
CULTIVATING RESPONSE-ABLE LEADERSHIP POSTURES: RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE BIBLICAL TEXT

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Abstract

Adaptive, sensemaking, and improvisational approaches to leadership all require responsive capacities. Such leadership facilitates creativity and innovation, in part by receiving and attending to the intentions and actions of others. Drawing upon the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur, this essay explores the way in which particular encounters with the biblical text can cultivate responsive postures within a community as one aspect of leadership formation. After exploring the theological dimensions of this approach to the biblical text, the essay turns to Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics to understand the phenomenon of the textual encounter and an appropriate, creative, and open-ended means for engaging texts. The essay closes by considering where and how such reading communities can be situated for the sake of cultivating response-able postures of leadership.

Cultivating Responsive Leadership Capacities

When Jose Ribeiro accepted the call to New Hope Presbyterian Church in Campinas, Brazil, the church looked like many mainline congregations in North America.¹ The church occupied a large campus in the center of a rapidly growing city and provided a number of services to the neighborhood, but the congregation was declining numerically and struggling to adapt to the fluid social, economic, and cultural realities of an urban context. New leaders regularly inherit such settings and face pressure to pioneer something new, to revitalize the congregation, or to recover the relevance of the church. Ribeiro began his tenure with a different kind of action; he cultivated space for attentive listening. He converted a

¹ While based on a true story, the name and church have been changed.

small room into a chapel, where he practiced a regular rhythm of contemplative practices with his church staff on Thursday mornings. Most weeks, the staff sat in silent contemplation before speaking to one another about what was heard, seen, or discovered in prayer.

Over the years, they also discovered a way of listening guided by Scripture they call “bibliodrama.” As a member of the community reads the gospel text, the community silently imagines themselves in the text before sharing with one another what they experienced. What do they feel? Hear? See? Smell? With whom do they identify? By establishing such practices early on, Ribeiro exercised leadership in the cultivation of certain responsive postures, inviting his staff to listen more intently to God, to one another, and to the Scriptures. In Ribeiro’s telling, these simple ways of listening, reading, praying, and speaking to one another have transformed his own ministry, the staff of New Hope, and a host of congregational leaders in the region. While the congregation is enjoying a revitalized ministry and presence in the neighborhood, Thursday mornings at New Hope now often include more than the church staff, with other pastors, church planters, and local leaders joining in shared contemplative exercise. Moreover, through retreats hosted by Ribeiro and his colleague, a network of church planters and leaders engaging in pioneering ministries have discovered in contemplative spiritual practices deep resources for innovative, pioneering, and adaptive leadership in challenging church planting and revitalization contexts. It might not be common to place innovative ministry alongside contemplative spiritual practices, nor might one immediately connect an open-ended exercise like bibliodrama to the cultivation of leadership capacity. Yet, this is precisely how Ribeiro tells his story.

Over the past decade, scholars within the leadership industry, religious and otherwise, suggest the need for more creative, adaptive, and pioneering forms of leadership. Unprecedented social fluidity means that

organizations must learn adaptive behaviors. Changing contexts force organizations and leaders to experiment, create, and learn in the midst of other activities and demands. While these capacities can be described differently as adaptive, improvisational, or sensemaking approaches to leadership, they have in common an emphasis on responsive leadership postures. Adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking leaders must learn to be response-able. Leadership in uncertain times or changing organizations requires a disciplined, yet playful openness so that innovative or creative solutions can be discovered and diffused. Learning to listen, attend, and wisely respond becomes an important part of leadership formation. For example, adaptive leadership emphasizes the capacity to learn from environmental and social cues that do not arise from the direction or even strategic plan of the leader.² Improvisational leadership³ identifies the link between practiced experimentation, intentional risk, and innovation, whereas sensemaking identifies the facilitative and reflective role of leadership.⁴ Each

² Adaptive leadership approaches tend to build upon the distinction made by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky between adaptive and technical work in changing organizations. Leadership engages technical work when it addresses known problems with known solutions. Leadership engages adaptive work when both problem and solution involve learning and discovery. See Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 11–20.

³ In leadership and ethics, scholars have identified improvisation as a useful metaphor in describing the skills and tasks required to act coherently and meaningfully in dynamic social contexts. Scholars draw in different ways upon improvisational acting and jazz performance. See Karl E. Weick, "Introductory Essay: Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis," *Organization Science* 9(5) (1998): 543–555; Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons From Jazz* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012). For ethics, see Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004).

⁴ Sensemaking refers to a means of organizational analysis that understands organizations as inherently interpersonal entities constituted by enacted and objectified shared meanings. See Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995). This has led to ways of imagining leadership as sensemaking. See Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual*

approach, in its own way, imagines responsive postures for leadership rather than directive agency.⁵ Adaptive organizations need leadership that is attentive to the new and surprising, which means that leaders must learn to cultivate space for ends that remain beyond the leader's control. One exercises leadership through facilitation rather than direct agency. Thus, leadership formation cultivates response-able postures.

How can we cultivate responsive leadership postures within Christian communities? While gift-based⁶ and practice-based⁷ approaches to adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking leadership in religious communities exist, I consider the way in which particular encounters with the biblical text can cultivate responsive postures within a community. I offer a deceptively simple wager: as the adaptive, improvisational, or sensemaking leader learns to suffer⁸ and respond to the biblical text, the

Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

⁵ For this paper, I am putting adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking visions of leadership together, primarily because they all suggest a capacity for openness. They imagine the leader as an actor as well as acted upon in unique ways. I think Ricoeur's phenomenology provides a unique ethical vantage point from which to think about this as not only a fact, but also a capacity.

⁶ It seems to me that missional and church planting literature focuses on certain "apostolic" or "pioneering" leadership gifts. While the language of gift draws the reader into the realm of spiritual gifts, the enacting of such proposals often amounts to finding the right people, with the right social-psychological makeup to lead a new, adaptive, missional ministry. For example, see Alan Hirsch, Tim Catchim, and Mike Breen, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012); and Michael Volland, *The Minister as Entrepreneur: Leading and Growing the Church in an Age of Rapid Change* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2015). While these approaches certainly warrant attention, I'm concerned here with issues of *formation* in response to the need for adaptive, improvisational, or sensemaking leaders.

⁷ See Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014); and Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters*.

⁸ I use the term *suffer* throughout this essay to denote something other than physical pain. I use it as a philosophical term to describe a relational

leader also gains practice in attending, listening, and responding to the demands and surprises of one's context. We learn to recognize and respond to the innovative or creative in our contexts through postures cultivated by playfully listening to that which is old.

In what follows, I will explore a theoretical basis for the practices that Ribeiro and New Hope in Campinas use to provide anecdotal evidence. I suggest that our practiced engagement with scriptural texts cultivates an ethos and thus certain ethical possibilities for a community. In particular, we can learn from the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur to cultivate local interpretive communities where, in the course of listening to one another, one's context, and the biblical text, emerging leaders can cultivate capacities for disciplined, yet playful, attentiveness to the interruptions or innovations of others. The Bible, as a text, presents to the community new possibilities for life in the world; it is a discourse that discloses a world. This is true not only of the Bible, but of all the other texts and contexts a community encounters. For this reason, the encounter with the biblical text provides an invaluable opportunity for the community to learn attentive, responsive postures for leading in dynamic contexts.

Of course, the suggestion that attentiveness to the biblical text leads to responsive postures in relationship to the new and unexpected becomes immediately problematic if the content and form of the biblical text warns against such response-ability. The first section,

understanding of personhood and experience. Ricoeur uses the phrase "acting and suffering self" throughout *Oneself as Another* to reflect the many ways in which personal identity is constituted in both acting and being acted upon. We are not only actors or agents, but also sufferers who bear, receive, and sometimes resist many other cultural, historical, institutional, and personal forces. Our sense of self is shaped in our acting and suffering; this is because our living, acting, and interpreting occurs in a world that exists apart from us and before us. In the same way that we are shaped by (suffer) the intentions and actions of others, the biblical text can also shape us in surprising ways. I use the term *suffer* to describe this reality. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 18, 96–112.

then, considers the theological implications of my argument, exploring the way metaphor and narrative can perform an understanding of Christian hope by means of the biblical text. Next, I turn to Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics to understand the phenomenon of the textual encounter and an appropriate, creative, and open-ended means for engaging texts. I close the essay by considering where and how such reading communities can be situated for the sake of cultivating response-able postures of leadership.

The Form of Biblical Hope

The One Who Is to Come

As Christian communities seek to live faithfully in the world, they do so with openness to God's work and hope for God's arrival. In the book of Acts, Peter falls into a trance and hears a voice from heaven inviting him to eat unclean animals. A mystical experience in the world falls in direct violation of the biblical text. This trance-like vision is followed by a knock at the door and the invitation of Cornelius, a Gentile, to come and proclaim the good news. Upon arrival at the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and his whole family just as it did upon Peter and the other disciples at Pentecost. Not surprisingly, Peter's experience of God's action in the world poses a challenge to the Jerusalem community. They have encountered God in the world in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. Peter, in reporting his actions to the Jerusalem church, asks "Who am I to stand in the way of God?" The church discerns with Peter after some conversation that this, indeed, marks the surprising act of God. While we might sometimes think of the biblical text as a document that restricts the Christian community from considering the new or unexpected, our hope in the resurrection invites us to imagine the text functioning differently. For Peter and the Jerusalem church wrestle, not with the validity of the Bible, but with how to interpret the action of God in biblical terms and how the Bible might bring narrative

order to the surprising action of God. The Peter-Cornelius episode is not an isolated case. It is rather the kind of dynamic dialogue that the content and form of the Bible makes possible, because the biblical text arises from faithful communities wrestling with God's presence and perceived absence—God's action and suffering in the world in ways that help the community live in faith and hope.⁹

The expectant, worldly engagement we see in Acts 10–11 finds its orientation and ground of possibility in the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ, in the midst of history, suggests for N. T. Wright a “*revolutionary doctrine*” because the promised new creation becomes visible in the midst of the old.¹⁰ The longed-for fulfillment of God's mission to redeem and reconcile creation becomes definitive and present in the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus. It draws our attention to the scope of God's mission while fixing our hope on its fulfillment. As such, the resurrection invites the church in Acts and today into a creative, transformative, world-engaging work that avoids activism and fatalism, for the resurrection signifies God's action in “making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last” and motivates God's people to work for God's new creation in the present.¹¹

⁹ I have in mind here L. T. Johnson's insistence that the New Testament is a form of Midrash on the Hebrew Bible in light of the unexpected resurrection of a crucified Messiah. Additionally, Christopher Wright has suggested *mission* as not only a theme of the biblical text, but also the situation of its emergence. This is at least partially true: the Bible reflects and is written from boundary-situations, as the community of faith wrestles with a new situation of difference or transmission, such as when Israel is in exile. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 166; and Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006).

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 214.

¹¹ Wright, 214. Jürgen Moltmann identifies a similar relationship between hope and creative, faithful action. Moltmann carefully distinguishes Christian hope from historical optimism, and utopian or ideological visions. The

This feature of Christian theology is important for our work because it directs our attention to God's world with an open posture, enabling us to be cognizant of how often surprise factors into the story of the faithful. Along with the women at the empty tomb or Peter in the house of Cornelius, we attend to the unexpected in hope of encountering God. Furthermore, the content of the biblical text, which weaves history, poetry, and narrative together, provides an inexhaustible set of metaphors and narratives, a text that—like the God to which it witnesses—remains beyond our grasp. The open-ended nature of Christian hope, alongside the rich metaphorical and narrative complexity of the biblical text, provides content and form for the kind of leadership postures in question.¹² The content of the biblical text directs the Christian to historical attentiveness and eschatological openness: we know Jesus as “the one who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). The form of the biblical text in poetry, history, and narrative performs that which it describes, making the text a place where the new is heard (or read) before it is seen.¹³

resurrection of the crucified one from the dead and his ascension into heaven demonstrate the peculiarities of Christian eschatology and, subsequently, Christian action in the world. The fact that the one crucified is raised, for Moltmann, suggests the all-encompassing nature of God's redemption; the Christian hope “is directed towards a *novum ultimum*, towards a new creation of all things...that embraces all things, including also death (33).” See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967). See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* [Kommen Gottes], trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

¹² Walter Brueggemann emphasizes the surprising, uncontrollable breadth and depth of the biblical text. See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹³ “The symbol gives rise to thought.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* [Symbolique du mal], trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 348.

Metaphor, Narrative, and the Biblical Text

While Christian theology certainly nods toward the new, surprising, and unexpected in its articulation of eschatological hope, we often do not pair canonical texts with innovative capacity. Yet, the form of text that Peter inherits makes possible the kind of adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking work in which he participates. In particular, studies in metaphor and narrative demonstrate connections between language and perceptive capacity that disclose how biblical metaphor and narrative can open new possibilities for perception and action. The biblical metaphors and narratives that form Peter also perform the openness to God's action in the world, which Peter himself experiences. While metaphor creates something new in language and discloses to us new possibilities for experiencing, understanding, or seeing the world, narrative mimics our own experience of time and brings order to it. We might say that metaphor cultivates the possibility of new experience while narrative helps us make sense of experience. Understanding how metaphor and narrative work suggests the way biblical texts can create moments of disclosure in the act of reading or in shaping an interpretive community.

In the first chapter of Revelation, John describes the risen Christ in somewhat bizarre terms: He has a sword for a tongue and bronzed feet, among a cluster of other images. Scholars explain John's vision as a cacophony of messianic and theophanic images, stories, and visions from the Hebrew Bible. While these descriptions help us to understand the meaning of the chapter, the immediacy and power of John's vision is lost in explanation. Explanation might help us understand the importance of John's vision, but it does not allow us to experience John's vision. As with a joke or a poem, explanation does not transmit the same experience that would be possible for one able to catch and see the Hebrew Bible imagery without explanation. John's cluster of metaphors and similes are meant to *perform* the surprise and assurance of

Christ's presence and power in the midst of John's exile on Patmos and for the persecuted churches in Asia Minor.

This is how metaphor works. It is what metaphor does. Metaphor is not simply a semantic innovation that can be described; it is *experienced*—the fusion of event and meaning. It is, according to Ricoeur, a predicate placed in a surprising relationship to a subject in a way that discloses or reveals something new about or in the world. *This is that*: “a creation of language that comes to be at that moment.”¹⁴ For Ricoeur, metaphor helps to explain how it is that we hear the new before we see it. What he means is that metaphorical utterance creates new possibilities in our cognition and perception, allowing us to be attentive to some aspect of the world we previously would have missed. Like a scientific model, metaphors mediate reality to us through their power to “redescribe” what is, in actuality, “inaccessible to direct description.”¹⁵ Metaphor, then, is not only a textual or linguistic phenomenon, for in bringing to language some connection that was previously unarticulated, it also redescribes the world for us. We experience this redescribing when reading a poem or hearing the lyrics of a song. We can experience it as well when we encounter and experience the world anew through hearing the biblical text. The form of the biblical text provides “the new” as metaphor and poetic utterance—the new that we might hear so that we can see or recognize its appearance.

The biblical text also takes a narrative shape.¹⁶ If metaphor discloses the possibility of seeing the new,

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 114. Ricoeur suggests the *sentence* as the carrier of metaphor rather than the *word*. This means that the metaphor is an utterance whose power is not only in naming, but in performing or doing something new in reference to the world.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 11, 283–291.

¹⁶ Since the rise of narrative criticism in biblical studies and post-liberalism in theology, the narrative shape of Scripture has been largely assumed. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth* *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 2016

narrative names our attempt to receive and bring order to our discordant experiences. Ricoeur's work on narrative emphasizes similarities between fiction and history, for both attempt to bring sequential order to events or experiences. Following Aristotle, Ricoeur suggests a mimetic and sensemaking function for fiction, in which narrative construction imitates our own experience of time and brings order to our experiences.¹⁷ When we create a plot, we put events within a particular order in relationship to each other.¹⁸ That is, we construct narratives to make sense of our experience in a way that imitates our world and the sequential experience of time. Moreover, the narratives we receive orient our action in the world. The stories we inherit enable us to imagine our lives as meaningful and coherent. Narratives orient us and provide a sense of agency, as Alastair MacIntyre famously says: "man [sic] is, in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal...Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as well as their words."¹⁹ In telling stories, we redescribe our world in human terms, giving a sense of plot to experience. In reading stories, we encounter worlds and times different from our own and thus gain narrative perspective and/or frameworks for our own action in the world.

The basic features of metaphor and narrative clarify how textual encounters can provoke and cultivate

Century Hermeneutics (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974) and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Ricoeur frames it this way: "Time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative." See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellaur, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3. By emphasizing the way that narrative functions to make meaning and give meaning to persons, Ricoeur shares similarities with the narrative accounts common to virtue ethics and post-liberalism.

¹⁸ Ricoeur calls this "emplotment." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 31–51

¹⁹ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

capacity for recognizing and responding to innovative action. Like a scientific model, metaphor provides a means by which we might apprehend the world or experience it in new ways. Like the script of a play, narrative provides us with a sense of agency in the world and with the means to make sense of our lives in light of an overarching framework. Together metaphor and narrative provide a means by which we might hear the new before we recognize it. In the case of the biblical text, poetry, history, and narrative perform the hope and openness to which the texts themselves testify. John's vision of the resurrected Christ, delivered in a rich cluster of metaphors, "catches" the church in our own context, enabling us to experience the surprise, awe, fear, and good news of John on Patmos. We are thus equipped to look toward the world and respond to this Christ in our midst. So also, the story of Peter and Cornelius orients us, enabling us to ask in the uncertain boundary-crossing events in which we find ourselves or are thrust upon us: "What is God up to here? Who do we call unclean that God has made clean?"

Others have made similar claims for the content and form of the biblical text. In particular, post-liberals and virtue ethicists make a strong claim for the role of narrative in forming community and the transformational scope of the biblical narrative in particular. In both cases, the biblical narrative helps to determine boundaries and coherence for a community. Post-liberals understand the biblical narrative as constituting a unique narrative arc for the ecclesial community.²⁰ Virtue ethicists, while overlapping with post-liberals, are concerned with questions of moral coherence in their appropriation of narrative.²¹ However, neither approach necessarily imagines formation in the biblical text as facilitating adaptive or improvisational leadership capacities. But for Ricoeur, narrative and metaphor, when mediated through

²⁰ See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*.

²¹ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*.

a text, neither narrow possibilities for a community nor distinguish a community from the world. Rather, Ricoeur imagines the text itself as an Other, a stranger, a world that decenters and disrupts a community even as the community offers its own reading and interpretation of the text.²² This is true even for a canonical text used to shape community identity. Ricoeur's dynamic understanding of the textual encounter provides an important clarification for the way that biblical engagement can enable not only creative action, but an open, responsive posture understood as an ethos attentive to the new, innovative, and surprising. Next, I consider Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, suggesting a disciplined, yet playful approach to the biblical text in processes of leadership formation.

A Phenomenology of the Text

Ricoeur's celebrated approach to hermeneutics is called "hermeneutic phenomenology" because of the prescient way he shifts the ground and horizon of hermeneutics and phenomenology in relationship to one another. Ricoeur's reading of the phenomenological tradition from Husserl through Heidegger calls into question the hermeneutic fascination with subjectivity, whether the subjectivity is that of the author (as in Romantic hermeneutics) or the reader (as in certain contemporary hermeneutic frameworks). The existence of a world "out there" means that textual interpretation is necessarily intersubjective and therefore ethical and political. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics names a particular

²² Imagining the text as an "Other" marks Ricoeur's phenomenological project. Merold Westphal calls this "reversed intentionality," where Ricoeur, through the text (and narrative) helps us to see human experience "not just in terms of intentionality but also, and perhaps above all, in terms of the beyond of intentionality." We *participate* in a world even as we try to make our way and make sense within it. See Merold Westphal, "Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006): 121.

kind of suffering²³ that mirrors Heidegger's *Dasein*. Because texts present a world to us within our own worldly experiences, both author and reader are thrown into a world of meaning-making. Once an author commits a text to print, the author's intentions no longer control its meaning. Yet, the reader is not entirely free to make the text say what the reader hopes it might say. The result is a vision of reading as a textual encounter that cultivates an ethic of disciplined attentiveness to the text in front of the reader alongside a playful openness to the world(s) opened up by text, reader, and context.²⁴ Such an ethic, I suggest, is not only useful for reading the biblical text but also in cultivating innovative and adaptive leaders. To describe such a vision, we must look more closely at a phenomenology of the text as articulated through the terms *discourse* and *distanciation* before considering a hermeneutics of disciplined play.

Text as Discourse

For Ricoeur, a text is a written work of discourse. These three terms (*discourse*, *work*, and *writing*) constitute a particular understanding of the text as a distinct world that refers in crucial ways to the world. As referring to the world, a text shares the features of any communicative discourse event such as a speech or a conversation. In discourse, a speaker draws together sentences within a particular time and place to refer in some way to a world shared with an audience.²⁵ Ricoeur takes this basic feature

²³ See footnote 8 for a discussion of the term *suffer*.

²⁴ A key presupposition that informs my use of Ricoeur is that his phenomenological hermeneutics carry a strong concern for ethical formation. Ricoeur makes this intention clear in one of the last essays in *From Text to Action*, where he considers the ways in which personhood is mediated through texts and as a result of interpretation, considering the way "a self [is] enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds that interpretation unfolds" (301). Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. John B. Thompson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 270–307.

²⁵ "Discourse refers to a world that it claims to describe, express, or represent." As such, the speech-event is "the advent of a world in

of discourse (communication in reference to a shared world) as a starting point for thinking about a text. No matter how “other-worldly” a text might seem, its attempt to communicate gives it the basic features of discourse. It is an attempt to communicate in reference to a shared world. But the nature of text as a written work of discourse means that texts present a distinct world. When a speech-act is completed, the discourse becomes a *work*. A completed work describes discourse in which I can no longer ask the speaker to clarify. But once it is a work, I can explore or remember the speech-act in its entirety and draw together meaning or conclusions based on the whole of the work. A work of discourse allows us to understand the way certain words or sentences or grammar functions within the whole of the conversation.²⁶ *Work*, understood as a whole unit of discourse, provides the next step toward recognizing the nature of texts, because although texts share similarities with a speech or conversation as a communication act, they do not share the contemporaneity of such acts. They are works, and as a work, they can be objectified to a certain extent. As a *written* work, the objectification of discourse becomes formal and fixed. It is this last move, from work to writing, that the nature of texts as a world can be understood. Writing fixes discourse in a way that secures its autonomy from the event and the author. Writing makes a work of discourse distinct from the author and the reading community. As such, writing

language...by means of discourse” (78). See Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 75–88.

²⁶ This is due, of course, to the polysemy of language. When speech becomes realized as an event, the primary unit of meaning becomes not the word, but the sentence. The polysemy of language insists that words receive meaning based on their relationship to other words within the unit of the sentence. Yet, this same polysemy demands that the sentence find its meaning within the broader context of the whole discourse. See Paul Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 1–20.

creates a textual world that might, in fact, “explode the world of the *author*” as well as the reader.²⁷

Thus, a text can be understood as objectified discourse in the sense that it shares in the eventfulness of discourse without being bound to the immediate conditions of speech. That is, a text still offers a communication event that refers to the world in a way that invites the reader to make meaning, but unlike speech, authorial intention cannot be clarified in the course of conversation. Instead, it is the nature of the text as a work of discourse that makes style, genre, and organization so significant for the task of understanding. As a written work of discourse, then, the text projects a world—the world of the text—in front of the world of the reader. Ricoeur calls this *distanciation*.

*The Function of Distanciation*²⁸

Distanciation names the otherness of a written work of discourse. While this otherness might create some hermeneutic problems, it also offers a breadth of imaginative and interpretive possibilities, for the phenomenon of *distanciation* understands reading and interpretation as an encounter of worlds. When discourse is turned into a written work, it becomes autonomous from the author and the “common situation” of the discourse.²⁹ A written text differs from spoken discourse in the sense that it does not offer immediate contact between speaker and shared world. Instead, a written text objectifies discourse and might even obscure the original context, what Ricoeur calls the “first order reference” of the discourse.³⁰ *Distanciation* creates a problem for certain notions of interpretation that understand it as clarifying authorial intention or the circumstances of production. How can we know what a text is *about* if it loses connection to both author and world? But our

²⁷ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 83.

²⁸ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 83.

²⁹ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 84.

³⁰ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 85.

fascination with the world behind texts misses critical interpretive consequences of the distanced text. Rather than name authorial intention or reconstruct the event of discourse, distancing offers the text as a “*proposed world*,” which intersects with my immediate world.³¹ When the world of the text confronts my own, the task of interpretation shifts from uncovering events behind the text to considering the world of possibility opened up by the text: “to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front of* the text.”³² We can profitably read research regarding the Galatian community, the conditions of Paul’s composition of the letter, or even Paul’s psychological state in writing the letter, but distancing inevitably shifts the interpretive moment from past to future, from what lies behind the text to the future made possible by the text. It is not that such original conditions are unimportant, only that they are indirectly accessible and not solely constitutive of meaning.

The distanced text puts text and interpreter into a dynamic relationship. The world of the reader and the world of the text interact, disclosing a way of being or possibility out in front of the text. The text cannot mean anything one chooses, yet its interpretation is an open-ended affair. The phenomenon of textual distancing presents texts to communities—even communities who authored the texts—as an Other, as a word presenting its own world. The nature of the thing being interpreted challenges and changes the very task of interpretation.³³

³¹ Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distancing,” 86. Italics Ricoeur’s.

³² Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distancing,” 86. This is also what Gadamer means by the “horizon” of the text.

³³ This, of course, remains a critical insight of the whole phenomenological project. After Heidegger, phenomenology assumes the priority of “being-in-the-world in relation to any foundational project.” What this means is that “there is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts” (15). Ricoeur, *On Interpretation*, 1–20. In the end, this is why Ricoeur identifies such wide-ranging implications for hermeneutics, as implied in the title of his book of essays on hermeneutics: *From Text to Action*.

Thus, the distanciated text offers a world to the interpreter; the encounter with the text creates the possibility for new language, vision, and action in the world. Texts present the reality of “reversed intentionality,” whereby they act on us even as we attempt to understand them.³⁴ Ricoeur’s understanding of the text invites the reader into a creative and careful engagement with text and context, which I will call disciplined play.

Disciplined Play as Explanation and Understanding

To say that the act of interpretation results in the appropriation of a world out in front of the text does not eclipse disciplined study of the text itself, such as exegesis or even historical criticism. It is, rather, a way of insisting upon the eventfulness of the textual encounter. Or, to borrow a term from Hans-Georg Gadamer, it remembers the “play” and creativity involved in all acts of interpretation.³⁵ Gadamer, working from the romantic tradition, recognizes the particularity of interpreter and text in the task of reading, rehabilitating the term *prejudice* to talk about those aspects of our history and particularity that we bring to the study of any text even as we try to understand it on its own terms.³⁶ We always come to texts within particular histories and prejudices; texts always present themselves to us as an “Other.” Gadamer describes our negotiation with the otherness of the text as *play*. Like a game of soccer, we inhabit the world and rules and vision of a text. We play within the world of the text in order to appropriate it to our own world, the so-called “fusion of horizons.”³⁷

Ricoeur owes much to Gadamer in his own approach to the text. For Ricoeur, “understanding” a text names the possibility of transformation, of expanding the

³⁴ Westphal, 121.

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, revised ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 102ff.

³⁶ Gadamer, 274–285.

³⁷ Gadamer, 336ff.

possibilities for one's life or perspective. Understanding enables one to live from the possibilities of a particular textual narrative or to see the world anew from a lively metaphor. The world of the text confronts the world of the reader. Unlike Gadamer, however, Ricoeur places the playful encounter with the text into a dialectical relationship with the *discipline* of method.³⁸ Drawing upon Wilhelm Dilthey, Ricoeur offers the terms *explanation* and *understanding* to describe interpretation.³⁹ Explanation names the disciplined task of interrogating the parts in light of the whole. In biblical hermeneutics, explanation names the process of exegesis, where the reader interrogates grammar, structure, and word usage. But such work, important as it is, remains incomplete apart from *understanding*, which is the creative and unpredictable encounter with the text as a whole, the disclosure of the "world" out in front of the text and how this may be "appropriated" within my own world.⁴⁰ Understanding names a "take" on the text that is playful and/or creative. Explanation clarifies the reasons or the argument for this particular take. A dialectical relationship, the reader moves back and forth between understanding and explanation. They mutually inform, confront, and clarify one another. While our initial understanding of a text might be naïve, disciplined explanation will challenge or affirm the initial naïve reading, which sends us back to

³⁸ Ricoeur argues that Gadamer holds *truth* and *method* against one another, stating that his title should be "Truth or Method." Ricoeur's own proposal holds both method/discipline together with understanding/truth/appropriation. See Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation," in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 182–196; and Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 43–62.

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 125–143.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, "Appropriation," 182–196.

consider the world disclosed in front of the text. Ricoeur thus offers us a form of disciplined play.

While disciplined play describes an intentional and rigorous approach to the text, it does not privilege the agency of the reader or reading community over and against the text. The text remains a world and worldly "Other." Through disciplined play, the reader and reading community *suffer* the world of the text, suddenly learning to see or act in the world from a new understanding.⁴¹ As a reading community exercises attentive discipline in its engagement with the text, the community recognizes and receives elements of the text that might prove challenging or disruptive. And as the community begins to appropriate the text, playfully imagining how it is that the text discloses new possibilities for living in the world, the community might be surprised by what they discover. Through disciplined play, text and context interact in the life of the community, thus opening up new and unexpected ways of living in the world with integrity to the self-understanding of the community. For Ricoeur, this outcome of disciplined play remains central to his proposal: *texts* provide a critical way in which selfhood is mediated and communities are shaped.⁴² We do not just understand ourselves in relationship to one another; we critically and crucially understand our world, our agency, our very selves in and through the textual "others" we encounter. In the appropriation of the text, the reader "finds [herself] only by losing [herself]."⁴³ For this reason, we attend to texts with care and creativity.

We see a form of disciplined play in Ribeiro's bibliodrama. An imaginative exercise, he invites the group to appropriate the text playfully and creatively. When they read and contemplate the text, its narrative world presents itself to the world of the reader. The reader—with personal history, concerns, and hopes—finds himself or

⁴¹ Of course, texts also suffer their readers.

⁴² Ricoeur calls this the "long detour" through the symbol and the text. See Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," 17.

⁴³ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 88.

herself before the textual world and its possibilities. Similarly, the text finds itself before the world of the reader and reader community. However, bibliodrama is not mere play. The expectation of sharing one's encounter with the text constrains and disciplines the imaginative exercise, tethering reflection to the integrity of the text. Participants will share their encounter with the text, explaining their particular understanding through attention to certain grammatical or narrative details in relationship to the concerns or experiences. This practiced movement between explanation and understanding cultivates a powerful textual encounter that is attentive to the phenomenological possibilities of texts. Disciplined play as bibliodrama equips reading communities for responsive postures in relationship to the text, one another, and the world.

Thus, disciplined play carries important consequences for leadership formation, because the content of the scriptural canon obviously shapes the identity of the religious community and the leader. But also, as I have argued above with reference to a phenomenology of the text, disciplined play allows emerging leaders to practice an attentive, disciplined, yet imaginative and creative posture in relationship to the text. This posture, while learned in a reading community, enables the emerging leader to approach other such "texts" in his or her community similarly, because the Bible is not the only text that forms and informs our communities. Our communities are intertextual in the sense that we each bring a host of formational narratives, personal histories, experiences, and perspectives. Such formational texts may not be in the foreground as we seek to shape and cultivate community or as we read and interpret the biblical text together, but they are powerful and formative nonetheless. Adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking forms of leadership require an ability to identify and respond to the perspectives of others. An open, listening, and attentive yet playful approach to biblical texts enables

us to work similarly with the texts we each bring into the community.

Meaningful Action

Even more, however, Ricoeur suggests that shared, meaningful action in the world also functions phenomenologically as a text. For if distanciation names a key defining phenomenological feature of texts, then completed meaningful human action also shares textual properties as it becomes distinct from original circumstances or intention.⁴⁴ If we consider the features of distanciation, which present the text to us as an “Other,” we can see that meaningful human action, once it is completed, also becomes “detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own.”⁴⁵ In the same way that written discourse declares what is said, meaningful action leaves its mark on time.⁴⁶ Like a text, meaningful action offers significance that extends beyond its immediate or initial situation. Any congregation that has undergone a church split or experienced profound renewal understands this. The action of certain parties to split off from the church, perhaps ten years ago, informs and influences debate and imagination for the present congregation. The stories of renewal, perhaps from the 1980s, still shape the hope and identity of the congregation thirty years later. Meaningful action, distanciated from original intentions and circumstances, calls for interpretation or reading by an “indefinite range of possible readers.”⁴⁷ As with texts, we encounter meaningful human action also as a world, a logic, a set of

⁴⁴ See Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 153–155.

⁴⁵ Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” 153.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” 152.

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” 155.

possibilities that might or might not confront the world of the reader/interpreter.

We can see, then, how disciplined play in the dialogue between explanation and understanding might facilitate capacities of attentive openness for religious leaders. Not only does the content of the biblical text orient the community toward expectant hope, but the form of the text and our ethic of engaging the text do as well. As such, our practiced encounters with biblical texts have ethical implications beyond what is written in the text. *How* we approach these texts cultivates capacities to approach the “texts” of one another, congregational history, the interruption of the stranger, and any other such meaningful human action in our midst. Disciplined play in an encounter with authoritative texts can equip communities in the attentive receptivity required for adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking forms of leadership. Suffering the text helps us to suffer the unknown and the other in faith and hope. But where can we learn such capacities? What types of communities can embody disciplined play in a way that is attentive not only to biblical texts but also in ministry contexts? In the final section, I will suggest the formation of reading communities that bridge seminary, congregation, and neighborhood for the sake of cultivating disciplined play.

Communities for and of Practice: Cultivating Responsible Leadership Postures

Hermeneutic conversation can remain woefully abstract, destined to ever-spiraling contemplation of meaning, sense, and referent. Where does such an understanding of text, metaphor, and interpretation meet the call to action, the imperative to do something? This question echoes the familiar struggle in seminaries, Bible schools, and congregations to connect theological studies with the practices of theologically reflective ministry. Often, such concerns lead to apprenticeship and informal models of formation such as internships alongside more formal and academic learning. At times, disciplines for

studying the biblical text or texts of theology rest uneasily alongside more “practical” courses in spirituality, pastoral care, or field education. While some students are able to integrate the different spheres in a robust way, the theory-praxis and mind-body dualisms of theological education are difficult to overcome.

The ethical or formational possibilities of disciplined play require a communicative space that bridges academic disciplines and world, the classroom, and the congregation. On the one hand, emerging leaders need familiarity with the biblical texts and tools for study. Without an orientation in biblical and theological studies, the movement between explanation and understanding, from parts to whole, from discipline to play, will be limited. Yet on the other hand, such tools cannot be seen as an end in themselves, nor can they succeed in cultivating individualistic habits and postures for biblical engagement. Such tools might be learned in the study or the classroom, but they must be practiced in the open and in the midst of a community. Where, then, might we practice disciplined play in relationship to the biblical text? How might students learn this?

In field education, students join a ministry setting as “legitimate peripheral participants” for the sake of learning certain habits, postures, and skills for ministry.⁴⁸ Field education acknowledges the fact that leadership in ministry requires embodied and not only intellectual knowledge. Thus, we invite students to become legitimate, yet peripheral participants in congregational systems as a learning process. They must be given

⁴⁸ The phrase “legitimate peripheral participation” comes from Situated Learning Theory, associated with the work of Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave. SLT is concerned with a formal theory of learning that emphasizes the social conditions of all learning and the embodiment of this learning in actual communities of practice. See Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

legitimate roles without a crushing amount of responsibility (thus peripheral). They must participate in the community as a means of learning. Field education enacts our understanding that certain things are learned socially, in communities of practice, rather than by oneself or in a classroom. We can build on these insights to imagine places and communities for engaging the biblical text to practice adaptive and creative leadership postures. In closing, I will offer two suggestions: one for the classroom and one for the congregation.

Disciplined play can be learned in the seminary classroom through practices and spaces that combine attentiveness to one another, one's own experience, and the biblical text. I learned from Church Innovations Institute a practice called "Dwelling in the Word," where a text is read out loud in a group, contemplated in silence, and then shared with a "reasonably friendly looking stranger."⁴⁹ After sharing with a partner one's own experience with the text, the group reconvenes and persons share what they heard their partner say. It is a wonderful, powerfully formative practice that embodies attentiveness to the text, the stranger, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This can be a formational practice for congregations, but it can also cultivate certain postures of integration within a classroom setting. While students are learning various disciplines of study, Dwelling in the Word decenters their own methodological designs on the text and enables them to hear it, one another, and (hopefully) the Spirit of God in their conversation. In a seminary context, they do not drop their biblical or theological tools in the moment of encounter; rather they tend to bring those tools to bear on the text as a part of their imaginative and creative engagement with it. Dwelling in the Word is a practice that an instructor can

⁴⁹ In describing the practice, Church Innovations leaders are known to use the language of "reasonably friendly looking stranger" as a way to help people to dwell across differences. For a description of the practice, see Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Church Innovations Institute, 2011).

bring into the classroom, where students are invited to participate and gain proficiency. Its knowledge is embodied socially in the community.

More substantially, however, disciplined and playful engagement with the biblical text needs to also be practiced in hybrid contexts, where the classroom and the congregation can overlap. While we teach many ways of explaining the text—biblical exegesis, Greek and Hebrew tools, theological dictionaries, and congregational Bible studies—we often fail to exercise disciplined play with the text within ministry contexts. The type of open-ended storytelling and discernment exercised by Peter in Acts 11 might not be taught in classrooms or Bible studies, but it is exercised to varying degrees within congregations and even neighborhoods as we wrestle together to hear God and imagine God's future. Those concerned with leadership formation should cultivate and find spaces where imaginative play takes place, situating theological students and young leaders within groups as legitimate peripheral participants in the wrestling, creating, and discernment of the community.⁵⁰ Word, world, and congregation need a stronger connection for leadership formation. Congregations and seminaries can learn from New Hope Presbyterian Church in Brazil. Ribeiro's contemplative space and practice often includes new and emerging leaders.⁵¹ In fact, the congregation regularly

⁵⁰ Space does not permit making this proposal more concrete. However, I imagine it drawing from two different strands of renewal in theological education. First, such a proposal imagines the congregation as a site and partner for theological education. Second, I assume a holistic *formational* component for education. See, for example, David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁵¹ We can learn from New Hope, not only in their inclusion of interns and seminarians in their practice, but also the way that creative, innovative ministry is seen as connected to contemplative spirituality. In many ways, this essay is a philosophical exploration of this practice. In the United States, Elaine Heath and Larry Duggins also connect pioneering leadership with contemplative spirituality. See Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional*, *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 2016

receives interns and candidates for ministry from a local seminary. They imagine these contemplative practices as an important part of seminarian training. The seminarian joins an already-established community of practice and learns through participation in the community its embodied wisdom with regard to prayer, Bible, and discernment. Ribeiro's approach to leadership development displays the importance of participation and practice. His engagement with the contemplative tradition has helped him to create space for playful and imaginative engagement with the biblical text as a part of such formation. What might leadership formation processes look like in congregations if the biblical text were allowed to shape open-ended and contemplative practice at all levels of the congregation? Surely, this question can be addressed at the classroom, curricular, and congregational level.

In conclusion, the interrelationship between text and action is critical in thinking about forming capacities for adaptive, improvisational, and sensemaking leadership. Because such approaches require a response-able posture toward that which is "Other," I suggest that engagement with the biblical text provides opportunity to experiment with and learn responsive postures in hope and faith. The same care or ethic we practice vis-à-vis the biblical text informs and shapes our approach to the stories, experiences, and actions of others. Inversely, our interpretation of the biblical text can cultivate certain virtues that also shape our interpretation and engagement with the events and stories of congregations and communities. I want to suggest that such an ethic opens leadership and community to that which is new. The cultivation of creative spaces for reading, listening, and discernment will not teach methods for leadership or Bible study, nor does it need to provide a clear knowledge base. Instead, the process of participation in such open-

ended and creative conversation with the biblical text provides, according to Ricoeur, an ethical posture, a virtuous circle where our way of being toward a text and world inform one another. This way of being places one in the posture to hear the new, so that it might be recognized and seen later on. It is the posture that sustains and makes plausible adaptive and improvisational leadership.

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