



Reformed hermeneutics as a hermeneutic of appreciation

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Abstract

The evolving postmodern world bears witness to a hermeneutical shift in which diverse, and even opposing, interpretations of reality have become simultaneously equivalent and equally authoritative. Within this interpretive melting pot, Christian hermeneutics has become only one voice among many, and the particular nuances of the different Christian traditions are increasingly muted. This situation, however, presents an opportunity to apologetically reformulate the contribution of Reformed hermeneutics as a missional contribution within the theological conversation. Rooted in the theological heritage of both the patristic and Protestant church witnesses, this contribution emphasises discernment and spiritual formation as lying at the heart of its unique value. The articulation of this hermeneutic of appreciation can be described by outlining the contours of an integrative exegetical approach.

Keywords

hermeneutics; Reformed theology; exegesis; appreciative inquiry; missional theology

1. Introduction

Hermeneutics has a long and complex history that can be traced back as far as the ancient Greeks, and it centres on the fundamental question: what does it mean to understand? Hermeneutics seeks to address this question

through careful investigation of the hidden dimensions of reality that operate behind the scenes of human life. It aims to render the structure of human insight as explicit as possible (Porter & Robinson, 2011:1-2). Hermeneutics is a broad field that strives to understand and interpret human behaviour and psychology, worldviews, art and culture, faith convictions and concepts of God, as well as written texts. Underlying all these efforts lies the timeless concern of this search for insight: what does it mean to be human in relation to ...?

It is somewhat ironic that the modern university finds its historical origins in Christian theology, given the marginal status that Christianity has come to occupy in this era within academic and scientific discourse. During the patristic era, with its focus on a clear and coherent understanding of God and of how to live in relationship with the Triune God, the necessity of biblical hermeneutics was firmly established. Through church fathers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, scholasticism – an educational method that emphasised dialectical reasoning and debate – laid the foundation for the research and training models of modern universities. These models extended across disciplines such as the study of civil law, mathematics and natural science, psychology and sociology, as well as literature and textual exegesis, all of which can be named as examples of hermeneutical frameworks seeking insight into the totality of the human condition.

Unsurprisingly, the explosion of scientific knowledge has also had a significant impact on Christian hermeneutics. Over the centuries, a biblical worldview gradually made way for a scientific worldview, and it is now widely acknowledged that many assumptions about the world, the universe, medicine, and human roles and behaviour – when based directly on particular readings of biblical texts – cannot be regarded as credible reflections of created reality. Galileo Galilei’s muchdebated conviction for heresy in 1633 by a Roman Catholic Inquisition, following his publication of a book arguing for a heliocentric model of the universe, marked a decisive rupture with the Bible’s threetiered cosmology that placed the earth at the centre (Blackwell, 1991:126). Since then, developments in literary studies, textual analysis, and exegetical methodology have significantly altered the function of biblical texts in the grounding of scientific claims. As Musa (2024:15) observes, “The Bible in its complete form is now understood as an ‘enough’ form and text for the people and/or children of God who would

like to know God and live according to his ordinances and continue that testimony as given and received in the text.”

Yet this was never the fundamental task of Christian theology. Christian theology can be understood as the hermeneutical umbrella under which all aspects of the Christian search for deeper insight into God, humanity, and the world are situated, particularly insofar as hermeneutics in its contemporary usage increasingly refers to the clarification of a text’s meaning for a contemporary audience (Porter & Clarke, 2002:5). As Migliore (2004:1) explains, the task of theology is, on the one hand, to provide a clear and comprehensive account of Christian doctrine, and on the other hand, to translate Christian faith into terms that are intelligible within the broader culture.

Migliore (2004:24) further clarifies that Christians work from the conviction that God has revealed himself, that this revelation took shape within specific historical events and through particular people by whom God’s identity and will were made known – as attested in Scripture. God’s Word grants access to God’s selfrevelation in Jesus Christ, while this prophetic and apostolic witness has been mediated to successive generations through the proclamation of the church (2004:40). The purpose of reading, interpreting, and embodying these texts is determined by the purpose of God’s selfrevelation itself, namely the invitation of human beings into a deepening participation – *koinonia* – with the Triune God and with one another (Fowl, 2009).

The difficulty, of course, lies in the fact that the mediation of God’s Word as a theological activity is inseparable from the many diverse approaches employed in the interpretation of these texts. Since the Christian Scriptures, as contained in the Old and New Testaments, are regarded as the authoritative and normative witness to God’s selfrevelation, the *how*, *where*, and *what* of the study of these texts – that is, their exegetical interpretation – constitutes the central task of Christian theological hermeneutics (Porter & Clarke, 2002:4). While Christian theology seeks to interpret God’s revelation and its implications for each successive generation, hermeneutics provides the underlying building blocks and presuppositions that shape how interpreters approach Scripture to determine exegetically what each book within this library of texts means (Porter & Clarke, 2002:6).

The problematic nature of this task becomes evident in ongoing uncertainty surrounding several key questions *vrae* (Green, 2011:9-12): What is the relationship between theological exegesis and Christian faithformation? What role should history and historical criticism play in theological interpretation? How should exegesis relate to the so-called “Rule of Faith,” particularly the hermeneutical function of early confessions? How do particular faith communities and theological traditions shape the interpretation of Scripture?

In the middle of the twentyfirst century, we find ourselves in a period in which the hermeneutical principles governing academic biblical and theological scholarship are once again being critically reassessed (Green, 2011:3-4): For most of the church’s history, theology was practised through exegesis. Exegesis found expression in homilies, formal systematic discourses, catechetical instruction, and pastoral correspondence in which Scripture was read *in the present tense* – that is, with the expectation that the Bible could leap across time and context into the present moment. Since the eighteenth century, however, the rise of scientific methods of biblical interpretation has gradually created a separation between the professional academic study of the Bible and the everyday interpretive practices of the church. In this way, a rift emerged between academic biblical studies – and at times even the Bible itself – and the practice of theology.

To further exacerbate this existential tension, the church in the twentyfirst century finds itself in a postmodern period of reorientation (Smit, 2008:108-110). Characteristics of this era include the increasing integration of scientific disciplines; the reduction of the Bible’s authority to that of one document among many valid religious texts; the relocation of authority to the depth and integrity of interpersonal relationships; the emergence of a relationally driven ethics in which group consensus defines moral norms; and the diversification of religious experiences according to participants’ needs. In addition, the global growth of Pentecostalcharismatic movements has exerted increasing influence on theology – often through ahistorical and fundamentalist approaches to Scripture – and on ecclesial practice through experiential, emotionally driven forms of spirituality.

This context has made it necessary to develop a renewed appreciation for theological hermeneutics. Theological hermeneutics seeks to understand

the role of the Word of God in the faith and formation of individuals and faith communities (Green, 2011:4). Particular emphasis is placed on the potentially reciprocal influence between Scripture and doctrine, as well as on the role of Scripture in the church's selfunderstanding and its critical reflection on faith practices. The Bible is read not merely as a historical or literary document, but as the primary witness to God's revelation in Christ and as an indispensable partner in theological reflection (Migliore, 2014). The aim is to seek an encounter with the God who stands behind the Word and who is mediated through the Word. Such a hermeneutic aspires to provide the church with a renewed foundational metaphor (Yamamoto, 2007:92) - an organising analogy that enables communities to make sense of experience, interpret the world, and articulate the meaning of life - in order to renew the church's mission (Nel, 2023:9).

As a Reformed theologian, I propose to describe this approach as a *hermeneutic of appreciation* that engages Scripture with faithdiscernment. Ian Nell (2020:6-7) offers a compelling description of theology that undergirds this hermeneutical framework. Theology, he suggests, can be understood as *theodrama*: the scholarly study, through interpretation and discernment, of the activities of the Triune God as Author, central Protagonist, and Director, as witnessed in Scripture and faith traditions, embodied in practices across particular times and contexts, and oriented toward the faithful enactment of the gospel drama by a diverse cast of participants within faith communities, as part of an ongoing process of transformation toward the realisation of God's kingdom as a hopeful future.

2. The building blocks of a hermeneutic of appreciation

Traditionally, exegesis was undertaken to determine the original intention of the authors of biblical texts and to establish what a particular text would have meant to the audience for whom it was first written (Porter & Clarke, 2002:7). Over time, however, the task of exegetical inquiry has broadened to include an investigation into how this original intention has been received and interpreted throughout history - the history of interpretation - as well as what the text means today, that is, its contemporary relevance (Porter & Clarke, 2002:9).

This traditional approach has been expanded considerably. Some exegetical methods developed in reaction against earlier approaches, while others emerged from different academic disciplines (among others, Porter & Clarke, 2002:10-16). These approaches can be represented schematically as follows:

Exegetical Approach	Strength	Risk
<i>Discourse analysis:</i> Uses insights from linguistics.	Unlocks the core argument of individual pericopes.	Focuses exclusively on the logical flow of the text to identify a presumed “timeless truth”.
<i>Rhetorical and narratological criticism:</i> Reads texts historically, literarily, and narratively.	Reveals the rhetoric of the author and other narrative techniques.	Constricts the faith perspective that is inherently communicated through biblical texts.
<i>Literary criticism:</i> Examines the literary nature of texts.	Identifies metaphors, stylistic devices, and other literary techniques.	Becomes trapped in semantics and technical textual features as a literary genre.
<i>Historicalcritical approaches:</i> Divide texts into their composite parts as they developed from oral traditions into their final form.	Clarifies the development of texts and identifies religious traditions or schools reflected in them.	Loses sight of the unity of the final text and reduces meaning to varying degrees of authority.
<i>Socialscientific approaches:</i> Utilise insights from sociology, anthropology, history, and related fields to illuminate the social world behind the text.	Reveals the culture, customs, and practices of the world in which the text originated.	Widens the historical gap between text and contemporary context, thereby stripping the text of proclamation value.
<i>Ideological criticism:</i> Reads texts primarily from contemporary perspectives such as liberation theology or feminism.	Exposes unconscious biases that shape contemporary readings of the text.	Allows the contemporary perspective to become the normative lens by which the text is judged.

<i>Hermeneutics of suspicion:</i> Approaches texts sceptically, interrogating surface meanings, uncovering hidden power structures, and deconstructing underlying ideologies.	Reveals invisible power dynamics and fosters the development of a second naïveté.	Leads to a wholesale questioning of the integrity of ancient texts.
<i>Confessional hermeneutics:</i> Interprets texts in dialogue with the doctrinal tradition of the interpreter and faith community.	Retrieves the witness of previous generations who interpreted Scripture within their own contexts.	Risks imputing meaning to the text that is not actually present – <i>eisegesis</i> .

Taken in isolation, each of these exegetical approaches – with their particular academic presuppositions – exerts a significant influence on how a text is ultimately embodied in practice. Each hermeneutical key produces a distinctive way of reading a text, leading to divergent interpretations and practical outcomes. Exclusive reliance on any single method does not result in an integrated understanding of Scripture; rather, it often gives rise to fragmentation, where the same biblical text is given radically different, and even incompatible, meanings.

Yet when taken together, these exegetical approaches contribute to deeper insight and richer understanding of the complexity of the biblical texts. Each constructive contribution to the reading and interpretation of Scripture offers a distinctive vantage point from which the veil of the past may be drawn back to perceive more clearly the Triune God – who is, ultimately, the subject of these texts. A conscious and critical engagement with one's own presuppositions, combined with a responsible openness to insights that fall outside one's own interpretive framework, dismantles a particular form of suspicion: the discrediting of alternative interpretations merely because they emerge from different hermeneutical approaches.

In the proclamation of God's Word and its embodiment within the contemporary contexts we inhabit, an integrative theological hermeneutic of appreciation is required. Such appreciative engagement enables more

faithful participation in God's purposes for the world and deepens our understanding of the testimony concerning who God is. Musa (2024:17) describes this as a hermeneutic that operates from a biblicaltheological paradigm *from above* and resists relying exclusively on bottomup contextual frameworks as guides for interpretation.

An older schematic diagram can be used to illuminate both the problem under discussion and the building blocks through which a hermeneutic of appreciation may be developed. This model draws on Reformation principles that functioned as hermeneutical keys through which the Reformers established the theological foundations of the Protestant movement. These principles were born from Protestantism's renewed appreciation for – and return to – the Bible as the primary source of revelation, alongside a reengagement with the writings of the patristic church fathers (Engle, 2021). This is encapsulated in one of the five *solas* of the Reformation: the conviction that Scripture alone is the source of knowledge about God, humanity, and the world.

Embedded within this principle lies a fundamental hermeneutical insight: Scripture must function as the foundational framework for reflection on the Reformation's theological claims. Scripture testifies through the Spirit to Christ as the only Saviour and Mediator, who is received by faith alone, not through human merit but by God's grace alone, resulting in a life lived solely to the glory of God (Bender 2019: 112–114; 120–123; 125–127).

Deist (1986:16) offers a schematic description of the communication process underlying how the Bible is read – a process that shapes the hermeneutical principles that we are currently developing:

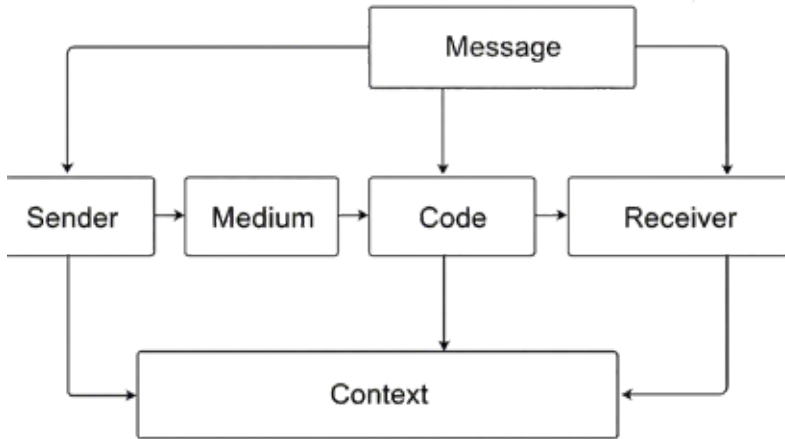


Figure 1 Schematic representation of the communication process in the reading of Bible texts
(Deist, 1986:16)

3. The communication process of a hermeneutic of appreciation

The communication process illustrated above represents a *textimmanent* approach in which the biblical text itself occupies the central position in the act of communication. Such a biblical text consists of a sender (the author of the text), a medium (namely the written characters employed), a code (the language in which the text is written), the message conveyed by the text, the receivers of the text (the readers), and the context within which the text originated. In an initial reading, the discourse of the text is apprehended to gain a general understanding of its message. Within the sphere of academic study, this corresponds to the domain of discourse analysis as well as rhetorical and narratological criticism.

In a second reading, attention is given to the code of the text in order to examine metaphors, comparisons, imagery, and other literary techniques. This round of reading also situates the specific pericope within the broader context of the biblical book of which it forms part, as well as within the larger units of thought that shape the text as a whole. From an academic perspective, this is the domain of literary criticism.

A third round of reading explores the world behind the text – focusing on the author, the sociocultural context in which the text emerged, and the processes by which the text developed into its final form. This information connects contemporary readers with the lived world in which the text originally functioned, thereby anchoring interpretation within the historical realities that shaped the text.

In a fourth round of reading, the focus shifts to the recipients of the text. It is at this point that Green’s argument becomes particularly salient, namely that the message of the biblical text is intended for each successive generation and continues to function as the Word of God (Green, 2011:9-12). While significant insight can be gained by considering what the text sought to communicate to its earliest readers, deeper understanding is also achieved when we – as contemporary recipients – reflect critically on our own context and on how it influences our interpretation of the text. Academics and others engaged in the study of Scripture draw here on insights developed through socialscientific and historicalcritical approaches. It is also within this phase that ideological and suspicious readings of the text play a crucial role by sensitising contemporary readers to their own presuppositions and unconscious biases. Indeed, no process of interpretation is ever innocent (Fourie, 2023:4).

A fifth and final reading involves the appropriation of the message of the text for the lived reality of believers before the presence of God. Fourie (2023:3) describes this stage as “communal spiritual discernment.” Through this process, the biblical text is able to function meaningfully as a central aspect of faith discernment, engaging in credible dialogue with the challenges, experiences, and opportunities of the present context.

4. The role of spirituality in the fifth reading process

A hermeneutic of appreciation can never be genuinely faithdiscerned if readers of biblical texts limit themselves to confession, cognitive insight, and private devotion within the confines of personal spirituality. Strauss (2023:150) makes the “simple but unmistakable point that anyone who wishes to learn more about the Christian faith must in fact make time to pray with others, to learn to read and interpret Scripture together, to help load the trailer and travel hundreds of kilometres to offer support and

assistance, and to carry refuse bins at a neighbourhood fair.” His argument affirms that acts of service and obedience constitute the faithful response through which Christians answer the call of the Triune God to participate in the renewal of the cosmos. For this reason, he argues, it is necessary to identify what Christians are actually doing when they take their faith seriously and live it out. He refers to these practices as *faith practices* – those activities that believing followers of Jesus Christ, over time and together, come to recognise as practices that ought to be performed faithfully in light of God’s involvement in the world (Strauss, 2023:151).

Newbigin (1989:132) further illustrates the intimate relationship between deeds and words in the gospel narratives of Jesus’ sending of the twelve disciples, identifying this relationship as a key spiritual marker of a hermeneutic of appreciation. Referring to Matthew chapters 5 through 11, he highlights how the preaching to which the disciples are called functions as an interpretation of the healing actions that accompany their mission. When believers participate in God’s work in the world, their faith practices become the testimony of their confession, and their testimony becomes the proclamation that gives meaning to their actions. The Christian calling, according to Newbigin, consists in living out the kingdom of God by participating in the powerful deeds of Christ that are already present in the world, while simultaneously proclaiming who the King is in whose name this participation occurs (Newbigin, 1989:133)).

It is therefore a fundamental misunderstanding to treat proclamation and action as if they were competing or mutually exclusive, or to suggest that one is more important than the other. Faith cannot be confined solely to accurate biblical interpretation, eternal truths, or confessional formulations. Nor can faith be reduced to social justice initiatives, contextual applications of the gospel, or a dilution of the centrality of Jesus within the Christian faith. A view of Scripture stripped of love for others, compassion for the marginalised, and sensitivity to human brokenness is just as problematic as faith practices that fail to direct attention, in a clarifying manner, toward Jesus Christ (Newbigin, 1989:137). Within a hermeneutic of appreciation, the study of God’s Word always culminates in embodied faith practices that live out the gospel beyond the safe spaces of faith communities. Consequently, believers must learn to speak the language and live the embodiment of God’s heart. Joubert (2024:14)

accordingly defines spirituality as those faith practices that form part of the Christian life and flow from the recognition of God's living presence.

Smith (2009:135) further deepens the connection between spirituality and faithdiscerning hermeneutics as a foundational component of a hermeneutic of appreciation. He develops his argument by noting that the earliest Christians worshipped God long before confessions and articulated worldviews were formally systematised. This reality is evident in New Testament texts where the authors incorporate the practices of early Christian communities into their writings, as in Romans 16:25–27. Moreover, Old Testament texts and other emerging writings of the period were read aloud during gatherings of the communities, situating Scripture within a public liturgical context. For the earliest Christians, the Old Testament already functioned as the authoritative Word of God. For this reason, Smith argues, the Bible functions distinctively: it is not a repository of theological information, but a means of grace, a site of divine action, an accompaniment to the Holy Spirit's transforming power, and a component of a pedagogy that shapes desire for God. If Scripture functions liturgically as the "circuitry" through which life in God's presence flows, then the life of Jesus serves as the "power source" that enables the practical embodiment of worship.

De Gruchy (2021:36) likewise explains that early Christians listened weekly to the gospel narratives, through which they received an alternative vision of the world and learned what it meant to live differently within God's kingdom. In particular, he notes, they learned to obey God's rule of love above all else, because this was the only path to genuine happiness, inner peace, and enduring joy. They learned that following Jesus required a radically alternative way of engaging the world, lived in anticipation of the inbreaking of God's new world. This alternative way of life called them to love and forgive others – including their enemies – to extend hospitality to strangers, to heal the sick, to pursue God's justice, and to share in God's peace (2021:37).

5. The value of Reformed spirituality in the hermeneutical process

The fifth reading may also be described as the space of *confessional* engagement with the text, since it intentionally incorporates the testimony of previous generations and faith communities. This is the space of faithdiscerning reading, appreciative reading, and the ongoing witness of a particular Christian community concerning God's revelation. It is within this space that a coherent worldview is formed through the integration of text, tradition, and the work of God's Spirit. The reception of God's Word for a specific time and context, filtered through a faith tradition – in this case, the Reformed tradition – ultimately constitutes the cornerstone of a hermeneutic of appreciation.

Calvin regarded Scripture as the highest norm for true Christian faith and religion (Nel, 2020:2). For Calvin, however, the Word is made living through the work of the Holy Spirit, whom he described as the Teacher in the school of the Word (Calvin, 1932/2:467). Through the Spirit, believers are taught, their understanding is illumined, the message of Scripture is engraved on their hearts, and they are empowered to live in obedience to God in accordance with the Word (Nel, 2020:4).

Similarly, the Reformed confessions consistently express a high regard for Scripture. The Scots Confession of 1560 affirms that the Word of God is “sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God,” and therefore confesses its authority as originating from God (SC, Ch. 19). The Westminster Confession declares Holy Scripture to be “most necessary” because it constitutes God's inscripturated revelation (WC, Ch. 1,1). The Belgic Confession goes even further by confessing that the Holy Spirit testifies within the hearts of believers that the words of Scripture are from God (BC, art. 5). The Heidelberg Catechism identifies the Bible as the source of knowledge concerning humanity's sin, redemption, and gratitude, with the mediating work of Jesus Christ as Saviour at the centre of this revelation (HC, question 19). Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism substantiates every answer with direct scriptural references, and while some of its exegetical interpretations may sound unfamiliar to modern hermeneutical ears, its consistent insistence that Scripture is the source of God's selfdisclosure remains clear. The Canons of Dort describe how

God calls people into communion with himself through Word and Spirit, offering a logically coherent articulation of Reformed spirituality within the context of the debates surrounding divine election (CD, chap. 1). In the Belhar Confession's call to unity and reconciliation, Scripture is described as God's lifegiving Word (Belhar, pt. 3).

This lifecreating presence of God within the biblical texts forms the foundation of Reformed spiritual sensibility (Smit, 2013:24). As Smit explains (2013:25), it distinguishes the Reformed tradition from a pietistic spirituality that makes salvation dependent on inward feelings, and from Methodist logics of assurance grounded in spiritual "laws" or pathways to salvation. It also sets the Reformed tradition apart from charismatic emphases on nonverbal communication between God and human beings through ongoing revelations of the Spirit and other supernatural gifts that are often regarded as evidence of Spirit baptism (Coetsee & Goede, 2022:29). In such contexts, the role and authority of the Spirit may take precedence over the disciplined scholarly study of Scripture (Coetsee & Goede, 2022:29). A Reformed worldview, by contrast, is grounded in faith as content – the salvific action of God in Christ – rather than in the subjective act of believing itself.

At the same time, Reformed spirituality is not limited to the study of Scripture and its proclamation through preaching. Because the salvific action of God in Christ lies at the heart of Christian assurance, the Reformed perspective is deeply shaped by the confession of Christ's kingship and reign (Burger & Nel, 2022:209). This confession affirms Jesus' living presence in the here and now.

Consequently, the gospel has implications not only for the church, but also for the world. Jesus is the Prophet who continually calls, sends, guides, and teaches his followers (Burger & Nel, 2022:213). Moreover, Jesus is already present and active in the places to which he sends them. Through the Spirit, believers are transformed into Christ's image. Their lives reflect his values and norms, their thinking is oriented toward God's redemptive purposes and expressed through their witness, and their actions become participations in Christ's work as they live in the manner he modelled during his earthly ministry (Burger & Nel, 2022:217). This orients the faithfilled attentiveness with which believers seek insight in Scripture in

order to discern where God is at work in the world and how to read the signs of the times (Burger & Nel, 2022:219).

Ultimately, the value of Reformed spirituality can be summarised by the tradition's search for a biblical *metanarrative* – that is, the effort to understand human history and the future as a coherent whole by telling a single, comprehensive story (Nel, 2023:30). Scripture functions as the source that binds this metanarrative together across the texts of the Old and New Testaments (Nel, 2023:33).

6. Spirituality and the faith practices of missional formation

Marais (2017:375) speaks of faith discernment as *missional formation*. This refers to the intentional communal process through which believers grow in their relationship with God and are conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the world. Faith practices that draw believers into a life of worship, as embodied in Scripture, are participatory in nature: believers participate in the lifegiving mission of the Triune God. These practices are intentional, since they involve a lifelong process of deliberate faith discernment and submission to Christ as King. They are also liturgical, in that faith communities glorify God together through worship practices that shape appropriate Christian desires within their thinking and convictions.

These intentional, communal faith habits give rise to several important insights (Marais, 2017:386): They function as largely unconscious habits that are practised by all members of a faith community; They consist of communal actions, even when they are often practised individually; They are inherently repetitive in nature; And they are transformative, in those habitual practices shape patterns of thinking that in turn influence conscious reflection.

Marais (2017:386) further identifies specific faith practices that contribute to the establishment of a faithdiscerning hermeneutic: The first of these is *listening*, the purpose of which is to foster participants' confidence and willingness to take part actively. A second practice is *affirmation*, aimed at recognising and validating the gifts and strengths of others and assisting them to flourish. A third practice is the *transformative reading of Scripture*.

By journeying together in the Word under the guidance of a hermeneutically trained facilitator (Nel, 2013:4), the aim of being formed by the biblical text as a faith community is strengthened. A fourth practice involves *silence and contemplation within group gatherings*, which cultivates the discipline of waiting for the inbreaking of God's kingdom rather than attempting to construct the kingdom through human effort. A fifth practice is *meditative and reflective prayer*, which directs attention toward the living presence of Christ.

7. Conclusion: An appreciative hermeneutic seeking insight

The problem statement with which this article began concerned the need for a hermeneutical key that enables meaningful engagement with God's activity in a rapidly changing world. Relatively little has been said explicitly about the nature of this rapid change. Nevertheless, several features of the contemporary reality have been implicitly acknowledged: recognition of the Western experience of secularisation; the marginalisation of the Christian faith among a plurality of religious options; and the proliferation of competing voices claiming authority, which has diluted confidence in the Bible's interpretive authority. At the same time, attention has been drawn to the distinctive role that the Reformed tradition can play in reaffirming a Scripturebased, Christcentred worldview. As a conceptual category, worldview is inherently hermeneutical, since hermeneutics refers to the interpretive filters through which people make sense of the reality around them.

Within this particular tradition, a renewed appreciation has emerged for the central role of God's Word in the Reformed hermeneutical approach – an appreciation that gives rise to a textimmanent hermeneutic of appreciation. By reading Scripture within its historical contexts and with a pneumatological openness to deeper insight and understanding, believers are enabled to recognise, discern, and participate in God's ongoing work in the world. This approach, however, requires the intentional dismantling of a cognitive bias that treats Scripture merely as a source of information or as a repository of universally applicable, timeless truths. A hermeneutic of appreciation reads Scripture in a faithdiscerning, formative, and liturgical manner – as an integral building block of Reformed spirituality.

A Reformed hermeneutic of appreciation draws readers deeply into an awareness that Scripture itself guides believers toward proactive faith practices – habits intentionally cultivated to clarify spiritual perception, enabling discernment of where God is at work and transformation into the likeness of Christ as this likeness is embodied in daily life.

At the same time, a hermeneutic of appreciation is not predicated on uniformity. The technical elements of the hermeneutical process – the specific exegetical practices through which Scripture is analysed – highlight the reality that different people, in different contexts and at different moments in history, read the same biblical texts and discern different messages. The appreciative character of Reformed hermeneutics ultimately enables theological thinkers to cultivate understanding of these differences, teaching them to hold one another in communion as children of the one living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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