

# How Do the Scriptures Mean—If They Do?

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In *What Does This Mean?* James Voelz displays a mastery of many fields and combines his knowledge in captivating fashion. In this book he does exactly what he sets out to do with scholarly aplomb. Voelz' understanding of modern biblical hermeneutics, linguistic theory, and post-modernism (PM) cannot be questioned. What can be questioned is the framework that he sets forth to interpret Scripture and do theology. Although the conclusions reached by Voelz are typically in-line with a traditional Lutheran approach, the starting point and premises assumed are questionable.

Voelz' starting point, as he clearly states, is that PM is a correct and valid philosophical framework to interpret Scripture. Voelz is careful to distinguish himself from 'radical' PM which would say "that there is no truth or fact outside of our subjective apprehension and that everything is, in fact, completely relative."<sup>1</sup> The underlying issue is how one can accept PM principles and not come to their conclusions, which completely negate the Word of God. The question which is not directly addressed is whether the fundamental ideas of PM can be used without affecting the content of Scripture (the Gospel).

The traditional approach to hermeneutics assumes Scripture interprets Scripture and that it conveys how it should be understood. One would typically start by presenting how the Scriptures themselves intimate how they are to be used and their purpose. The approach Voelz takes is radically different. The second section of the book, entitled 'linguistics,' proceeds to layout a scientific hermeneutic based on modern linguistic theory. The theological view of Scripture is tacked on as a series of addenda 230 pages into the book. Doing theology is not the statement of 'correct' beliefs but mainly is in place where one starts (Scripture) and how he reasons (according to Scripture) to his conclusions. I contend that Voelz' textbook is not theological, but a modern

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<sup>1</sup>James Voelz, "Reading Scripture as Lutherans in the Post-Modern Era," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (2000): 311.

scientific text from a very worldly point-of-view.

In PM fashion, the book's title and the beginning of the semantics section of the book are questions. Specifically, he questions what 'verbal inspiration' really means to *his* distinction between signifiers/signifieds. He concludes "one can see problems no matter which answer is given [to verbal inspiration]"<sup>2</sup> In PM questions abound, but answers are few, because there is no objective truth.

The separation between words and their meaning is a fundamental error of Voelz. Let the reader not be mistaken: the starting point for Voelz is not the truth of Scripture but the 'truth' of modern linguistic theory. "[...] words/signifiers and their meanings/conceptual signifieds can and are to be distinguished, even as they, at times, can and are to be separated. That this is so is confirmed by two **linguistic facts** [...]"<sup>3</sup> The assumption is that the currently accepted scientific view of language must reign and determine how the words of God are to be read.

Scripture clearly assumes that meanings are associated with words. The dogmatic statement of Robert Preus is at odds with Voelz' acceptance of modern science:

Actually the content of Scripture cannot be separated from its words. The meaning of God's self-communication to us is inextricably bound to the words of Scripture. Content cannot be expressed without words; the very purpose of words is to convey thoughts or content. In the case of something already written meaning cannot be known except from the words without meaning. Consequently, unless we can say that the words of Scripture are given by God, we cannot say the Scripture is inspired, for Scripture consists of words. Letters and words without meaning and content are like a man's body without a soul.<sup>4</sup>

Lutherans have always contended for the verbal inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit, but what good are inspired words if "there is no intrinsic relationship between words/signifiers and meanings/conceptual signifieds?"<sup>5</sup>

PM results in extreme subjectivism that denies objective meaning apart from a person's belief. The effects of this PM conclusion, as in culture, are extremely influential for Voelz as

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<sup>2</sup>James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 89.

<sup>3</sup>Voelz, *What*, 91. [emphasis mine]

<sup>4</sup>Robert Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), 45.

<sup>5</sup>Voelz, *What*, 93.

stated in the introduction: “it is increasingly to be recognized that the interpreter is a significant factor in interpretation, . . . [it] will be a special concern in our presentation.”<sup>6</sup> The overlap of text and receptor seems innocuous. But the question must be: Do the Scriptures agree? It should be troubling to the reader that Voelz assumes this communication model without explanation or proof of its validity. Are we to assume by default that the primary philosophy of a culture that ridicules every foundational idea of Christianity naturally has the correct view necessary to interpret the words of God? The assumption and foundation of ‘modern man’ is that science is by nature respectable and objective, even when applied to things above science—even to the Creator of science. Can the Church adopt the world’s underlying principles and tack on its unique beliefs and still witness to a truth not of this world?

Although Scripture is said to be the Word of God in an addendum,<sup>7</sup> this radical and necessarily paramount idea is totally absent in the majority of the book, as it must be, because linguistics and communication theory are naturally derived from human-to-human communication, not divine-to-human. This disturbing and un-Lutheran statement touching the method of inspiration implies that not all Scriptures are the words of God: “the divine and human authorships of the books of Sacred Scripture always present themselves in creative tension.”<sup>8</sup> The idea of ‘creative tension’ between God and the human scribes, as if there are two conflicting ideologies, is wholly missing in Scripture. “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> The Scriptures must not be treated like a human writing, nor can the language theory derived from fallen men be normative for the divine Scriptures.

If a pastor were to follow Voelz hermeneutical guidelines, he would “never appeal” to what God is actually saying or intending in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> If followed through one can never say anything sure about the content of Scripture, because one cannot say what God (the ultimate author) intended by inspiring Scripture.

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<sup>6</sup>Voelz, *What*, 19.

<sup>7</sup>Voelz, *What*, 234. Cf. the disturbing use of “it may be said” to seemingly qualify this assertion.

<sup>8</sup>Voelz, *What*, 242.

<sup>9</sup>2 Peter 1:21 (NKJV)

<sup>10</sup>Voelz, *What*, 213. Because the intended meaning is “often elusive or obscure.” Is there actually an intended meaning according to Voelz, and if it cannot be determined does it matter?

If the Scriptures are seen to be subjective human writings, they cannot convict and teach man truth. Voelz' hermeneutic comes too close to a subjectival view of Scripture. " 'Are all community interpretations equal?' There is probably not agreement on this answer, and a fully reader-oriented answer would be 'probably' or 'definitely, yes!' " <sup>11</sup> Voelz veils his answer quite cleverly, but he admits, according to his reader-oriented approach, that there is no one correct or incorrect interpretation—**all interpretations are subjective and therefore equally valid.** The best an interpreter can hope for is that he reads the Scriptures "in a way congenial to them."<sup>12</sup>

Voelz is PM in his approach of making the reader the key factor in interpretation. The danger is obvious when the clarity, perfection, and divine nature of Scripture is compared to the depravity, sinfulness, and God-hating nature of man.

An interesting outcome of a reader-oriented approach is the idea that the reader becomes a "second text" himself, in the process of interpretation.<sup>13</sup> In an article published the same year as the first edition of Voelz' hermeneutics textbook, he shows the absurdity and utter subjectivism he advocates:

How is the meaning of the key or anchor signs of—the judges within—the matrix determined? As noted above, that seems to be done apart from and prior to the given matrix. Which means that they are part of another prior matrix, which is itself interpreted. But that prior matrix will also have key or anchor signs whose meaning is determined apart from and prior to that matrix . . . (and so on *ad infinitum*).<sup>14</sup>

An infinite series of interpretations must be matrixed to come to a conclusion on a text, presumably this will occur in heaven where time is not such a restriction as it is on earth.

The conclusion Voelz arrives at, despite his noble attempts at salvaging the truth by appending theological addenda and "The Lutheran Confessional Approach" section, is the loss of Scripture as God's authoritative revelation. Due to the significant role of the reader, he "actu-

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<sup>11</sup>Voelz, *What*, 220.

<sup>12</sup>Voelz, *What*, 220.

<sup>13</sup>Voelz, *What*, 208-9. Cf. congenial = one's 'personal text' is aligned with the author's 'personal text.' (p221)

<sup>14</sup>James Voelz, "Multiple Signs, Levels of Meaning and Self as Text: Elements of Intertextuality," *Semeia*, no. 69/70 (1995): 156.

alizes” the text<sup>15</sup> and therefore “there is no possibility of ‘objective textual interpretation.’ ”<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere Voelz summarizes best his view: “I am not contending that a text may be seen simply as a container, so that meaning is simply the content of a text. I fully recognize that the meaning of a text may well be the experience one has while reading [. . .].”<sup>17</sup> “My emphasis is on meaning production/manufacture [. . .].”<sup>18</sup> The direction of Voelz’ hermeneutic, stated explicitly, is shown in a 1989 review by him of a commentary:

Now this is a very traditional viewpoint [of the reviewed commentator]—that the text has a definite structure and that its signs have a specific (cf. “should/must . . . be understood”) meaning. It does not raise the question of the reader’s role, as reader-oriented criticism would raise it, *viz.*, does the reader make meaning in a text, or, even, does the reader determine what the text itself is. [. . .] Again, there is no thought that readers make meaning in texts, or even have a role in determining the nature and structure of texts. Rather, according to this view, the shape of the text is determined, and “content of meaning” must (simply) be unloaded or unpacked, much as one would empty a container of its contents.<sup>19</sup>

So, according to Voelz, any text, including Scripture, has or contains no meaning in itself, but the reader puts his own meaning into it. If this hermeneutic is followed the reader becomes his own ‘divine scripture’ and god, because all authoritative meaning ultimately comes from him. What is the foundation for using the currently reigning *pagan* philosophy (PM) to understand what the words of the eternal God mean? The question for the theologian is: “What view of language and interpretation does Scripture itself intimate?”; not what is the academically respectable position.

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<sup>15</sup>Voelz, *What*, 219.

<sup>16</sup>Voelz, *What*, 210.

<sup>17</sup>Voelz, “Multiple,” 159.

<sup>18</sup>Voelz, “Multiple,” 157.

<sup>19</sup>James Voelz, “ ‘Some Things Old, Some Things New’ A Response to Wolfgang Schenk, *Die Philipperbriefe Des Paulus*,” *Semeia*, no. 48 (1995): 164.