

THEOLOGY AS HERMENEUTICS: THE WORLD OF GERHARD EBELING

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Arthur Gibson maintains that Ebeling's views and handling of language in explaining his theology are "incurably incoherent from a logical point of view." Gibson bases his judgement on an analysis of four works by Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, *The Nature of Faith*, *The Word of God and Tradition*, and, more importantly, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*.⁽¹⁾

I would like to argue that it is impossible to grasp Ebeling's theory of language and hermeneutics apart from his entire conception of theology. Before dismissing Ebeling's hermeneutics we must consider its theological coherence. This I will do in Part I of this article.⁽²⁾

Part II of this article analyzes Ebeling's theory of understanding as contained in his *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*. I will situate this work within the context of Ebeling's earlier theological programme. In so doing I shall show the evolution and development in Ebeling's theology.

The final section of this article contains a critique of Ebeling's hermeneutical theology.

I

In the earlier writings of Ebeling (between 1942 and 1967) theology and hermeneutics are interchangeable terms.⁽³⁾ One must delineate the entire structure of Ebeling's theology in order to uncover his theory of hermeneutics. I begin by explicating Ebeling's view of God. Then I speak of

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1. A. Gibson, "An Exhibition of Theological Fallacies: A Critique of Gerhard Ebeling's Analysis of Language," *JH* 15 (1974) 423.

2. See I.U. Dalferth, "Theological Fallacies: A Contribution," *HJ* 16 (1975) 389-404. Ebeling understands theology to be the same as hermeneutics as early as 1942 in his doctoral dissertation. Cf. H.J. Schultz, "Gerhard Ebeling," *Tendenzen Der Theologie Im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. O. Strolz (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1967) 594.

3. J.M. Robinson, "Die Hermeneutik seit Karl Barth," *Neuland in der Theologie, Band 2, Die neue Hermeneutik*, ed. J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, Jr. (Friburg: Herder, 1963) 92.

the relationship between the word of God and hermeneutics paying particular attention to the "word-event."

According to Ebeling, contemporary theology has the task of verifying our God-talk. It is extremely difficult to speak about God today because of the secularization of all areas of life. The separation between church goers and non-church goers represents an attempt to evade the difficult task of speaking about God meaningfully.⁽⁴⁾ Both believers and non-believers should attempt to bring our language about God in relationship to our contemporary understanding of reality.

Ebeling wants theologians to take a new look at the meaning of reality (*Wirklichkeit*). He is concerned with the relationship between theology and reality. Ebeling speaks of reality as being more encompassing than science. Reality can never be mastered by science. The problem consists in this: that theology *qua* theology speaks about something, which, as reality, can never be verified, viz., God.⁽⁵⁾

Ebeling does not concern himself with the question, "How can the claim of revelation convince me of the reality of revelation," nor with the question, "What is the criterion of genuine revelation?" He suggests that these are counterfeit questions. As long as we ask whether that of which theology speaks can be verified as reality we confine ourselves to an epistemological standpoint which pre-supposes that detached observation (*betrachtende Wahrnehmen*) is the proper place where verification occurs.⁽⁶⁾

The problem of religious language is discussed by continental European theologians from the standpoint of linguistic analysis. Whereas the continental group speaks of the question of "understanding" the Anglo-Americans speak in terms of "verification." The real question has to do with the extent to which statements which elude experience can be understood and verified.⁽⁷⁾

Ebeling protests against the objectifying language of earlier theology in regard to God-Talk. God-talk find its verification when the universe and human persons are spoken of in such a way that they are affected (*getroffen*). God-talk should cast an illuminating light on our being-human and on our situation in-the-world. When that occurs, God-talk verifies itself.⁽⁸⁾

Ebeling appears to fear a dualism which separates reality into two halves, viz., historical reality and an a-historical world above our own. Ebeling rejects such a dichotomy between a natural, historical world and a supernatural, a-historical world which one must then take on faith. Reality is a unity. Revelation does not mean that I receive information about a supernatural, transcendent world. On the contrary, revelation means that

4. G. Ebeling, "Profanität und Geheimnis," *ZTK* 65 (1968) 73.

5. G. Ebeling, "Theologie und Wirklichkeit," *ZTK* 53 (1956) 374.

6. G. Ebeling, "Profanität," 378.

7. G. Ebeling, *Gott Und Wort I* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1966) 21 – 22.

8. Ebeling, "Theologie und Wirklichkeit," 378.

the entire horizon of one's existence in all its dimensions is illumined in a way that sunlight illumines one's room. Ebeling would maintain that *in sensu stricto* I myself, in every facet of my being, am the object of revelation. Revelation both lights up my being and serves as the source of light. The human person necessarily belongs to the process of revelation, as the *materia* of God, to use Luther's terminology.⁽⁹⁾

Theologically, one cannot speak of God, the world and the human person apart from each other. They form an inseparable triad. The revelation of God is, *eo ipso*, a making-known (*Offenbarwerden*) of the world and of the human person. The human person in his/her being-in-the-world is the human person as addressed and called by an infinite Caller, who always calls person-to-person. One understands reality either in the light of faith or apart from faith. Faith should not be seen as a luxury for the religiously endowed person. Faith exists to awaken human persons to their true and authentic humanity, to allow them to become children of God. Faith does not set one apart from others, but makes one a true person.⁽¹⁰⁾

Ebeling maintains that the process of secularization has some unacceptable consequences connected with it. Human persons stand in danger of losing their sense of mystery. There are, observes Ebeling, good reasons why women, the elderly and children can derive spiritual nourishment from God and talk about God. They have a sense of mystery, for that which cannot be produced or manufactured, but which can be watched over and guarded. Those who put a premium on productivity, achievement and technology, on the other hand, lack this sense of mystery. Such individuals find God-talk as empty as false promises.⁽¹¹⁾

Preachers should bring home to people the mystery of reality. Whenever human persons become receivers, are surrounded by mystery and see life as a gift, they receive some idea of what it means to be surrounded, encompassed and confronted by God.⁽¹²⁾ God has entered the world and human history in an irrevocable way. It matters not at all whether human persons understand reality in a religious or non-religious way. At any rate human persons are open to an experience which has to do with God, however one wants to understand that word. In this context Ebeling makes references to what Karl Rahner would call "anonymous Christians," i.e., those who are not Christians *ex professo*, but de facto lead their lives in such a way as to be Christians nevertheless.

The experience of passivity has reference not only to the God-question, but is also important in regard to revelation. In the latter case Ebeling sees God as the active partner and the human person as passive. In this regard Ebeling is influenced by the earlier Heidegger's notion of thrownness

9. G. Ebeling, *Gott Und Wort* 196.

10. G. Ebeling, *Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens* (Munich: Siebenstern, 1967) 110.

11. *Ibid.*, 87

12. *Ibid.*, 91.

(*Geworfenheit*).¹³ Ebeling goes on to distinguish between the person as doer and the person as receiver. Such a distinction goes back to Luther who distinguishes between the active justification of works and the passive justification of faith. This is the famous distinction between law and Gospel. For Ebeling, faith lives off grace. It achieves nothing on its own, but receives. Faith confesses God as Creator instead of wanting to be its own creator.¹⁴

The Word of God and Hermeneutics

Ebeling regards the word of God as the source and lifeblood of theological understanding. Just as the term, God, does not represent a separate, special reality, so is the word of God not a supernatural, special word, but really the last, true and final word. This word of God refers so much to the human person that it is an oral word, a happening between persons. For Ebeling, the word of God distinguishes itself from the human word only in relation to its subject, God or the human person.¹⁵

The basic structure of the word may be called communication (*Mitteilung*) as opposed to declarative statement (*Aussage*). The word does not only function as a means toward understanding but the word serves understanding itself. Ebeling sees an affinity between the Greek view of reality as *logos* and the word. The word, or language, is identical with reality because the word gives direct expression to reality.¹⁶

Ebeling equates the word with reality.¹⁷ This is precisely what Ebeling means when he writes that the primary phenomenon of understanding is not the understanding of language, but the understanding *through* language.¹⁸ The word itself has a hermeneutical function since it not only makes understanding possible, but also mediates understanding.

From the preceding sketch Ebeling sees three important consequences for hermeneutics: 1) Hermeneutics is only required when the "word-event" (*Wortgeschehen*) is disturbed. When the word-event occurs in a normal fashion, there is no need of an aid to understanding (*Verstehenshilfe*).

The term, "word-event" is crucial to Ebeling's hermeneutics. I will

13. In regard to thrownness" Heidegger writes, "Diesen in seinem Woher und Wohin verhullen, aber an ihm selbst um so unverhullter erschlossenen Seinscharakter des Daseins, dieses "Da es ist" nennen wir die *Geworfenheit* dieses Seins in sein Da, so zwar, dass es als In-der-Welt-Sein das Da ist. Der Ausdruck Geworfenheit soll die Faktizitat der Ueberantwortung andeuten." See *Sein Und Zeit* (Tuebingen: M. Niemeyer, 1963) 135. (This characteristic of Dasein's Being - this 'that it is' - is veiled in its "whence" and "whither", yet disclosed it itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the "*thrownness*" of this entity into its "there"; indeed it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the "there". The expression "thrownness" is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over.*"

14. Ebeling, *Das Wesen* 172. (f. "Profanitat") 90.

15. Ebeling, *Wort Und Glaube* 341.

16. Dillenberger, "Zur Ausweitung" 191.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Ebeling, *Wort Und Glaube* 333.

now try to explain what a "word-event" means. In many cases it is enough when the word is regarded as an instrument, as a sign for an object. I am presupposing, of course, that the object itself is understood. In this case linguistic understanding means that which is already understood is actualized.

In other cases where the linguistically, designated object (*sprachlich bezeichnete Gegenstand*) is unknown and does not present itself to the senses, the task of language is much more difficult. In such cases Ebeling says that the word itself has a hermeneutical function. The word serves as an aid to understanding. It has the power to bring about understanding because it points to its object.⁽¹⁹⁾ Ebeling speaks of a "word-event" because the word brings about understanding and therein shows its creative power. This is precisely what Ebeling means when he says that the primary phenomenon of understanding is not the understanding *of* language, but understanding *through* language, or when Ernest Fuchs writes that language consists not only in a tonal promulgation of the content of meaning . . . language is primarily a showing or a letting be seen.⁽²⁰⁾

In this context Ebeling and Fuchs are influenced by the later Heidegger who believes that understanding is a gift of language and not something we use to uncover language. In *Being and Time* one could come to Being in general only through human existence (Dasein). The later Heidegger comes to Being via the structures of human language.⁽²¹⁾

2) Since hermeneutics can only create space for the proper hermeneutical function of the word the content and object of hermeneutics is the word-event as such. Ebeling sums this up in the formula, *Wo Wort geschieht, wird Verstehen ermöglicht*, ("wherever the word happens it makes understanding possible.")⁽²²⁾

3) One cannot speak of the word apart from experience. The word brings about understanding insofar as it appeals to experience and leads to experience.⁽²³⁾ The experience, which the word of God creates, is called faith.

Ebeling sees a correlation between the word of God and Faith. The word of God and faith go together like love and marriage. The word of God is the communication of faith. God is the one who speaks in the word of God.⁽²⁴⁾ Hence the world takes on another dimension. The word of God should not be compared to a light which shines on God. Instead, the word of God is the light which radiates from God and lights up the rooms in the

19. Ebeling, *Wort Und Glaube* 333 – 334.

20. E. Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1970) 131.

21. K. Hamilton, "The New Hermeneutic, O the Jarring Sound," *CJT* (1968) 185. See H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit Und Methods* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1965) 497.

22. Ebeling, *Wort Und Glaube* 335.

23. *Ibid.*, 336.

24. Ebeling, *Das Wesen* 85, where Ebeling asserts that the notion of the word of God has a key position in the relationship between faith and language.

house of our human existence.⁽²⁵⁾ Human persons respond to this word of God by the correct and proper use of the word. In so doing man becomes an image of God.⁽²⁶⁾

In this connection Ebeling makes a decisive break with his teacher, R. Bultmann. Indeed, Bultmann sees a correlation between word and faith. However, he sees this correlation mediated through the act or deed (*Tat*) of pure, blind obedience to the kerygma.⁽²⁷⁾ For Bultmann the authority of this word cannot be proved.

For Ebeling, on the contrary, experience is the ground for the authority of the word. This experience consists in the evidence, that is to say, whether it hits home or not. In other words Ebeling maintains that the word of God verifies itself. It does so to the extent that it verifies our existence as human.⁽²⁸⁾

It goes without saying that the word of God does not become the word of God merely because it makes such a claim. The tradition of the word of God is not added on to our experience as its completion or as a displacement or repression of our actual situation. Rather, it aims to verify us both *in re* our being-in-the-world and to awaken us to our true condition in regard to our being-in-the-world. Incredible as it sounds, it seems that the inner truth of the so-called natural theology is won back again via the detour of hermeneutics.⁽²⁹⁾

Ebeling argues that the word of God verifies itself as the word of God in that it wakes us up to our basic situation, namely as a word-situation. This means that our human situation is always one in which we find ourselves confronted by God. The word of God opens us up to our basic situation. In another context Ebeling remarks that the word of Scripture makes us aware of that which we, as persons, have a thousand opportunities to experience.⁽³⁰⁾

Without a doubt, word and faith are the most important concepts for Ebeling. The definition and determination of man (*Menschen*) takes place in faith. The formula "Jesus, the word of God," contains the sum and essence of all christological predications.⁽³¹⁾ God comes to us in the person of Christ. This name, "Jesus," means that which is articulated in Jesus, namely, faith.⁽³²⁾

This unity of Jesus with the faith finds expression not in what Jesus

25. *Ibid.*, 186.

26. *Wort Und Glaube* 343.

27. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: 1961) 587. See Bultmann's *Glauben und Verstehen* II (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1961) 216 for Bultmann's hermeneutical presuppositions, particularly where he speaks about the term, *Vorverständnis*.

28. *Gott Und Wort* 77.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 90.

31. G. Ebeling, *Theologie und Verkündigung: Ein Gespräch mit R. Bultmann* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962) 80.

32. *Ibid.*

says about his own faith, but as a witness of the faith in being there for others.⁽³³⁾ Ebeling solves the problem of the historical Jesus in this way. The believer is already in contact with the historical Jesus. How does this occur? Ebeling would say that the believer encounters the historical Jesus in faith through the word. Easter-faith concerns itself with faith in Jesus because therein Jesus appears as a witness of the faith.⁽³⁴⁾

Ebeling extends his theological analysis from christology to ecclesiology. The church may be called that place where the word of God continues its work. Neither the church nor the sacraments have been expressly instituted by Christ, says Ebeling.⁽³⁵⁾ The church first appears with that faith which makes appeal to Jesus as the Resurrected One and preaches Jesus as the way of faith for all persons.⁽³⁶⁾

Ebeling calls the church the authorized word-event which makes its appeal to Jesus.⁽³⁷⁾ Jesus functions as the event of authorization (*Vollmacht*). The church may be regarded as the continuing presence of the power and jurisdiction of Jesus. As the authorized word-event the church spends itself in serving others in freedom. The church exists to serve others. This the church does using the authorized word-event itself (*vollmächtige Wortgeschehen*), which is the presence of God which takes place for all men and women.⁽³⁸⁾

At the end of his essay, "the Word of God and Hermeneutics," Ebeling writes that the hermeneutical principle is man as conscience.⁽³⁹⁾ This sounds somewhat strange. He intends to say that conscience contains neither a code of law nor individual precepts, but all of reality. Ebeling sees conscience as the coming-together of the human person, the word and God. Conscience may be regarded as the 'place' where the word-event occurs and where understanding becomes an event.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The theology of the early Ebeling may be summed up in five axiomatic points:

- 1) Theology is the academically rigorous and scientific study and putting into language (*Zur-Sprache-Kommen*) of the word of God.
- 2) Preaching means putting the word of God into words.
- 3) Revelation means the advent and arrival of God's word.
- 4) Faith means that the word of God has achieved its goal and purpose.
- 5) The word of God means God's arrival — in the conscience of us all.⁽⁴¹⁾

33. *Wort Und Glaube* 310

34. *Ibid.*, 315.

35. G. Ebeling, *Wort Gottes und Tradition* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1964) 225.

36. *Ibid.*, 94.

37. *Ibid.*, 93.

38. *Ibid.*, 94.

39. *Wort Und Glaube* 319 – 348.

40. *Ibid.*, 434.

41. *Ibid.*, 457.

II

In his *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* written in 1971 Ebeling takes up many of the themes found in his earlier writings and takes them one step further. What Ebeling does in this book is this: he attempts to sketch out the parameters of a theological theory of language; i.e., to reflect on the meaning of a theological hermeneutics or a theory of understanding.

Ebeling understands hermeneutics to mean the attempt to develop a theory of language with the widest possible horizon.⁽⁴²⁾ He points out that the root meaning of *hermeneuein* is speech as such, to speak, to say. The meaning develops from this in three ways; (1) to put into words (express), (2) to expound or explain and (3) to translate or interpret. Ebeling sees the linkage between these three as a concern for the understanding of language by language, i.e., the achievement of understanding either by a statement which is to the point, by an explanation which makes the meaning clear, or by an accurate translation. In each case the intention remains the same, viz., to enable language to achieve its full effect in carrying out its function.⁽⁴³⁾

To a certain extent, hermeneutics has a negative function to perform, namely, to remove that which prevents language from being effective. Hermeneutics, says Ebeling, attempts to mend the breakdowns which interfere either within language itself or outside it or with the process of conveying that kind of understanding which language itself brings about.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In all of this Ebeling takes as his assumption the notion that "language can only be helped by language." An example may shed clarity on this. An obscure and equivocal statement may be helped by an explanation which removes the obscurity and ambiguity. In such a case language removes the difficulties to an understanding of the correct meaning.

Ebeling says that the distinction between a theory of understanding and hermeneutics does not always hold up if a theory of language is conceived in comprehensive terms. A theory of language is usually limited to the way language comes into being through the interplay of language as a formal system and its subject as the content of spoken language. On the other hand, hermeneutics concerns itself with the understanding of certain manifestations in language and overcoming the difficulties which they present to understanding.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Ebeling believes that a comprehensive theory of understanding has a close relationship to life itself. He argues that if the form of a theory of language is to be derived from the widest possible range of language as it is actually used in life, the tension must be maintained between the active use

42. G. Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 156.

43. *Ibid.*, 157.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 163.

of language in speaking and the quasi-passive use of language in listening.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The distinction often made between a theory of understanding and hermeneutics does not always stand up because speaking and listening are complementary aspects of a single situation, viz., speaking is oriented toward listening and vice versa.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The process of language may be subdivided into four main aspects: 1) the speaker as its subject 2) the act of speaking as such 3) the content of the statement and 4) the person addressed. In regard to the speaker as the subject of language, Ebeling says that the speaker must be seen within a historical and social context. What experiences has the speaker had? Where has the speaker derived what he/she says? The speaker has also been influenced by heredity, environment, the events of his/her life and the meaning put on these events.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Ebeling sees a close relationship between 1) the speaker and 2) the act of utterance. The verb becomes the central link which binds the sentence together. The first thing to be asked would be whether the act of speaking was in place in the actual situation. Breakdowns in the process of language occur when, for example, someone says something which he/she has no right to tell the receiver. The act of speaking must be done in a proper way. The key word to remember is responsibility.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The third element in the process of language may be termed 3) the object or content of the statement. Ebeling points out the fact that language does not directly unite the speaker and the receiver, but that the encounter takes place within the context of a particular matter.

Errors or lies can creep in so that the use of language can result in deception. A statement may be true *per se* and yet be open to misunderstanding. The purpose of a spoken word is to set the listener into action in the direction of understanding. Ebeling writes, "It attributes to him a productive participation in the statement in his own mind. It does not fulfill its task any better, for example, the more it reduces the listener's need to think. What language can and ought to achieve is made all the more clear, the more a statement provokes thought."⁽⁵⁰⁾

The fourth element in the process of language may be called 4) the person addressed or the receiver of the message. Every statement is potentially subject to the judgement of those who bear it. Ebeling speaks of the receiver of a message as an extremely complex context into which the statement is uttered.⁽⁵¹⁾

The four main aspects of the process of language are summed up in the

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 168.

49. *Ibid.*, 170.

50. *Ibid.*, 174.

51. *Ibid.*

model sentence, "I am saying something to you." "I" refers to the speaker. What is at stake is the authority to speak. "Am saying" alludes to the act of utterance, "something" refers to the object of the statement which Ebeling views as a challenge to understanding and "to you" has reference to the receiver of the message. What is at stake in this last element is the achievement of mutual understanding.

In the process of language it is ultimately life itself which seeks to find expression. Since the process of language and the process of life are so intimately related, something of the reverence for life should be carried over to the way we use language.

The one basic source from which 1) the authority to speak 2) the responsibility for language, 3) the challenge to understanding and 4) the achievement of mutual understanding spring are the extent to which they are concerned with truth. Truth is the ultimate test of a theory of language. Failures of language are the risks and obscurities which do not allow the truth to come about in the process of language, Ebeling says that the help which language grants can only be that which helps the threatened and damaged process of language to return to, and serve, the truth. Ebeling believes that love is the one thing that is true. To the extent one grounds a doctrine of language on this statement, to that extent one moves toward a theological theory of language.⁽⁵²⁾

What is the relationship between a general theory of language and a theological theory of language? Ebeling would argue that, to a certain extent, a theological theory of language is subject to general criteria of language. He believes that theology should defend the Christian faith in the open forum of the whole experience of the world. Ebeling maintains that the Christian faith concerns everyone and can be uttered in a way comprehensible to everyone. This does not obscure the special and distinctive character of the Christian faith, but makes its distinctive nature even more obvious.⁽⁵³⁾

A theological theory of language should not be made subordinate to a general theory of language. Why not? Ebeling defends the thesis that a theological theory of language does more to elaborate a comprehensive theory of language than does any other theory of language. It does so because a theological theory of language calls attention to basic issues and places specific issues in a very broad context.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Ebeling calls theology a theory of the language of faith. Fundamental theology and a theological theory of language are almost identical in nature and in scope. A theological theory of language becomes a necessity whenever theology faces a crisis of language. Ebeling sees the Bible as the source and norm of the language of faith. The language of the Bible

52. *Ibid.*, 180.

53. *Ibid.*, 183.

54. *Ibid.*, 185.

becomes most appropriate when it allows us to create our own independent language of faith. A reciprocal relationship exists between the Bible and faith. Faith depends upon the Bible for its language and life; while the Bible shows faith how to use its own words.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The language of faith exists only in relationship to the ordinary language of the world. Ebeling remarks that the Bible itself gives living proof that the language of faith has roots deep within the language of the world. Ebeling sees the language of faith in dialogue with the experience of the world. A theological theory of language aims to bring to light this inner polarity in the language of faith. In this way faith can hopefully remain in contact with the experience of the world.⁽⁵⁶⁾

How does Jesus fit into the picture? Jesus may be regarded as the embodiment of the criteria of the language of faith. The precise way Jesus embodies the criteria of the language of faith has always been a *questio disputata* within the Christian tradition. This, however, does not eliminate the need for the language of faith always to take account of Jesus. Ebeling remarks that the constant reference of the language of faith to Jesus forces it into the dialogue of faith with the experience of the world.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Ebeling offers a number of criteria for the language of faith. The language of faith has an unreserved obligation to tell the truth if it is to be in harmony with Jesus. According to Ebeling, a criterion for the language of faith must give unlimited scope for the truth. It should be noted that truth as the criterion of the language of faith also applies to language in general.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The language of faith, moreover, has an obligation to love. Ebeling says that love as a *command* is the essence of truth related to life. Love seems to be more deeply involved in language when it is being spoken, i.e., when one person speaks love to another. It should be pointed out that love as the criterion of the language of faith applies to language as a whole.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The doctrine of the law and the gospel serves as the foundation for Ebeling's theological theory of language. This distinction between law and gospel related the language of faith to the experience of the world in the proper way. It performs another function. The doctrine of the law and the gospel avoids applying the Christian word directly as a law to the present experience of the world and turning it into a programme of political action.

In this context Ebeling asserts that theology has words as its subject matter. How so? Ebeling makes two observations: 1) the gospel takes the form of words and 2) one can encounter the content of the gospel only through the medium of language. Ebeling again equates the word with

55. *Ibid.*, 189.

56. *Ibid.*, 191.

57. *Ibid.*, 195.

58. *Ibid.*, 198.

59. *Ibid.*, 200.

reality. As we observed in Part I of this article, the word itself has a hermeneutical function in that it mediates understanding.⁽⁶⁰⁾

III

I wish to offer a modest critique of Ebeling's hermeneutical theology. Although I do not always agree with Ebeling, I have certainly learned a lot from him. Ebeling has certainly made theologians aware of hermeneutical problems. One cannot interpret a text if one prescind from a theory of understanding. I sometimes wonder if Ebeling has not adopted Bultmann's existentialist assumptions in such a wholesale way that Ebeling has difficulty elaborating his own hermeneutical method as independently and as creatively as he might hope to?

In general, I find Ebeling's thought to be open, at times, to sweeping generalizations. Ebeling believes that woman, the elderly and children find it easy to talk about God since they have a sense for mystery. On the other hand, technological man lacks such a sense. This seems to be a hasty generalization on Ebeling's part.

I have difficulty pinning Ebeling down. He is as slippery as an otter, being here, there and everywhere at once. Key words such as the word of God, the word event, faith and reality are sometimes interchangeable, I personally have trouble with the term, "word-event". Ebeling makes use of this term in such a variety of situations that I often scratch my head and wonder what it all means.

If language is in difficulty today, Ebeling serves to compound rather than to solve the difficulty. He writes in a very ambiguous way. Part of the trouble consists in the fact that Ebeling sees relationships and connections everywhere. In this regard Ebeling seems to be unduly influenced by the early Heidegger who does the same thing but on the philosophical level.

I have difficulty in another area. When Ebeling speaks of the "word of God" he forgets the fact that it is a *genitivus subjectivus*. Even in biblical thought the "word" never stands by itself but also has a subject. Only in Heidegger's abstract philosophy does the word or language itself speak. Language is always used by concrete persons, however, Ebeling speaks of the word, faith and the word-event as if they themselves were the subject.

One finds very little mention in Ebeling's hermeneutical theology of the sacraments. There seems to be such a massive emphasis on the theology of the word that a theology of the sacraments receives only passing mention. Incidentally, the same omission crops up in Ebeling's study on Martin Luther. I would argue that the omission of Luther's deadly seriousness about the sacrament strikes me as being an improper modernization of his thought.

In regard to Ebeling's theological theory of language I would point out these deficiencies: 1) Ebeling makes but token use of linguistic analytical

60. Part I of this article, 6.

philosophy. He mentions it *in passim*, but does not really understand it at all; 2) In his theory of language Ebeling fails to make some important distinctions. He does not point out the fact that every statement contains a request, i.e., is a "validate me" statement, according to Satir. He fails to distinguish between communication on the denotative level and on the metacommunicative level. An example may clarify this distinction. "The dog is on the couch." On the denotative level, this may be a simple statement of fact. However, on the metacommunicative level, the statement may be saying, "The dog is on the couch and I want him off the couch." A lot depends on the tone of one's voice, facial gestures, the particular situation and the non-verbals involved. Ebeling, by the way, makes the mention of non-verbal communication.

3) I have the distinct impression that Ebeling is not seriously interested in a theory of language *per se*. Instead he prefers to bandy about such terms as "hermeneutics" and a "theory of language", which, according to his hermeneutical theology, are the tree on which Ebeling hangs his theological ornaments. Ebeling uses the language of hermeneutics as a means toward his end of delineating a theological hermeneutics. I suspect that what Ebeling is about is the reiteration of his earlier theological programme articulated in the language of a "theory of language." Ebeling tries to achieve a synthesis between a theory of language and his own theology. In so doing a theory of language comes to occupy a subordinate position vis-à-vis his hermeneutical theology.