various groups to whom he must speak.

On that point, perhaps, a quote from Bultmann will not be out of place. Bultmann in an article 'Das Problem der Hermeneutik,' *Zschr. f. Theol. u. Kirche*, 47 (1950) 64. Reprinted in *Glauben and Verstehen*, II, 230. 'Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement makes good sense only insofar as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation ... For the rest, unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality.'

So much for understanding the thing; you have to use your head, not empty it.

Next, understanding the words. It easily happens that the author means *P* and the reader thinks of *Q*. And after a bit, since everything true of *P* is not true of *Q*, contradictions begin to arise. And then you have to distinguish between the controversialist and the exegete. The controversialist assumes that he is perfectly right in thinking of *Q*, and he begins to demonstrate how stupid a man the author must have been. But the exegete rereads; he goes over the matter again, tries to puzzle things out, eventually stumbles on the fact that what the author perhaps was thinking of was not *Q* at all but *P*. And he goes over the pages again and finds that it all makes perfect sense. And that is the problem of understanding the words. It can occur once or twice or three times or twenty times or a hundred times. And the interpreter's job is to keep on rereading and picking out the points where his understanding is fuzzy or inaccurate or incomplete or they are puzzled, and concentrating on them because there is where he has to find something different from what he is thinking now.

That development of understanding is a preconceptual process; it is a matter of insights; it is a matter of the thing that Euclid had but did not express when he claimed that the two circles would intersect. It is the same structure as our common sense, and it is that development of understanding that breaks the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is the fact the meaning of the words is not just from the words; it is the words in the sentence. And the meaning of the sentence is not just the sentence; it is the sentence in this paragraph. And the meaning of the paragraph is not just the paragraph but this paragraph in this chapter. There is a mutual dependence of the parts on the whole, and of lesser parts on the greater

wholes, and that is the circle. And how do you get around it? You get around it by a development of understanding that gradually keeps on correcting itself, the self-correcting process of learning; by adding insight to insight you qualify your previous insights, you complement them, you correct them. And so you have a development that gradually moves in, spirals in, on the meaning intended by the author.

People often think of hermeneutics in terms of rules; you observe the rules, and therefore you will arrive at the right interpretation. You observe the rules insofar as they help you to understand; they are crutches. And insofar as they don't help you to understand, paying attention to them is mere pedantry. The thing that is wanted is understanding.

Thirdly, understanding the author. The author may belong to a very strange world that you are quite unfamiliar with. You read him, and you understand a bit, and you have a host of puzzles. And you read him again, and you understand very little more, but you find an awful lot more puzzles. And then the task before you is the lifelong task of becoming a scholar, of being able to move into the common sense attitudes and ways of speech and actions of another place and time. And it is the same business of discovering that it was *P* and not *Q*, but it is pushed to an enormous length.

Finally, understanding oneself. The classics in religion, letters, philosophy, theology are beyond the initial horizon of their interpreters. And they come within the horizon of the interpreter, only insofar as the self-correcting process of learning is pushed to the limit of a conversion in him, a change in his intellectual outlook, his moral stance, his religious life. This is the existential dimension in the problem of hermeneutics. And the conversion is only a basic step; one has to work the

conversion out in all its implications. And so we have the remark of Friedrich Schlegel, quoted by Gadamer: A classic is never completely understood. But those who are educated and keep on educating themselves are constantly going back to it to learn something more. This is the classic as the source of something that makes you pull yourself up to the level of it.

Further, the classics ground a tradition. And the tradition may be authentic or unauthentic. And insofar as it is unauthentic, it provides the interpreter with a false context in which to interpret the classics. Insofar as it is authentic, the classic is – this is what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*, causative history. The historical documents, the documents of the past, set up the mentality that is going to interpret the documents. The classical example is the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24.32): ‘Did not our hearts burn within us, when he spoke on the way and opened to us the scriptures?’ And the other way in St Paul in Rome (Acts 28.26): ‘Go to this people and say: you will hear and hear but never understand; you will look and look, but never see.’

The interpretation of the text, a correct understanding of the text, can demand of the interpreter a transformation of the man that he was before. And that, of course, is the fundamental problem; it is the fundamental problem of differences in philosophy, in morality, and in religion. The next section, then. First understand the object, the words, the author, oneself. Next, judging the correctness of an interpretation.

[Judging the Correctness of One’s Interpretation]

The criterion is the criterion on commonsense insights grounding judgments of fact, set forth in *Insight* 283-99. The criterion there is, Are there any further

relevant questions? And the example given was the man who left his tidy home in the morning, where everything was beautifully ordered, neat and clean, and so on. He comes back in the evening and finds three inches of water on the floor and the windows broken and a mess everywhere. And he says, ‘Something happened.’ Well, there are no further relevant questions. If he said, ‘There has been a fire,’ he might be wrong because an enemy man might have done this; it could have been a faked fire or something. You know whether there are further relevant questions or not, whether you have said more than the evidence the demands. The catch, of course, in the statement is ‘relevant’; what do you mean by ‘relevant’?

Well, one begins an investigation out of one’s own interests, concerns, viewpoint. But gradually, the more one understands the object under investigation, the more one gradually comes to understand the concerns, the interests, the viewpoint of the author, the context of his thinking and speaking. And the word ‘context’ has two meanings. There is the heuristic meaning, where you go to discover the context, and in that sense, in the heuristic sense, the context of the word is the sentence, and of the sentence the paragraph, and of the paragraph the chapter, and of the chapter the book, and of the book the *opera omnia* of the author and his life and times.

The actual context is an interweaving of questions and answers in limited groups. One strikes some question, one gets hold of some question and answers it; but that answer itself just gives rise to more questions, one answers them. But those answers give rise to still more questions, and this process can go on indefinitely, if the topic were changing. But if one confines oneself to a determinate topic, then questions, answers, more questions, more answers, more questions, more answers, it can go on for a good while, but eventually you start

getting decreasing returns on that topic. And then you find an interwoven set of questions and answers that mutually support one another and illuminate one another, and that is the context.

Again, it may be asked, What is the topic? Well, like the context, it too has to be discovered. By persistence or good luck one hits on some element in the context of questions and answers. Sooner or later one hits on another, for some time progress may be slow, then a rapid succession of fresh insights, constant revision of previous views, and finally the tapering off, no further relevant questions. There has emerged the overall topic and its subordinate parts, persistence of understanding the thing, the words, the author, the self, persistence in attending to what one has not yet understood, directing attention to what one finds fuzzy, obscure; you gradually build up your set of questions and answers, and there emerges in that set the topic that limits them.

And when one reaches such a context, judgment is possible. Because one has reached a point where further questions are yielding diminishing returns on that topic, where one can begin to say that there are probably no more in the way of relevant questions, and consequently, and unless there are further relevant questions, there are no possibilities of complementing and correcting the insights one already has.

[A Clarification]

In this connection a clarification may not be out of place. Schleiermacher, who was the main person in introducing modern hermeneutics, said that the interpreter will understand the text better than the author himself did. And Collingwood, in a somewhat similar fashion, said that the historian reenacts the past. Now, there is

some truth in this, but it is not entirely accurate; and I take my example from *Grace and Freedom*, in which I learnt something about this business.

Over a dozen years, St Thomas constantly changed his views on grace and freedom. And one can work through and see all these changes, and changes in connected matters like on operation, divine operation, divine operation in the will, freedom, and so on. There is a whole network of differences gradually going forward. And discovering that network of changing views is extremely helpful in arriving at an author's mind, because if St Thomas says the same thing a hundred times you are no further ahead. But if he says different things a hundred times and you can account for the differences, then you have a lock in on his meaning.

Now, there is no evidence that St Thomas himself ever went back and did a historical study of his own writings. On each occasion he was aware, perhaps, that he was changing what he thought before and that he had got something new, but that he ever went back over the whole process and studied it, we just have no evidence of that at all. And as he was developing right up to the end, and at the end he stopped bothering his head about theology, there is very little likelihood that he did that overview. So there is something that the interpreter will find out about an author that the author himself, in all probability, never made explicit in his knowing. He was conscious of what was happening when it happened, but to set the whole thing up in a series, in an explicit series, probably he didn't do. But this doesn't mean that the interpreter knows better than the author what the author was saying. Thomas was writing a contribution to the doctrine of grace and the doctrine of freedom. What the interpreter is doing is a contribution to the history of the doctrine of grace and freedom. They are working on different topics. Further, in a text such as St Thomas's there are all sorts of accidentals that arise because of

particular circumstances that we have no way today of recovering and accounting for. Thomas would know just why, at the time, he was doing things the way he was. But today there is the standard explanation: maybe he was writing on a Friday. The interpreter is not going to get control over all the accidentals in a text; he does what he can. There are spots that are not further relevant questions to a topic that one is discussing. He does what he can.

[Stating the Meaning of the Text]

Our final section is stating the meaning of the text, and stating the meaning of the text by the exegete qua exegete, the meaning arrived at in the functional specialty ‘interpretation,’ not the meaning to be communicated to someone who is going to have the text make a difference in his life, which is part of the specialty ‘communications.’

Bultmann, for example, derived a systematic mode of statement from Heidegger. St Thomas, in his scriptural commentaries used a systematic mode of statement derived from Aristotle. Well, systematics is a fine thing, but we are not dealing with systematics yet; we are dealing simply with the interpretation. You don’t express an interpretation of scripture in terms derived from Denzinger, from the general councils, and so on.

I will consider three cases. First of all, the statement the interpreter makes for his colleagues; secondly, the statement he makes for his pupils; and thirdly, the statement he makes for theologians in other fields or specialties.

The statement he makes for his colleagues he makes in notes, articles, monographs, and the way he makes them you can see from the periodicals. But the statement is technical; it supposes familiarity with the tools: the dictionaries, the

encyclopedias, the maps and so on that are known by the specialists in the field. It supposes the ability to understand a summary statement of the state of the question. People in the field, colleagues in the same field, will be able, with a few indications, to understand just where the issues are when he started out working at it. And he does not narrate his every step in his investigation. I remember, I once handed in a chapter of my thesis to Charles Boyer, and he said, one doesn't go up and down all the staircases. One doesn't narrate everything one has done and discovered; one gives one's conclusions and one's reasons.

So much for the statement an interpreter makes to his colleagues, people working in the same field.

The statement for his pupils. That is an entirely different thing. In the seminar he does take them through all the steps, he does let them see all the steps, and just why each step was taken. Similarly, in the dissertation he brings to bear his greater knowledge, or he is teaching the person how to do this work when on his own, when more or less on his own; he is less on his own in the seminar. But the monograph, the notes, the article, the monograph gives you results; it doesn't narrate the process. The function of the seminar and the dissertation is to familiarize the student with the process.

Finally, for theologians in other specialties or fields, I would like to read you a passage, a precis of a passage by Bishop Descamps from *Sacra Pagina*, 1, 142 f., 1959. Albert Descamps argued that biblical theology must be as multiple and diverse as are, for the alert exegete, the innumerable biblical authors. So there will be as many biblical theologies as there were inspired authors, and the exegete will aim above all to respect the originality of each of them. He will appear to be happy to proceed slowly, and often he will follow the ways of beginners. His descriptions

will convey a feeling for things long past. They will give the reader an impression of the foreign, the strange, the archaic; his care for genuineness will appear in the choice of a vocabulary as biblical as possible; he will be careful to avoid any premature transposition to later language, even though that language is approved by a theological tradition. Any general presentation will have to be based on the chronology and the literary history of the biblical books. If possible, it will be genetic in structure; and for this reason questions of date and authenticity, which might be thought secondary in biblical theology, really have a decisive importance.

Further, general presentations will not be very general. If they regard the whole bible, they will be limited to some very precise topic. If their object is more complex, they will be confined to some single writing or group of writings. If a biblical theology were to aim at presenting the whole or a very large part of the bible, it could do so only by being content to be as manifold and internally differentiated as some 'general history' of Europe or the world. It is true, Bishop Descamps admits, that there are those that dream of some sort of short-cut, of a presentation of the divine plan running through the history of the two testaments; and many of them would claim that this is almost the proper function of biblical theology. But he himself is of a contrary opinion. A sketch of the divine plan pertains to biblical theology only in the measure that a historian can feel at home with it; not even the believer reaches the divine plan except through the manifold intentions of the many inspired writers.

Now that expression of the mode of expression proper to an exegete speaking to the theological community seems to me eminently relevant, sane, and solid. Many perhaps will hesitate because it does not want a presentation of the divine plan. I think that hesitation is removed when we make a distinction. We are

not talking of biblical theology as a source of communications, of the final, eighth functional specialty. We are speaking just of the communication of an interpretation made by the second functional specialty, interpretation, to the theological community. And I think that will do for the present period.