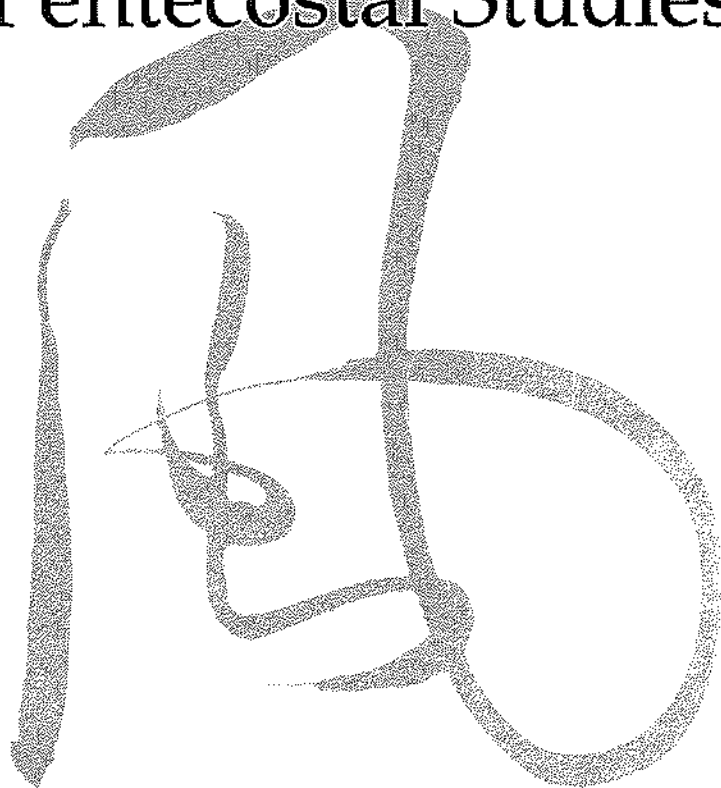


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TOWARD A PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTIC: OBSERVATIONS ON ARCHER'S PROGRESSIVE PROPOSAL

Paul Elbert

This book¹ polishes a former doctoral thesis at the University of St. Andrews supervised by Richard Bauckham who observes in his jacket comment that it provides "both an illuminating reading of the history of Pentecostal hermeneutics as well as an insightful proposal for the kind of Pentecostal hermeneutic that is appropriate to our contemporary context." The argument, advanced in six well-articulated and understandable stages, is that in the development of the century-old movement there can be found an authentic Pentecostal hermeneutical approach which can be retrieved and reappropriated. If so, it could begin to challenge and perhaps, in time, even replace an overtly presuppositionally-based interpretive practice rooted in the Protestant Reformation with respect to the Holy Spirit in New Testament texts.

Archer necessarily first defines this revivalist, restorationist, gender-insensitive and multi-racial movement from the perspective of its origins. Its growth involved a rejection of historically accumulated rationalistic excess and instead offered wholeness, healing, and a frame of reference for understanding human experience and ultimate spiritual concerns. A passion for the Kingdom of God arose from a reading of the biblical metanarrative and a passionate desire for unmediated experience with the heavenly Jesus and with the Holy Spirit. Archer rejects secular definitions of Pentecostalism provided by historians who appeal to social forces or to an evangelicalized or rationally sanitized rewriting of Pentecostal history. Instead, Pentecostalism originated and progressed due to the logical

¹ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community*, JPTSup 28 (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), hardback, xii + 219 pp., ISBN 0-567-08367-5, £40.00.

coherence of the Five/Four Fold Pentecostal message validated by supernatural signs amongst the community and in direct opposition to the predominate worldview of rationalistic, philosophical, and cessationistic presuppositions traditionally applied both to narrative and to epistolary discourse in the New Testament. To validate this definition Archer appeals directly to personal testimony of the participants, making no attempt either to make their testimony conform to contemporary secular models of reality or to pour modem historiographical odium upon it. This seems particularly appropriate, given the one hundred-year celebrations of the Azusa Street phenomenon (1906-2006) now underway in Los Angeles and throughout the world.²

Next, Archer elucidates the confrontational paradigm shift away from the dominant hermeneutical context of the early-nineteenth century, with both its intensive Enlightenment-oriented and dispensational thinking, toward an authentic Pentecostal hermeneutic. The Pentecostals said "yes" to both the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture and to the authority of experience based upon Scripture's trustworthiness and reliability. Archer finds it unfortunate then that American Pentecostals, under the pressure of evangelicalization, joined the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s and reworked their doctrine of Scripture to embrace "inerrancy." This caused a deleterious invasion of a "modernistic foundation already poured by the academic Fundamentalists at the turn of the twentieth century (which assumed that) the Pentecostals simply had to be educated into the modernistic thought and argument of the more 'intellectual' tradition" (64). In considering the New Testament writers themselves, one does not get the impression that they wrote first and foremost just to convey propositional truth, but to encourage faith-response. Pressing on from the concepts of the trustworthiness and reliability of Scripture to that of "inerrancy" seems to have just emphasized the correctness of Protestant doctrines, those articulated and those unarticulated as well, rather than to enhance the thoughtful study of Scripture on its own terms. In any case, as far as Pentecostals are concerned, perhaps results of this evangelistically suppressing and shame-enhancing union with "inerrancy" and its

² See, for example, Estrela Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Grant McClung, ed., *Azusa Street and Beyond: 100 Years of Commentary' on the Global Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2006). Harold H. Hunter and Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., eds., *The Azusa Street Revival and Its Legacy* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway, 2006); Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2006); and Kimberly E. Alexander, *Pentecostal Healing. Models in Theology and Practice* (JPTSup; Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo, 2006), 73-84.

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rationalistically geared overtones may be observable today in the marginalizing of testimony, tarrying, and in the propensity of some to be led more by their own acquisition of academic history than by dreams, visions, and the Holy Spirit.

In his fourth chapter, "Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretation," Archer works from original literature to discern a commonsensical Bible Reading Method that relied upon inductive and deductive reasoning skills to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture under the illumination of the Holy Spirit. According to Archer, this is different from the traditional scholastic Protestant Christianity, which employed more of "proof-texting system" (74). The Bible Reading Method was thoroughly pietistic and synchronic, requiring all of the biblical data to be gathered and harmonized with respect to plot and context. The biblical past and the present could thereby potentially unite, contrary to traditional epochalistic-oriented creeds and ecclesiastical dictums that suggested, and even demanded, otherwise. Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostals saw the first Jerusalem Pentecost and its ensuing repetitions in the ministry of disciple-believer-witnesses as narrated by Luke as a "commanded promise" (91) for all Christians who were afar off, whether they be Jew or Gentile, a personal promise to all believers beyond narrative time.

How this reading method of the Pentecostal story forged a convincing hermeneutical narrative tradition and arrived at meaning is illustrated (99) by its contemporary employment in L. Daniel Hawk's narrative study of *Joshua*.³ Plot encompasses the framework of the story and its detailed arrangement of incidents and patterns as they relate to each other. This understanding of plot also operates in the mind of the reader who then tends to organize and make connections between events. Hence, the narrative elicits a dynamic interpretive relationship between text and readers. One may note as well that the great narratives of Homer have long been read by classicists in just this manner, similar to how Homer was read by Greco-Roman students in the New Testament period. But of course Pentecostals were (and very much today are) engaged in a battle of interpretation with their Protestant forerunners who inherited a catechistic tradition of what may, be considered to be "apostolic-age" hermeneutics.⁴

³ L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contrasting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

⁴ With respect to Evangelical Protestants, Archer was a participant in a recent five year dialogue with them as critiqued in my "Pentecostal/Charismatic Themes in Luke-Acts at the Evangelical Theological Society: The Battle of Interpretive Method," *JPT* 1212 (2004), 181-215, here 188, n. 23. Previous to this he had already whetted our appetite for the details of his thesis that Pentecostal hermeneutics will

In this scheme the New Testament and Luke-Acts in particular was (and is) read cessationistically through narrowly selected Pauline glasses and via the imposition of epochalistic temporal carvings and the cocooning of narrated events: both approaches being of course foreign to the Bible Reading Method as discerned by Archer. The latter method naturally places a literary emphasis on coherence, cohesion, and biblical metanarrative whereby the spiritual past and the spiritual present could be harmoniously fused. The traditional Reformed-style approach to Lukan narrative, on the other hand, tends, in effect, to disrupt narrative continuity and coherence. The primary goal, that is, the standard historically venerated function of acceptable hermeneutical practice, is to "make-it-fit." Basically, Calvin's presupposition that Peter, at the end of his speech in Acts chapter two, could not possibly be promising his audience the same gift of the Holy Spirit that he himself just received because such non-rational events were confined to an "apostolic age" is implicitly adopted as "right." Narrative sensitivity in the area of the Holy Spirit and Luke-Acts does not come to the fore. The dominant presuppositions are that Spirit-reception by disciple-believer-witnesses ceased after the last ink dried and that salvific experience by characters portrayed in Luke's first book did not exist or, if it did, it is made to vanish at the end of that book. To extend the latter presupposition artificial temporal epochs are imposed upon the narrative. The functional result of this narratively divisive practice is that Spirit-reception at the beginning of Luke's second book can be made salvific, dubbed "once for all," since "Pentecost can never be repeated."

These presuppositions are very dominant in the interpretive practice of Evangelical Protestantism and have roots in the sixteenth century. To disbelieve them would put one distinctly outside of that faith-tradition, perhaps making one a theological unperson. Later readers of Luke's text, as contrasted with original readers, are expected to adhere to the presuppositions of the model. The "apostolic age" version of Reformed-style hermeneutics with respect to Luke-Acts and the Holy Spirit also simply assumes and requires that the examples and precedents of Spirit-reception, which serve a Lukan fulfillment of prophecy theme, are confined to

enrich the study of interpretation in the twenty-first century via his observations that "Pentecostalism's contribution to hermeneutics is in the area of community participation and experiential understanding. There exists a promising Pentecostal hermeneutic rooted in the classical spiritual ethos of Pentecostalism" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Pentecostal Hermeneutics: Retrospect and Prospect," *JPT* 8 [1996], 63-81 [81]) and his argument that "Pentecostals used the Bible Reading Method with a desire both to believe and obey . . . nor did they create a new method" (Kenneth J. Archer, "Early Pentecostal Biblical Interpretations," *JPT* 18 [2001], 32-70 [69-70]).

characters in the narrative. This encapsulating presupposition is seldom articulated, it is just "the way things are." It is unquestioned and unexamined. Traditional resistance to experience and to the non-rational and non-cognitive seem equally presuppositional. In this incoherent scheme, however, salvific experience by later readers is compared with salvific experience of characters portrayed in Luke's first book. Spirit-reception by later readers, that is, prayerfully receiving the promised gift of the Holy Spirit from the heavenly Jesus as Lukan characters did, cannot exist in this interpretive model. Additionally, the concept of knowing based on personal experience with the Spirit of Jesus, even though that experience may be compared with the experience of characters in a New Testament text, is viewed askance. This attitude goes back in Protestant scholarship to the assumption that a "post-apostolic age" Holy Spirit operates beyond the "Pentecostal age," that is beyond the supposed "apostolic age" which entombs both Pentecostal experience and Pentecostal history. Instead, for later readers, knowing or acquiring knowledge by reading texts alone is the approved rationalistic paradigm. This paradigm has two effects, first, to appear to venerate texts, and second, to imply that the "make-it-fit" interpretive program of the Evangelical Protestant faith-tradition is necessarily "right" if not mandatory.

Pentecostals in Archer's proposal, on the other hand, offering a much needed breath of fresh hermeneutical air, allow for the biblical stories to challenge, reshape, and build their tradition and are comfortable with Central Narrative Convictions (114-18) like "repetitive themes, aspects of narrated time, plot development, and characterization" (118). Archer suggests that an intuitive grasp of narrative features is probably facilitated among people who have a reliance on oral communication and who listen to how stories are told, perhaps being similar culturally to hearers in the first century to whom New Testament documents were read (and to such hearers in the majority world today). From the point of view of the Bible Reading Method and the concept of a Latter Rain from the Old Testament, a New Pentecost seemed entirely realistic and right, so that one might conclude "Pentecostal worship was more than it seemed. Outsiders saw only fanaticism, but insiders saw more. They discerned order within disorder, reason within unreason. Not a bad bargain for saints heaven bound."⁵

The last two chapters, "Current Pentecostal Hermeneutical Concerns" and "A Contemporary Hermeneutical Strategy" focus on guidelines for the future. In hermeneutical concerns, six scholars (all Pentecostals, in addition

⁵ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 111.

to the charismatic Methodist L. Daniel Hawk, cited above) come to the fore, namely French Arrington, Howard Ervin, John McKay, Mark McLean, Roger Stronstad, and John Christopher Thomas. Archer skillfully highlights their important contributions to interpretative technique and method, to which should be added the study of James Shelton.⁶ Archer hopes, in his words, "to avoid the epistemological foundationalism of Modernity and reappropriate the active participation of the community and Holy Spirit in the interpretive process" (195).

Pentecostals who might argue that Luke's pneumatology is different from and is ignorant of a Pauline pneumatology, are assessed among Archer's hermeneutical concerns as following "the hermeneutic of evangelicalism" (140), which might be otherwise labeled as an "apostolic-age" hermeneutic. Of course, this circumstance in some Pentecostal interpretation is only to be expected, due to the drum beat that the New Testament reflects unity and diversity pushed to the extreme, so that any possible Lukan theology and pneumatology discerned in disagreement with five hundred years of established Reformed-style interpretation and its assured results--must necessarily be off somewhere in the wild blue yonder, distinctively Lukan. Lukan pneumatology, if it exists at all, must be different from that of Paul because Paul cannot be a precursor to Lukan though in this regard. Hence the pressure to divide Luke from Paul against the grain of the spiritual and literary environment of early Christianity. Archer provides a penetrating critique of this overly divisive (and presuppositionally replete)⁷ interpretive agenda, which he appropriately labels as the "Evangelical Historical Critical Method" (148-54).

One might consider the "Evangelical Historical Critical Method" to be a scholarly name of the task and art of a purging process. Pentecostal

⁶ James B. Shelton, "Epistemology and Authority in the Acts of the Apostles: An Analysis and Test Case Study of Acts 15:1-29," *The Spirit and Church* 2/2 (2002), 231-37.

⁷ As to the presuppositional component, Stanton is astute to stress that philosophical and doctrinal presuppositions "have exercised a profound influence on interpretation right up to the present day" (Graham N. Stanton, "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* [ed. I. H. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977], 62). A possible confluence of the aforementioned presuppositions hidden in the "Evangelical Historical Critical Method" might be perceived to have quite an intense hermeneutical effect. In this regard, perhaps another observation by Stanton may not be too wide of the mark: "If an individual's prejudice is so deep seated that, in effect, a verdict is passed before the evidence is even considered, then, surely, prejudice negates the possibility of understanding a text" ("Presuppositions," 62).

experience and Pentecostal history (New Testament *Pfingsterfarung* and *Pfingstgeschichte*) within ongoing salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) and Spirit history (*Pneumageschichte*) are among its prime victims. In particular, in the case of the unarticulated, undisclosed, and narratively truncating epochalistic presuppositions which are evidently incorporated into the Reformed-style scheme of "historical-critical" or "apostolic age" hermeneutics applied to the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts, where prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit is purged from the faith-response of later readers and narrative continuity within Luke's double-work is marginalized, Luke has been routinely criticized and chastised over the years for not "making-it-fit." Luke's own contemporary narrative-rhetorical literary and Greco-Roman educational context is never considered in this approach. The only plausible explanation, with all due respect, is that Luke is just not the sixteenth century man he should be. However, perhaps his apparent familiarity with the non-rational, his descriptive attention to the experiential, his emphasis on examples and precedents, and his apparent literary effort to excel in the narrative-rhetorical expectations of his day render him ill-starred to "make-it-fit." Given this, perhaps then a fresh approach to Luke-Acts and its relation to the rest of the New Testament might be appropriate. Perhaps argument which either imitates the functional intent of the narratively unattuned epochalistic carving of Luke-Acts, or the supportive assumption of authorial isolation prevalent in past Protestant scholarship, might also be reconsidered in light of reasonably expected theological and pneumatological links between Luke and his esteemed predecessor, with apologies for mentioning my own work.

In his hermeneutical strategy, Archer offers suggestions as to how an interdependent tridactic dialogue between Scripture and its story world, the Holy Spirit, and readers in community can result in a negotiated meaning that is creative and practical. Archer wants to stimulate a hermeneutical strategy that is informed by an "early Pentecostal ethos" and to challenge a heretofore-uncritical acceptance of the "Evangelical modernistic approach" (195) among Pentecostals. Archer wants to de-emphasize

⁸ Paul Elbert, "Possible Literary Links Between Luke-Acts and Paul's Letters Regarding Spirit-Language," in *Intertextuality in the New Testament* (ed. Thomas Brodie, Stanley Porter, and Dennis MacDonald; Sheffield: Sheffield-Phoenix Press, 2006), forthcoming. An expanded version of the thesis offered in Brodie *et al.*, ed., *Intertextuality*, was presented at the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary (March 2006), entitled "Probable Literary Connections Between Luke-Acts and Paul Regarding Spirit-Language."

the predominant attention in that approach to discern "the past determinate meaning of the author's intent" and to emphasize "the reality that interpretation involves both the discovery and creation of meaning for the present" (194). He undoubtedly feels that the modernistic Evangelical methodology, replete with the Spirit-extinguishing heritage of both Lukan and Pauline cessationism along with its divisive and contextually disruptive presuppositions, has leaned too much toward the world behind the text, perhaps overly concentrating, for example, on its historicity or on its presumed affixment to an "apostolic age," rather than toward an appropriate unity between the biblical text and the present context (193). In all of this Archer raises a significant point. However, one might observe that when a New Testament author's probable original meaning, as deduced by due and careful attention to the contemporary communicative procedures in the Greco-Roman world,⁹ comes into coincidence with present experience, the community would then find a sense of helpful assurance, an assurance which I am sure that Archer would indeed welcome and appreciate.

In conclusion, Archer's critical hard-hitting thesis is not a simplistic or romanticized vision of the past or of the present. The cumulative impression of the evidence Archer adduces is that the Spirit, Scripture, and the Spirit-filled community can thoughtfully, experientially, and practically function together. Any emphasis on the intrinsic rhetorical power of texts which complements the usual practice of knowing meaning via *interpretation/exegesis* alone is welcome. Sometime Archer's presentation borders a bit on the socio-jargonistic side, but he

⁹ This approach, also quite commonsensical as well by contemporary critical standards with respect to authorial integrity, would, I suggest, be substantially similar to a "bible reading method" with its inherent application of interpretive principles as cogently framed by Adele Berlin in her presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "A Search for a New Biblical Hermeneutics: Preliminary Observations," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century: The William Foxwell Albright Centennial Conference* (ed. J. S. Cooper and G. M. Schwartz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 195-207. As to the narrative-rhetorical procedures in the first-century Greco-Roman world (intellectual practices quite different indeed from the "apostolic age" or "historical-critical" hermeneutic of Evangelical Protestantism and much more akin the Bible Reading Method detected by Archer) which influenced narrative-rhetorical composition and interpretation in the literary tradition at that time, see Elbert, "Possible" and "Probable."

provides a short glossary of terms (197-98) with definitions for those unattuned to such worldviews. However, I find Archer's analysis to be easily navigated, entertaining, wonderfully succinct and plausible, filled with 'interpretive gems and insights that have an instinctive appeal. Therefore throughout the century ahead, as its title suggests, his thesis could provide a stimulating introductory tonic to both hermeneutics and to faith-experience throughout the major sectors of Christendom.