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Fides, dialogus and *virtus*: Re-examining the theological hermeneutics of the Reformation period

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Modern hermeneutics often oversimplifies the rich intellectual tradition of theological hermeneutics from the Reformation period, neglecting its complexity and depth. This study aims to re-examine this tradition by focusing on three often overlooked themes: the relationship between understanding and faith [*fides*], the dialogical nature of understanding [*dialogus*], and the virtue [*virtus*] of the interpreter. Through an in-depth analysis of early theological hermeneutic thought, the study reveals that the process of understanding is profoundly influenced by faith, possesses a dialogical character, and is grounded in the moral qualities of the interpreter. These findings challenge the simplified assessments of the theological tradition by modern hermeneutics and provide new perspectives for contemporary discussions on theories of understanding.

Contribution: This study's main contribution is its thorough investigation of important, yet previously overlooked themes in Reformation-era theological hermeneutics. By emphasising the complex interactive relationship between understanding and the elements of faith, dialogue and virtue, the research enriches discussions on the history of hermeneutic development and addresses shortcomings in modern hermeneutic studies. These insights offer valuable references for refining contemporary hermeneutic theories and contribute significantly to the intersection of theology and modern theories of understanding.

Keywords: understanding; faith; Reformation hermeneutics; dialogue; virtue.

Introduction

The emergence of modern hermeneutics marked a pivotal shift, positioning understanding as a central theme within the humanities and social sciences. From Schleiermacher to Dilthey and Gadamer, hermeneutics evolved from exploring interpretive rules to framing understanding as a core human activity. However, in this progression, the theological hermeneutic tradition of the Reformation period has often been oversimplified or even misinterpreted.

Schleiermacher argued that a universal hermeneutics did not yet exist in his time, only particular hermeneutics (Schleiermacher 2012:119), which he considered merely a collection of observations insufficient to meet scientific standards (Schleiermacher 2012:161). Dilthey extended this critique, asserting that hermeneutic thought before Schleiermacher failed to address the activity of understanding itself, remaining focused merely on describing interpretive rules. Dilthey (1900) stated:

> Schleiermacher returned to the analysis of understanding itself, that is, the knowledge of this purposeful act, and from this knowledge derived the possibility of universally valid interpretations, along with their aids, limits, and rules. (p. 198)

Gadamer viewed traditional methodological hermeneutics, including that of the Reformation, as naive objectivism, lacking reflection on the subjectivity of the interpreter and ignoring the historical fusion inherent in understanding. Gadamer (1990) explicitly stated:

> Governed by the objectifying method of modern science – this being the essential characteristic of 19th-century hermeneutics and historical science – it appears to us to be the result of a misguided tendency towards objectification. (p. 319)

He further argued that the methodological rules of early hermeneutics remained merely a compilation of interpretative steps aimed at opening the understanding of Scripture or humanistic classics (Gadamer 1993:95). Grondin, in his work *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik*, also diminishes Reformation hermeneutics by viewing Luther as merely rediscovering Augustine's principle of biblical self-interpretation, while Flacius defends this principle from a grammatical perspective (Grondin 2001:59–62, 65–68).

These assessments have, to some extent, contributed to the innovation of modern hermeneutics by elevating the question of understanding to a central concern in the humanities and social sciences. However, they have also obscured the richness and complexity of theological hermeneutics from the Reformation Era. In reality, early theological hermeneutics was not merely a systematic exposition of textual rules; it also sought a mode of understanding that engaged interactively with faith, dialogue and moral intention. This approach emphasised that the subject of understanding is not only a cognitive entity but also a moral and faith-oriented being. Although some scholars have attempted to highlight the influence of early theological hermeneutic thought by re-evaluating history (Alexander 1993; Bühler & Cataldi Madonna 1994; Jaeger 1974) and the historical background of the concept of 'allgemeine Hermeneutik' (Scholz 1994), a systematic understanding of the relevant themes in early theological hermeneutics still requires detailed elaboration. Revisiting Reformation Era theological hermeneutics is essential to address certain biases in modern hermeneutics and to return to the essence of understanding.

This article aims to delve into the richness of theological hermeneutics from the Reformation period, focusing on three key themes: the relationship between understanding and faith, the dialogical nature of understanding, and the virtue of the interpreter. Through an in-depth analysis of these themes, the article seeks to reveal the unique value of Reformation Era theological hermeneutics, creating a new dialogical space for contemporary theories of understanding. It is important to recognise that understanding is not merely a process of information processing or cognitive activity but it involves faith, morality, dialogue and various aspects of human existence. These elements were central to theological hermeneutics during the Reformation and deserve reconsideration in the modern context.

The relationship between understanding and faith

During the Reformation, the interplay between understanding and faith became a central issue in theological hermeneutics. Martin Luther and Matthias Flacius Illyricus emphasised the crucial role of faith in understanding, asserting that interpreting the Bible requires not just intellectual effort but a foundation of faith.

Luther emphasised that interpreters must approach Scripture with reverence and faith in God to truly grasp its meaning. This perspective reflects a profound awareness of the limitations of human reason. For Luther, human reason alone cannot comprehend God's will, as it is constrained by sin and finite understanding. Only through faith and reliance on divine revelation can one transcend personal limitations and access the deeper significance of Scripture. This emphasis on faith makes understanding a God-dependent act rather than solely an exercise of reason or knowledge. In the preface to his work *Assertio omnium articulorum*, Luther (2006a) argued:

That is, it [*the Bible*] is in itself entirely certain, entirely accessible, entirely comprehensible, its own interpreter (sui ipsius interpres), testing, judging, and illuminating everything by everyone, as also written in Psalm 119: The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. (p. 81)

Because Luther emphasised the clarity of Scripture under God's interpretation, misunderstanding Scripture was not due to its obscurity but to the veiling of human hearts. In his work *De servo arbitrio*, he illustrated this by saying:

Just as Paul says of the Jews in 2 Corinthians 4: 'The veil remains over their hearts.' And again: 'If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in those who are perishing, whose hearts the god of this world has blinded.' With the same brazenness, one could accuse the sun or the day of being dark if one has veiled their own eyes or moves from light into darkness and hides oneself. Thus, these wretched people should stop blasphemously attributing the darkness of their hearts to God's Scriptures, which are entirely clear. (Luther 2006b:237)

Luther identified a dual clarity and obscurity regarding Scripture: one externally appointed in the Word, the other found in the knowledge of the heart. Because Luther regarded the biblical text as completely clear, any obscurity arises solely from human hearts. Luther (2006b) argued:

When you speak of inner clarity, no one sees even a jot in the Scriptures unless they have the Spirit of God. Everyone has a darkened heart, so that even when they claim to present and understand everything from Scripture, they have no true sense of it or genuine recognition. They do not believe in God or that they are creatures of God, nor anything else, according to the word in Psalm 13: 'The fool says in his heart, there is no God'. For the Spirit is required to understand the entire Scripture and each of its parts. (p. 239)

Building on this interpretive framework, Luther (2006b) noted:

The Holy Spirit is no skeptic! He has not inscribed doubts or mere opinions in our hearts, but certainties of truth, more certain and firmer than life itself and all experience. (p. 233)

Luther underscored faith's role in clarifying the heart and embracing God's word. Faith was seen as a prerequisite for understanding, enabling people to avoid spiritual blindness and accept God's true words, thereby allowing a direct comprehension of Scripture.

As a follower of Lutheran thought, Flacius shared Luther's fundamental hermeneutic perspective, likewise emphasising that biblical interpretation must start from faith. For Flacius, faith is the prerequisite for understanding, and only through faith in God does the path to understanding open to us. This view suggests that understanding is not merely a cognitive process, but a complex activity involving faith, where the interpreter's inner disposition significantly influences the depth of understanding. Flacius (1968) observed:

It is the duty of Christ to open the Scriptures to us and to enlighten our hearts so that we understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). From His fullness, we must all receive. This happens by recognising and accepting Him in faith. (p. 31)

Through faith in God, one's heart is purified,[1] enabling true understanding. This view suggests that our understanding is not an isolated act of reason, but a process intricately linked to faith and spiritual growth. Flacius (1968) further commented:

> When we turn to Christ, the veil is removed from our hearts and also from Scripture itself, not only because we are enlightened by the spiritual light, but also because we hold in our hands the viewpoint and argument of the entire Scripture, namely the Lord Jesus Himself with His suffering and His benefactions (2 Corinthians 3:16). (p. 35)

From the hermeneutics of Luther and Flacius, we see that faith leads to conversion and purifies the heart, forming the precondition for understanding.[2] The only distinction lies in that, for Luther, faith directly opens the way to comprehend Scripture, whereas for Flacius, faith makes understanding possible, although full comprehension requires overcoming language-based obstacles.

The dialogical nature of understanding

In the hermeneutical thought of the Reformation period, the Bible was viewed not merely as a passive text but as a venue for ongoing dialogue between God and the interpreter. Luther believed that God, as the Bible's author, engages in dialogue with readers through the text, a process that transcends the interpreter's understanding and includes divine revelation to the interpreter's soul. Thus, understanding becomes a dynamic exchange between God and the interpreter (reader).

For Luther, this dialogue involves not only a rational exchange but also an interaction of the soul, establishing a sacred bond between God and the interpreter through the Bible. Although human language in the Bible might seem ambiguous, God's intentions are absolutely true and clear. For human enlightenment, God has meticulously arranged the content of the Bible. Thus, Luther (2006b) argues:

> If the words are unclear in one place, they are clear in another. The same matter, explained clearly to the whole world, is sometimes stated in the scriptures with clear words, at other times it hides behind unclear words. (p. 237)

Flacius similarly continued Luther's idea that 'God is both author and interpreter', so that understanding and interpreting the Bible also forms a dialogue. Flacius (1968) argued:

> The Holy Spirit is both the author and interpreter of Scripture. It is His role to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). It is His work to write the Scripture into our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). For prophecy and all Scripture (according to Peter's testimony in his first letter,

1. The idea of purification by faith is used in the context of God not discriminating between Jew and Gentile, as stated in Acts 15:9: 'And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith'.

2. Augustine expressed the idea that faith precedes understanding in *On Christian Doctrine*: 'Thus, although understanding lies in the sight of the Eternal, faith nourishes as children are nourished with milk in the cradles of temporal things. Now "we walk by faith and not by sight". Unless we walk by faith, we shall not be able to come to that sight which does not fail but continues through a cleansed understanding uniting us with Truth'. (Augustine 1958:45)

verse 20) is not a matter of one's own insight or interpretation. Rather, just as it was given by the Holy Spirit through the prophets, it must also necessarily be interpreted by His light (2 Peter 1:20). (p. 31)

As both author and interpreter, God has already made precise arrangements in the Bible for our understanding. Flacius further pointed out that the layout and structure of biblical text represent God's intention to communicate with humans. He considered many narratives and doctrines within the Bible not merely as historical records or doctrinal statements but as dialogues with the reader facilitated by God through an intricately arranged text. Flacius specifically noted that metaphors, symbols and narrative structures in the Bible serve as instruments to inspire readers to think and respond. This dialogical quality transcends traditional objectivist frameworks, emphasising a bidirectional process that requires the interpreter's constant response to God within the text. For Flacius (1968):

> God has indeed made wondrous provisions for our folly, so that the Holy Scripture is written with remarkable craftsmanship, with comprehensive agreement and harmony. This means that not only the individual books or writings and their various passages, but also a single passage and the entire context are illuminated and explained in such a way that all doubts cannot be more successfully resolved and interpreted from anywhere else than by thoughtfully reflecting on the specific passage itself in the fear of God. Nowhere else can one find an author or a written work of such craftsmanship and unique benefit. (p. 105, 107)

The dialogical nature of this understanding renders hermeneutics not merely the application of interpretive rules but a dynamic process full of exchange and response. As the interpreter reads the Bible, they are not simply comprehending the text's content but engaging in a sacred dialogue. This dialogue takes place not only between the interpreter and the text, but also between the interpreter and God. Through this interaction, the interpreter's understanding deepens, while God's will reveals itself more clearly. Following Luther, Philipp Melanchthon combined rhetoric, grammar and dialectics to form a new hermeneutical concept that enhanced attention to textual language levels (Leiner 1997).

This drew Flacius's attention to language issues, and he focused on the challenges posed by language in understanding the Bible. While he maintained that God's message in the Bible was inherently clear, he recognised that its expression in human language introduced a degree of ambiguity, making interpretation necessary. Unlike Luther, who leaned towards the possibility of immediate understanding, Flacius emphasised the need for a more objective approach, relying on interpretive principles to grasp the meaning of the text. Flacius divided the interpretive rules for understanding the Bible into two categories: special rules and general rules. The special rules are derived from the Bible itself, emphasising principles such as the supremacy of God's word and the harmony between the law and the gospel. The general rules include eight focused on the interpreter's character and approach, such as seeking God's guidance, applying faith,

and treating reading as a dialogue with God. They also include four rules centred on the biblical text: *scopus*, which focuses on identifying the overall goal and intent of the text; *argumentum*, which involves summarising the main theme and perspective of the text; *dispositio*, which examines the structure and layout of the text, likened to the parts of a body; and *tabellaris synopsis*, which organises the text's elements into a systematic table for better understanding. Flacius likened the Bible to an organism, emphasising the dynamic relationship between the whole and its parts as essential for fully grasping the essence of God's word (Wang 2024).

Modern 'discourse analysis' (Harris 1952), introduced by Zellig Harris to study linguistic structures beyond the sentence level, offers an interesting point of comparison. Although Flacius's method was rooted in theological concerns rather than purely linguistic or sociocultural analysis, there are clear affinities. Both approaches pay close attention to the logical and thematic arrangement of the text, the unity of its parts, and the role of context in shaping meaning. Discourse analysis typically investigates how language operates in social interactions, studying how meaning is constructed in extended stretches of spoken or written language. Flacius's 'organismic methodology' (Wang 2024) by contrast, emphasised the Bible as an intricately crafted unity arranged to facilitate a dialogue between God and the interpreter. Yet the two share a similar commitment to grasping how textual structure and overarching themes guide a reader's interpretation.

Gadamer acknowledged and revealed this methodological rule originating from ancient rhetoric (Gadamer 1993:287). However, we need to further recognise that the fundamental purpose of this methodology is to facilitate interaction between the interpreter and God. The value of Flacius's hermeneutics lies not merely in applying traditional rhetorical methods to biblical interpretation but in forming a dialogue. Through this dialogic form, God's words and thoughts can truly reach the human heart and manifest in concrete practice. When we consider this 'organismic methodology' in light of modern discourse analysis, we see that, while their objects of study and ultimate goals differ, the textual strategies can, in many cases, overlap. The present discussion, however, focuses on the dialogical dimension of Flacius's work, in which God arranges Scripture to guide the interpreter. The interpreter, in turn, comes to know both the text and God through this structure.

From this early theological tradition, we see that hermeneutics, from its inception, has emphasised dialogue more than mere method. Luther and Flacius's approach shows that the interpretive act is an ongoing interchange between God and the interpreter, rather than simply the application of formal rules. Although many modern accounts of hermeneutics regard its dialogical character as a more recent development, Reformation thought reveals that this feature was already present in earlier theological frameworks. Consequently, we may conclude that hermeneutics has always been, at its core, a dialogical art

grounded in the conviction that intellectual understanding arises through an encounter with the God. Notably, an important aspect of this process is the interpreter's virtue.

Virtue of the interpreter

The application of the thought of virtue (excellence) in a Christian context is by no means unrelated to Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle's discussion of virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics* offers valuable insights for understanding why interpreters during the Reformation placed such emphasis on virtuous character. According to Aristotle, ethical virtue is understood as a 'hexis' ('state', 'condition', or 'disposition') that is essentially a habitual inclination leading us to experience appropriate emotions (Kraut 2022). As Aristotle's (1984) principle of the 'mean' suggests, virtue often consists in striking a balance between excess and defect.

> For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now excellence is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and both these things are characteristics of excellence. Therefore excellence is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate. (p. 25)

In this sense, for interpreters, Aristotle's view of virtue implies that in the process of biblical exegesis, one must not only avoid pride, but also guard against negligence. Only through ongoing self-reflection and practice, by adjusting one's moral character to find the appropriate 'mean', can interpreters maintain humility and perceptiveness, sincerity and objectivity towards the text, thereby opening themselves to a deeper exploration of truth.

In theological hermeneutics during the Reformation, virtue was regarded as a vital prerequisite for understanding. An interpreter's virtue was considered crucial to accurately comprehend a text, particularly in terms of their pursuit of truth and moral integrity, which ultimately determined the credibility and value of their interpretation. The character of the interpreter directly impacted their understanding of a work. An interpreter with high moral standing often approached understanding with a commitment to truth and a sense of responsibility towards the author, giving their interpretations greater credibility and worth. In the hermeneutics of the 16th-century Reformation and the 17th-century Lutheran Orthodoxy, the virtue of biblical interpreters was one of the keys to unlocking a text's meaning. Only interpreters who possess a certain level of moral integrity could more profoundly enter the inner world of the text and genuinely grasp its deeper significance. On the matter of considering an interpreter's virtue as a decisive element for understanding, Flacius and Johann Conrad Dannhauer are prominent figures.

Virtue finds its primary manifestation in Flacius's eight general principles for interpreters. For example, consider the first principle, that is, seeking God's guidance before interpreting (humility); the fourth principle emphasises avoiding influence by anxious emotions (patience), and the fifth principle is about not fearing difficult passages (courage) (Wang 2024). These rules set an expectation of goodness in the interpreter. Only when the interpreter acts with good intention can understanding truly happen. This connection highlights that an interpreter's virtue is intrinsically linked to faith. Humility and belief in God are prerequisites for genuine understanding. A good interpreter must possess certain virtues, such as humility and devotion to access the deeper meanings within the text. An interpreter should approach with a humble heart, avoiding personal bias, to truly grasp God's intention. Interpreters who are prideful or self-satisfied may overlook God's voice in their interpretation, focusing instead on their own understanding and thereby straying from the true meaning of the text.

Dannhauer, one of the key figures in 17th-century Protestant hermeneutics, adopted Flacius's distinction between special rules and general rules. He further advanced the disciplinisation of hermeneutics by treating it as a subdiscipline of logic and integrating it closely with dialectics (Bolliger 2020:16). Dannhauer further developed this perspective on the interpreter's virtue, explicitly titling his work *Idea Boni Interpretis et Malitiosi Calumniatoris*, underscoring his focus on the qualities of a good interpreter. This work, 'the first textbook of the new discipline called "general hermeneutics"' (Scholz 2015:778), describes the qualities and traits of a good interpreter. A good interpreter diligently strives to eliminate any subjective weakness of will, approaching the text with genuine humility and an awareness of potential biases. By seeking the author's original intent and carefully examining the text, they endeavor to convey its meaning faithfully and objectively, free from personal prejudices that might distort the truth. In contrast, a distorter is one who imposes their own subjective will or preconceived notions on the text, ignoring its internal logic and true meaning. Rather than discovering the text's genuine meaning, they force it to align with their personal biases, thus undermining objectivity.

Dannhauer first of all defines the interpreter ([*interpres*], *subjectum hermeneuticae*) as one who ascertains the true meaning of the text, in contrast to the deceiver who distorts it (Sparn 2014:192). He identifies two obstacles to understanding: language and the interpreter's inner disposition. An interpreter's virtue involves addressing the latter, requiring them to exclude personal weakness of will and biases to interpret biblical texts objectively and impartially. According to Sparn (2014:193), Dannhauer writes in *Sacred Hermeneutics* that each person was endowed with the capacity for understanding from creation, which is perfected as an active and habitual skill through the Holy Spirit. Through faith in God, one can cultivate the virtues necessary for understanding. For Dannhauer, reverence for God, sharp insight, diligence

and sincerity are fundamental prerequisites for interpretation (Sparn 2014:194).

Overall, the emphasis on the interpreter's virtue renders hermeneutics not merely a cognitive process but a moral and spiritual discipline. In interpreting texts, the interpreter not only needs sufficient knowledge and skill but also the requisite virtues to ensure that their interpretive process aligns with God's will and the pursuit of truth.

Conclusion

This article has delved into the rich dimensions of theological hermeneutics during the Reformation period through three primary aspects: the relationship between understanding and faith, the dialogical nature of understanding, and the virtue of the interpreter. Firstly, the connection between understanding and faith underscores the foundational and motivational role of faith, revealing that understanding is not merely a cognitive activity but a complex process deeply influenced by faith. Secondly, the dialogical nature of understanding suggests that understanding is not merely a decoding process by the interpreter but an interactive engagement with the divine force behind the text, a dynamic exchange. Finally, the interpreter's virtues serve as the ethical foundation of understanding, emphasising moral responsibility and spiritual cultivation within the process, transcending the boundaries of a purely objectified endeavour.

Through an in-depth analysis of these themes, this article highlights the unique value of theological hermeneutics from the Reformation Era and opens new avenues for dialogue within modern theories of understanding. Against this backdrop, revisiting the Reformation Era theological hermeneutics and reassessing its emphasis on faith, dialogue and virtue offer fresh perspectives for the theoretical development of modern hermeneutics and also valuable insights into the ethics, interaction models and understanding of human values.

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