THE VISION AND WORK OF THE CENTER FOR HERMENEUTICAL RESEARCH

BIBLE AND
THE WORD

UNDERSTANDING
AND PROCLAMATION

TEXT AND READING

SCHOLARSHIP
AND THEOLOGY

HOW READEST THOU?
(πῶσ ἀναγινώσκεισ;) Luke 10:26

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KÁROLI GÁSPÁR UNIVERSITY
OF THE REFORMED CHURCH
IN HUNGARY

Lectori Salutem!

"Blessed is the one who reads" (Rev 1:3).

Welcome

The Center for Hermeneutical Research warmly welcomes theologians, scholars in the humanities, teachers, pastors, and students who are interested in our work and publications.

About Us

Founded in 1993, the Foundation of the Center for Hermeneutical Research was a pioneering inter-university and interdenominational initiative in Hungary. It was established through the collaboration of leading theological and academic institutions, with the aim of fostering dialogue across disciplines and denominations. The Center operates under the guidance of a Board of Trustees.

In 2009, the Center for Hermeneutical Research Institute was established by the Faculty of Arts of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, to support the Center's academic, educational, and conference activities. In 2010, the Jonathan Edwards Center–Hungary was founded within this framework, in cooperation with Yale University. https://jec.hu/

Our Mission

The Center is dedicated to the study and teaching of the Christian interpretation of the Bible. Its work emphasizes:

- the integration of academic rigor and Christian reflection
- the exploration of diverse interpretive traditions
- the promotion of critical thinking and theological dialogue

We seek to represent the values of the Christian tradition in a way that is both historically grounded and relevant to contemporary life, while respecting denominational diversity.

Research Focus

Our work is shaped by the field of Theological Hermeneutics, also known as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS). This approach affirms that:

- theological and ecclesial perspectives are essential
- historical-critical research remains significant
- Scripture is to be read as a living voice within the community of faith

Publications

Since 1994, the Center has published the *Hermeneutical Booklets* series, with over 50 issues to date. These volumes present a wide range of theological perspectives and encourage thoughtful engagement with biblical texts.
https://hermeneutika-btk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/herm_fuz_2025_01_29.pdf
Books by Tibor Fabiny

Related Research

The Fundamentalism Project
The Institute works closely with Institutes of English Studies, engaging in research on: the Bible and literature, Biblical Typology (Figuralism), the History of Biblical Interpretation, Luther and the English Reformation, Renaissance Iconography, the History of British and American Christianity, Fundamentalism and so on.

Publications and research has been devoted to major figures such as Martin Luther, William Tyndale, William Shakespeare, John Milton and Jonathan Edwards.

The Center also maintains active relationships with Hungarian and international scholarly organizations.

Digital Innovation

In response to the digital transformation of scholarship, the Center has developed the Unified Bible Reader (https://ebo.kre.hu), an innovative platform that:

- offers multiple Hungarian and foreign-language Bible translations
- enables parallel reading of up to six versions
- synchronizes daily readings across denominations

This tool supports both personal devotion and academic research.

The other digital innovation is the Hungarian Shakespeare Reader:
https://shakespeare.kre.hu/

Community and Outreach

To encourage regular Bible reading, the Director provides a daily Bible study guide for members of various Christian denominations.
https://fabinytibor.eu/minden-napi-linkek/

The Center is committed to fostering ecumenical dialogue. By bringing together scholars from different traditions, it seeks to build bridges within and between churches through the shared study of Scripture.

BEYOND LITERALISM AND LIBERALISM: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DISCOVERED PATH OF THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS[1]

A Theological Pamphlet by Tibor Fabiny

The Center for Hermeneutical Research, founded in 1993, aims to serve and to shape perspectives; to foster critical yet at the same time faithful thinking. Our publications have reached their intended audiences across several denominations, have become university course materials among scholars in the humanities and theologians, and have even given rise to new subjects and courses.

Every second year, as an external lecturer, I teach the course "Hermeneutics" at the Lutheran Theological University, and I also teach the same subject under the title "Theological Hermeneutics" every spring semester at the Faculty of Theology of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. It is an exciting challenge to teach Calvin's hermeneutics to Lutheran theology students and Luther's theological hermeneutics to Reformed students.

I am aware that engaging in the interpretation of the Bible—hermeneutics—can also carry dangers, especially when it becomes an end in itself. In such cases, we are like the fool who looks at the finger pointing to the moon, whereas the wise person looks at what the finger is pointing to: the moon. Jesus says of the scribes of His time—but also of theologians, scholars, and "hermeneuts" of every age—that "they take away the key" from others, yet do not enter themselves. Woe to those who are interested only in the key—hermeneutics, theology, or scholarship—for its own sake, and who forget that the key, scholarship, theology, and hermeneutics exist for one purpose alone: that we may enter, and lead and invite others in as well. Enter where? Into the Kingdom of God, about which Jesus spoke in many beautiful and deeply meaningful parables.

The interpretation of the text exists for the understanding of the Word of God; the understanding of the Word of God exists for proclamation; proclamation, like the sowing of seed, serves the conception of faith in the human heart; the conceived faith exists to be passed on; the transmitted faith gives birth to the community of the Church; and incorporation into the Church, as the Body of Christ, serves our being received back into the holy communion of the Trinity. We may call this salvation, heaven, the Kingdom of God, or perhaps most fittingly eternal life. This is what everything is for. Everything is for our salvation, for our eternal life. This is why God became human: so that we might once again partake in the blessed communion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

God's Word—the Dabar, the Logos—was in the beginning, and it is this Word that created us out of nothing. It was this Voice, the Voice of the Spirit, that the people of God heard—those seized by the Spirit—so that they, in turn, might address others. The proclaimed Word was committed to writing, bound into a Book, yet this Word cannot remain confined within writing or within a book; it seeks to break out and desires to be proclaimed. Then it is written down again, printed, and proclaimed again and again. This is the true hermeneutical circle set in motion by the Holy Spirit. The interpretation of the Bible is not merely service, perspective, or passion, but also suffering. One must struggle—indeed, wrestle—for the true meaning of the Bible, as Jacob wrestled with the angel. In that struggle Jacob was wounded, yet it was precisely through this struggle and suffering that he became Israel, that is, the one who wrestles with God. Luther, too, struggled to understand the Word of God; this is why *tentatio* stands between *oratio* and *meditatio*. This battle and struggle often take

[1] Tibor Fabiny is a literary scholar and a Lutheran lay theologian. He published and edited books on Shakespeare and iconography, biblical hermeneutics and literary theory, biblical figuralism, Luther's theology of the cross, William Tyndale's hermeneutics, fundamentalism and theological hermeneutics, Currently he is finishing his collection of essays *Crime and Forgiveness. Essays on the Theological Approaches to Shakespeare*. As a Professor of English and the leader of the Center for Hermeneutics he is affiliated with the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. https://btk.kre.hu/index.php/fabiny-tibor. This pamphlet received thirty-three responses from Hungarian Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and Adventist pastors and theologians. These responses with the feedbacks were published in Tibor Fabiny, *Túl a literalizmuson. Gondolkodó párbeszéd a teológiai hermeneutikáról* (Beyond Literalism. Reflective Dialogue on Theological Hermeneutics), Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2023. The pamphlet was republished in various Catholic and Protestant journals in Hungary.

the form of dispute. We contend with God, as Job did; we do not understand why He hides Himself. This drama appears again and again and can be discerned in the twofold dramatic performance of what is today often sidelined as "salvation history": first, God's action—His becoming human, in the drama of redemption (Craig Bartholomew); and second, our struggle, our coming to faith, and our eternal life. Both are dramatic processes unfolding in time. For history and the human being alike are processes, not static states—just like the Creator, who not only is, but was and will be; and the created human being is also more than what simply is—he or she is also what will be.

My own hermeneutical interest, too, was born out of personal struggle and wrestling. There was a time when I felt I had to outgrow the subculture of my church; I turned toward secular knowledge and entered the field of the humanities. Then, quite unexpectedly, the Bible was placed before me—opened up by people to whom I am grateful, yet with many aspects of whose teaching I did not agree. I corresponded, debated, and was wounded, as even a friendship was lost in the process. At that time, I did not even know what hermeneutics was. And yet it was precisely this struggle that made me a passionate seeker of the understanding of Scripture, a "hermeneut," and I dare to say: a "theologian"—at least in the Lutheran sense, according to which every human being is a theologian (whether they know it or not, since everyone thinks about God in one way or another).

I struggled with those who interpret the Bible literally, for whom divine inspiration conveys divine "information"—that is, facts that are humanly, historically, and biologically precise, and that can be recognized either through human reason or, on the contrary, by sacrificing reason. This cognitive approach also reads the Bible as history, attributing clear (literal) meanings to its words. It makes no distinction between events that actually occurred and their narration. According to this view, God literally created the earth and the heavens in six days, the serpent truly spoke in Paradise, Jonah was literally swallowed by the great fish—because if this were not so, then the Bible, as the Word of God, would be false, that is, "God would be lying." I will not elaborate on the absurdities of this line of thought, but we must see that literalism seeks to "justify" (verify) the Bible through historical reality. Its proponents emphasize that ever new archaeological discoveries either now or in the future will confirm, "verify," the "truth" of the Bible, its humanly understood infallibility. "You see," they say, "the Bible was right after all!"

The literary scholar Northrop Frye calls literalism "anti-intellectual Christian populism," and writes that anyone who seeks the truth of the Bible in historical reality outside the Bible applies a criterion of truth that is foreign to it. Of course, there are historical references in the Bible, but its language does not operate with the modern concept of truth; rather, it very often employs poetic images, metaphors, narrative, and typology, which make present a different kind of Truth. The Bible's concept of truth is not "truth" in the modern scientific sense; rather, it partly denotes reality (*aletheia*), and partly it is a relational concept (*dikaiosyne*). God's truth is not an abstract idea, but God's action by which He makes one righteous, by which He justifies (Károly Karner).

So what, then, do biblical texts mean, and how do they mean? An American author explains in his study what the text of the Gospels can and cannot be considered. In a negative sense, the Gospel is not fiction, not myth, but neither is it history in the modern, historiographical sense. In other words, we proceed incorrectly if we read the Gospels as a literary genre, as myth, or, conversely, as historically reliable documents, since they are mostly narratives—that is, accounts—into which historical inaccuracies or even errors may have slipped, as John Calvin himself acknowledges in his work on the harmony of the Gospels.

In a positive sense, the author formulates it this way: the Gospels are testimonies; moreover, they are history-like testimonies; and finally, they are history-like testimonies about truths that are at once historical and transcendent (William Placher). The essential point, therefore, lies in testimony.

Four decades ago, while writing a letter, I spontaneously formulated this thought: Holy Scripture is not true because it is written down; rather, it is written down because it is true. How could every sentence of the Bible be equally inspired (*plenary inspiration*), when it contains terrifying curses and wearisome genealogies? Who can claim that those sentences are equally and in the same way inspired by the Holy Spirit, and on the basis of 2Timothy 3:16 ("All Scripture is inspired…") assert that this applies to every line of all sixty-six books of the (Protestant) Bible? Are the final lines of Psalm 137

really inspired in the same way as John 3:16? Literalists, however, do make this claim, and therefore speak of the infallibility of Holy Scripture—using a foreign term: its inerrancy (see the document published in Hungarian as well, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*).

At the same time, overcoming literalism does not mean rejecting the literal, word-for-word sense, which both the Reformers and contemporary theological hermeneutics take very seriously. Brevard Childs demonstrated that, as a result of the Enlightenment's historical approach, the *sensus literalis* became equated with the *sensus historicus*. Consequently, interpreters focused exclusively on the author's intention, the original historical meaning, and evaluated only that—while the spiritual, prophetic sense was lost. It was forgotten that the text itself is also interpretation: in the New Testament, certain words, persons, and events of the Old Testament gained new, deeper, and richer meaning. This is what the evangelists call "fulfillment." The literal meaning may carry within itself a deeper meaning (*sensus plenior*), a prophetic future—just as a tiny seed contains within itself the plant that will grow from it.

But I also struggled with my former liberal self, which regarded the Bible merely as a product of human culture. As a young high school student, I was enthusiastic about modern theology: I was drawn to a contemporary theology that kept pace with secular thinking. A quotation from Paul Tillich appealed to me so much that I copied it into a notebook: "If the word (God) no longer has great significance for you, then translate it; speak of the depth of your life, of the ground of your being… If you do this, you will have to forget some of what you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself. For if you have recognized that God means depth, then you already know much about Him."

Yet after my encounter with the Word, my conversion, I realized that God cannot be a function of the depth of my own life. For "depth" is something even the same person understands differently in different life situations. God does not change—we change. By that time, I was already formulating it this way: after coming to know the divine language, it is not enough to be "translators"; we must also become "teachers of the language"—of course, in a metaphorical sense.

I knew and felt that, however easy it would be to yield to the inviting warmth of either flock—the literalist or the liberal—I had to find the path appointed for me and walk on it. For me, this became the narrow path of theological hermeneutics: we must move beyond both literalism and liberalism.

By studying the works of literary scholars and biblical theologians, I came to understand that what I had instinctively rejected as literalism is, ultimately, fundamentalism.

While studying the life's work of a Protestant French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, and preparing many of his writings for publication in my own country, I encountered a new paradigm. Modern theology, after all, was still thinking in the dualism of old/new and conservative/modern, and, in the spirit of Enlightenment ideology, it critically rejected the old while uncritically celebrating the new. Ricoeur's essay *Religion–Atheism–Faith* (1991), however, opened up a new perspective. It suggested that we should not think in dualistic terms, but rather in the triad of pre-critical, critical, and post-critical, since the critical era—modernism—has itself already been surpassed by the post-critical and postmodern paradigm.

We can arrive at the "second naivety," at faith, not by bypassing the first naivety and rationalism, but by passing through them.

It seemed to me that our churches are once again lagging behind when, out of fear of being labeled outdated, they proclaim the exclusivity of modernity and critical thinking.

By moving beyond both literalism and liberalism, yet without rejecting their values—on the one hand, thorough knowledge of the Bible, and on the other, the freedom of thought—and thus seeking a bridge between these two paths, a third way began to unfold for me. At first I called it Christian hermeneutics; later, in light of the international (especially American) research of recent decades, I have come to call it theological hermeneutics. This is a new path on which now I attempt to walk. What, then, does theological hermeneutics mean, and how does it differ from earlier hermeneutical approaches? Without claiming completeness, I will now outline a few of its characteristic features.

1. Taking the biblical text seriously as a text and applying the latest insights of textual theory: namely, that the text is not a "transparent window" through which we can see the "historical" reality behind it, but rather a "stained-glass window," in which the text has layers, and often the text itself is already interpretation. The New Testament text is a "fabric" in which Old Testament motifs can be seen and heard. This is called intertextuality: certain motifs from earlier texts are incorporated into a new text, and thus, in their new context, the earlier texts (guest texts) acquire new meanings. As I approach the text, I recognize that the text "works," that it interprets, and that it creates a presence, about which I will speak later.

2. At the same time, the text of the Bible is not just any text, but a "holy" text. While it is not identical with revelation, it carries and contains revelation—God's Word. An American author lists seven characteristics of a sacred text: 1. divine inspiration; 2. the bearer of revelation; 3. coded (veiled), and therefore requiring decoding; 4. inspired, demanding an interpreter; 5. life-transforming (transformative); 6. serving as the foundation for a religious rite; 7. evoking the divine presence (Robert Detweiler).

3. Christian reading is Christological reading: together with Luther, it affirms that for us the essential point it *was Christum treibet*. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word, who, according to Luther, is present in the Bible just as truly as Christ is present in the manger. The principle represented by the Reformers—that Scripture interprets itself—is not a formal rule, but a dynamic movement that destroys the author's or the communities' "sensus proprius" that intervenes the divine and its human understanding (Walter Mostert). Instead, this Reformation principle refers to the presence of the one whom the text signifies: Jesus Christ.

4. The rehabilitation of inspiration: it gains new meaning, not through verbal inspiration, but through the recognition that without the work of the Holy Spirit there is no spiritual reading or understanding. The Holy Spirit touched the authors of the books of the Bible and the texts they wrote and must also touch and reach the reader. This, then, is trinitarian reading and hermeneutics: the Word with which the Father creates, the Christ about whom the text speaks and who speaks and understanding is the work of the Holy Spirit.

5. The rehabilitation of the spectrum of systematic theology. In the eighteenth century, biblical studies became detached from theology. Theological hermeneutics, however, reads the text with theological interest, through the "lens of faith," taking into account the principle of the *regula fidei*. We should therefore not approach the text exclusively with a "historical interest," seeking behind it the so-called "real" reality, the historical events, as modern historical-critical methods did; nor should we read it in order to confirm our own ideological presuppositions. We read the Bible faithfully to its own spirit when we "align ourselves with the direction" in which the witnesses of the text themselves stood.

6. The rehabilitation of the canon: Historical criticism treated the canon as a "dogmatic grid" from which earlier texts had to be liberated. A new insight is that the canon has a hermeneutical role in relating texts to one another: in the process of canonization, older texts acquired new meaning. The one-sided critical paradigm, by contrast, disintegrated, de-canonized, and ultimately de-Christianized the text.

7. The rehabilitation of the church: The interpretation of the Bible does not happen individually, but within the spiritual community of the church. Historical scholarship has appropriated Scripture; now the church "claims it back." Catholics have always emphasized this, and more recently, representatives of theological hermeneutics affirm this as well. This is not about "one" church or a single denomination, but about the "one," "holy," "apostolic," "universal" (catholic) church. Biblical interpretation is inseparable from the confession of faith. This reading is a reading open to repentance. If we close the Bible saying, "this is exactly what we expected," we are not surprised. In such cases, we have not only read poorly but have sinned, because we studied Scripture to confirm our own presuppositions rather than accepting that God always speaks to us in new ways. The goal of reading the Bible must be the constant renewal of our minds and understanding.

8. The rehabilitation of the faithful tradition is the next point, since church history is the history of the Scripture (Gerhard Ebeling). There is a distinction between traditionalism and tradition: the former is the dead faith of the living; the latter is the living faith of the dead (Jaroslav Pelikan). Tradition, rejected by the Enlightenment, has to be rescued. This is why the *Hermeneutical Booklets* I have been editing for more than 30 years, include writings by the Church Fathers (Origen, Tyconius, Augustine), and then by the theologians of the Reformation era: Luther, Tyndale, and Calvin. Among twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologians, those authors have been published who have advocated theological hermeneutics, as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Oscar Cullmann, Paul Ricoeur, Ulrich Luz, George Lindbeck, Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, David Steinmetz, George Hunsinger, Richard Hays, Richard Briggs, and from the younger generation, John Webster and Kevin Vanhoozer.

9. The emergence of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or reception history. It has been recognized that texts have not only a "pre-history" but also a "post-history." (Ulrich Luz). It is not only the process of the text's formulation but also the study of its impact that constitutes scholarly activity, and this greatly facilitates the interpretation of texts. What did a particular biblical book mean to the great figures of church history? Their reading can also influence our own reading, and this becomes possible through the study of the history of exegesis. The biblical commentaries of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others remain a treasure trove for today's readers. It is a wonderful realization that we can sing in the same chorus as Luther, Calvin, and others. The study of reception history is an interdenominational, ecumenical endeavor.

10. The Christian reading of the Old Testament: The Old Testament is not merely the Hebrew Bible, but for us Christians, it is testimony about Christ, which we are permitted to read "backwards," figuratively (typologically), from the perspective of fulfilment (Richard Hays). This is not a "baptizing" of the Hebrew Bible texts, but a mode of reading that the Christian church has practiced for two thousand years, and which is also expressed in the liturgy. The writings of the Old Testament were the Scriptures for Jesus and the authors of the New Testament as well; reading them "backwards," they understood that the prophecies, prefigurations, and sacrificial festivals of the Old Testament point forward to the coming of the Messiah. At the same time, it is also valuable to read the Bible in dialogue with contemporary Judaism. It is not only we Christians who read the Old Testament "with faith." The faith experience of believing Jews should also be considered when reading the Bible. However, we should not assume that Judaism necessarily appreciates it when we Christians read the Old Testament as a "letter not addressed to us."

11. Christian reading is openness to surprise, the experience of which is joy. In the Book of Nehemiah, for the Jews returning from Babylonian exile, the priest Ezra reads aloud the discovered book of the Law, the Word of God. We are given an account of a beautiful worship service, a liturgical-hermeneutical process: Ezra opens the book in full view of the people, the people stand, and Ezra blesses the Lord (the liturgy): "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading" (Neh 8:8). After the reading (which is at least as important as the act of reading itself), the people first weep, then rejoice. Behold, hermeneutics set in motion by the Holy Spirit! I would be surprised if Luther did not see here the tension between Law and Gospel. Faithful understanding is always accompanied by joy. One need only think of the joy of the Ethiopian eunuch: "he went on his way rejoicing," or recall the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "burning" with understanding.

With all these considerations, I wish to emphasize that reading with a theological interest, through the lens of faith, not only complements historical reading but also serves as the starting point for interpreting the Bible. "First Theology!" – say the representatives of the theological interpretation of Scripture (Kevin Vanhoozer).

This older hermeneutical approach, understood as "wise biblical reading," (Richard Briggs) can be transmitted through theological education and, through teaching, applied in congregational settings: in sermons and Bible studies. Theological hermeneutics (beyond literalism and liberalism)

aims precisely to bridge the gap that has arisen between the scholarly work of professional theologians and the faith of the members of the congregation.

With many of our publications, we try to teach and cultivate a "wise" reading of the Bible—an interpretation that serves our salvation. This is the purpose of our new project, the Unified Bible Reader (EBO), which allows reading nineteen Hungarian Bible translations and simultaneously displays the daily texts of the Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Baptist churches.

I do not wish to claim that this theological hermeneutics is without shortcomings or debatable aspects. I have merely attempted to present it as a contemporary alternative to the historically-focused approach, which for centuries has been regarded as exclusively scientific.