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Changing Roles of Pentecostal Hermeneutics

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There can be little doubt that Pentecostalism is changing. The movement has grown and its beliefs, practices and the way that it interprets biblical texts have had to be adjusted as its members sought to interact with other religious and intellectual communities. Early Pentecostals held to an uncritical, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and showed little concern for the original language of the text and the cultural setting in which it arose. They emphasized doing rather than studying, and text rather than con-

text.¹ Their subjective, pietistic, self-absorption led to interpretations that had little connection with those intended by the original biblical authors. James Barr describes this type of fundamentalism as ritualistic, and to be celebrated and not discussed.² It is the aim of this paper to map the changes that have occurred in the way Pentecostals have interpreted the biblical texts over the last hundred years and to consider reasons for these changes.

Pentecostalism has been distinguished from the rest of Christianity by two distinctive beliefs. The first is belief in a post-salvation experience of the Holy Spirit. This belief can be traced to their Methodist and Holiness roots. It was frequently called the 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', a term that is taken from Acts 1:5.³

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¹ V. Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 214.

² James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (London: SCM, 1966), p. 215.

³ G.D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 84.

The second distinctive Pentecostal belief is that tongues (or *glossolalia*) is the normative evidence for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Charles Parham developed this unique belief after he and his Topeka Bible College students searched the book of Acts for biblical references which would be 'evidence' for the baptism in the Spirit.⁴ The term 'evidence' came from the scientific method that was discussed in popular literature in the early twentieth century.⁵ Parham believed that tongues were a supernatural impartation of human languages (*xenoglossolalia*) that would enable rapid world evangelization in the last days before the Messiah's return.⁶ He claimed that this gift would provide the means for missionaries to be sent overseas without first having to study foreign languages. Although this claim is clearly evidenced in early Pentecostal literature, it was soon abandoned when under-prepared missionaries faced difficulties as they endeavoured to evangelize foreign lands.

A lack of concern for the original linguistic and cultural context of biblical passages was evident in early Pentecostal Bible colleges. Hollenweger notes that 'Until recently it was possible to obtain a

doctorate in theology at a Pentecostal Bible College without knowledge of ancient or modern languages, without knowledge of the origin or composition of the Bible, without secondary education, and simply on the basis of six years' instruction on the Bible.'⁷

After an initial period of isolation, Pentecostal churches found increasing opportunity for interaction with evangelical churches that shared common goals. As Pentecostalism has matured and been accepted into the mainstream, its pre-critical fundamentalistic view of the Bible has been challenged by more sophisticated approaches widely accepted by those with whom they interact.

When the large American Pentecostal group, the Assemblies of God (AOG), joined the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, it recognized the need to adjust its hermeneutics and adopt the more sophisticated methods of their newfound associates.⁸ Upward social mobility, higher incomes and the suburbanisation that followed World War II contributed to change in the Pentecostal's educational and theological aspirations. The introduction of accreditation for AOG ministers in 1959 reflected their increasing concern for conformity.⁹ Liberal arts degree programmes that included a

⁴ James R. Goff, *Fields White unto Harvest: Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), p. 15.

⁵ R. P. Spittler, 'Glossolalia', in S. M. Burgess and G. B. McGee, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1988), p. 339.

⁶ V. Synan, 'The Origins of the Pentecostal Movement', Oral Roberts University, Internet Site, <http://www.oru.edu/library/holyspirit/pentorg1.htm#19th> (1999) (Accessed 16 Oct 2000),

⁷ Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: the Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1972), p. 292.

⁸ E. L. Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Hyatt Ministries, 1996), p. 179.

⁹ W. Menzies, *Anointed to Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO.: Gospel Publishing House, 1971) p. 376.

greater consideration of modernist methods mostly replaced the Bible-based theology programmes of the 1940s.¹⁰ This led a growing number of Pentecostal groups to adopt historical-grammatical methods that emphasize contextualisation and the pursuit of the original author and his intentions.¹¹ Changes in the attitudes and beliefs of the newly graduating church leaders flowed on into their newer churches.

These changes rang alarm bells with many Pentecostals and they frequently chose to discard modern scholastic methods, labelling them as faith-destroying and even demonic. Many older Pentecostals considered them a threat to traditional Pentecostal beliefs, including the normative, post-salvation reception of the Spirit evidenced by *glossolalia*. Younger, newer graduates were also concerned. They recognized that dependence on critical exegetical methods challenged the vitality and freedom that characterized traditional Pentecostalism.¹² Byrd said that the Pentecostal emphasis on critical exposition in seminaries has produced pastors with a good knowledge of technical exegetical skills but lacking the prophetic edge that characterized

early Pentecostalism.¹³ Sheppard, singling out Gordon Fee as an example, warned that Pentecostals were beginning to pursue the historical-grammatical method at a time when biblical and theological scholars had moved beyond this emphasis.¹⁴

The scholarly methods used by Gordon Fee revealed a virtually unbridgeable historical gulf between the experiences of modern day Christians and New Testament Christianity. The experiences of New Testament Christians were found to be so different from those of modern times that they must be considered irrelevant.¹⁵ The Pentecostal claim to find intended New Testament patterns concerning charismatic gifts for all Christians was found to be unwarranted. *Glossolalia* as the sole evidence of a Pentecostal baptism was found to be untenable.¹⁶ The failure of the historical critical method to satisfy the needs of Pentecostal communities led an increasing number of their scholars to question this approach and to look to other methods that were more supportive of their Pentecostal beliefs.¹⁷

In recent times, most interpreters of the text have recognized that they 'cannot silence their own subjectivity, or achieve an objective neutrali-

¹⁰ Menzies, *Anointed to Serve*, p. 376; Synan, *Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, p. 214.

¹¹ T. B. Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:2 (1993), p. 163; Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 86.

¹² G. T. Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation After Gadamer', *Pneuma: The Journal for the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 16 (1994), p. 121.

¹³ J. Byrd, 'Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory and Pentecostal Proclamation', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:2 (1993), p. 207.

¹⁴ Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation', p. 121.

¹⁵ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 163.

ty'.¹⁸ Biblical scholars have begun to question all attempts to locate an absolute, intended meaning within the text. Post-modernism grew out of a recognition of the limitations of modernism and a rejection of the claim that 'only what is historically and objectively true is meaningful'.

¹⁹There has been a recognition that both liberals and fundamentalists were perpetuating the same false notion that the original intention of the author could be identified. Both of these 'left and right wing modernist groups' seemed to be pursuing the same impossible task.²⁰

Recent decades have witnessed a decline in church numbers. This can, at least in part, be linked to a growing disillusionment with churches that emphasize centralized, hierarchical structures and complex, cerebral theologies based on historical critical methods. Many in society are seeking religious expressions that value pragmatic, experiential practices and intuitive, mystical ways of knowing. They are seeking religious practices that allow them to be active participants in God's unfolding purposes rather than remaining as detached observers of God's completed work.

Post-modern Pentecostalism

Cargal²¹ and Arrington²² note that most Pentecostal preachers are unaffected by modern critical methods and that their interpretations of the text have had less to do with rationalistic, inductive methods of biblical study and more to do with a creative interaction with the text.²³ Most have continued the practice of interpreting a text in different ways at different times to meet the particular needs of their hearers. Many Pentecostal scholars in recent times claim that traditional Pentecostalism has more continuity with post-modern modes of interpretation than it does with modern historical critical methods.²⁴

An examination of writings in the Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, *Pneuma*, reveals that the hermeneutical sophistication of Pentecostals has risen dramatically over the last decade as they have begun to integrate the latest hermeneutical practices. This is particularly noticeable in the writings of Cargal (1993), Byrd (1993), Harrington and Pattern (1994) and Arrington (1994). These scholars point out the inadequacies

¹⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992), p. 316.

¹⁹ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 171.

²⁰ Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation', p. 121.

²¹ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 163.

²² French L. Arrington, 'The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 16 (Spring 1994), pp. 101

²³ Frank D. Macchia, 'Tongues as a Sign: Towards a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15 (Spring 1993), p. 65.

²⁴ R. D. Israel, D. E. Albrecht and R. G. McNally, 'Pentecostals and Hermeneutics: Texts, Rituals and Community', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:2 (1993), p. 137.

and dangers to Pentecostalism that come from an emphasis on the grammatical, historical and critical context of the text. Many have looked to post-modern hermeneutical methods for a solution.²⁵

Some Pentecostals, such as Howard Ervin, have suggested that the post-modern questioning of modern scientific certainties provides support for a return to the ancient world-view of biblical times.²⁶ Ervin's view, however, is a naive misrepresentation of both post-modernism and Pentecostalism. While Pentecostalism shares many attributes with post-modernism, their significant differences need to be recognized. Post-modernism is often a 'misnomer for ultra modernity'.²⁷ It remains essentially anti-supernatural and pro-critical. While Post-modernists recognize that reason and rationalism are limited, they do not claim that critical thinking is *passé*.²⁸ Post-modernism is inclusive rather than exclusive. It hesitates to deny the validity of religions, but it also hesitates to accept claims to exclusive truth by any one religion.

Pentecostalism, on the other hand, has different reasons for its suspicion of modernism. It believes in a supernatural God who exists outside of the

closed, determinist worldview of modernism. Pentecostalism holds to values that lie beyond the possibility of evaluation by the critical method. It holds that revelation and spiritual intuition are superior ways of knowing. It claims that truth can be found in an easily comprehended, single source of revelation in the Bible. It is open to guidance by a contemporary interpreter, the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism claims to provide answers to the overconfidence of modernity and to the uncertainty of post-modernity.

Despite these differences, many people believe that developments within post-modern methods of interpretation hold promise for Pentecostals.²⁹ Cargal, for example, says that the 'post-modern vision of reality opens up the possibility of the transcendent virtually closed by modernity'.³⁰

Church of God pastor and scholar, Joseph Byrd, says that new hermeneutical methods such as those of Paul Ricoeur are needed if the distinctive Pentecostal beliefs are to survive threats from both modernism and post-modernism.³¹ A number of Pentecostals believe that they have found a solution in Ricoeur's method.

Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur has shown that objectivity and subjectivity need not be consid-

²⁵ Mark D. McLean, 'Toward a Pentecostal Hermeneutic', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 6 (Fall 1984), p. 36.

²⁶ H. M. Ervin, 'Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option', *Pneuma: The Journal for the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 3 (Fall 1981), p. 19.

²⁷ D. S. Dockery, (ed.), *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1995), p. 26.

²⁸ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 178.

²⁹ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 187.

³⁰ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 178.

³¹ Byrd, 'Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory', p. 203.

ered as opposites, but as two aspects of the one paradigm that exist alongside each other as 'two sides of the one coin'.³² Paul Ricoeur's post-critical method combines reconstructions of the original meaning of the text with contemporary readings of it.³³ His post-critical hermeneutic also challenges the readers to acknowledge that they project their own interests, desires, and selfhood into the text.³⁴ Ricoeur says that readers typically change over time from naive, intuitive interpreters of the text to increasingly self-critical analysts of their application. He says that the identification of this change brings an awareness of the need to balance the creative and the analytical. Moreover, it brings recognition of the need to listen with tolerance and mutual respect to different interpretations.³⁵ By combining the benefits of the historical-critical methods with a self-critical recognition of multiple prevailing interpretations, the interpreting communities are better equipped to apply the 'biblical' message to contemporary needs.

The hermeneutics of Ricoeur encourage an awareness of the diversity of meanings that the text will pres-

ent to different reading communities.³⁶ His method recognizes the creative effect of symbols, metaphors and narratives on the religious imagination and thoughts. Subsequent generations of religious movements cannot be expected to have the same experience of the text's symbols as the first generation did.³⁷ They live in different contexts, and must be allowed to develop their own interpretations that are appropriate to their own times and situations. The recognition that symbols within the text are re-experienced by succeeding communities and generations in different ways should build greater understanding of the ways in which beliefs change and a greater tolerance for differences in interpretations.

Plurality of Meanings

Michael Foucault has shown that the haste with which modern ways of knowing overlooked pre- and post-modern values needs to be reconsidered.³⁸ Attempts to dismiss early Pentecostal hermeneutics that focused on subjective, intuitive ways of knowing need to be re-examined. Pentecostal hermeneutics that allow for the claim that the Holy Spirit reveals deeper, culturally relevant meanings of the text must be considered as viable.³⁹

³² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 75, cited in J. Byrd, 'Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory and Pentecostal Proclamation', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:2 (Fall 1993), pp. 203-214.

³³ Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1980), p. 217.

³⁴ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 472.

³⁵ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 4.

³⁶ Byrd, 'Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory', p. 211.

³⁷ Byrd, 'Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory', p. 211.

³⁸ Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Species* (New York: Vintage, 1973) (Originally in the French 1966), pp. 217-249.

³⁹ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 174.

Wolfgang Iser says that biblical texts are deliberately ambivalent, inviting the readers to place themselves into different roles within the textual setting.⁴⁰ This ambivalence enabled fresh Pentecostal interpretations of the texts to develop. These renderings have appealed to large numbers of Christians during this last century. The difficulty, however, with plurality of interpretations, is that it frequently leads to misinterpretations and excesses. The emergence of Unitarian Pentecostalism is an example of this.⁴¹ The 'British Israel' belief and 'prosperity teaching' are further examples. Where other controls do not exist, Fee warns that 'we must abide by rules of good exegesis and exert extreme caution in considering any deeper meanings'.⁴² If a plurality of interpretations is to be accepted, then they must be evaluated against accepted norms within the written text and the contemporary community.

Pentecostals and the Text

The emphasis on the Spirit as the source of multiple meanings of the text is a significant contribution that Pentecostalism has made to post-modern hermeneutics. Cargal says 'the [Pentecostal] recognition of the dialogical role of the experiences of the believer in both shaping and being shaped by particular interpretations of the biblical text is both compatible with certain post-struc-

turalist views of the reader as creator of significations and an important critique of objectivist views of the meaning of the Bible and its authority'.⁴³

Like Post-modernists, Pentecostals emphasize immediacy of the text and multiple dimensions of meaning. This has allowed interpretations to develop that are suited to the particular interests and needs of different groups. Over the decades, Pentecostal interpretations of these distinctive beliefs have continued to be influenced by the social and cultural settings in which *glossolalia* occurred. The charismatic group, and not the individual's experience, determined the effects of *glossolalia* upon a person.⁴⁴ It was not the glossolalic experience alone that made Pentecostalism distinctive, but the expectant social reality in which it occurs.⁴⁵ Texts cannot be read in isolation. They must inevitably be read in the light of one's own social, cultural, ecclesiastical and national histories. Hermeneutics can no longer be a search for one 'true' and 'historical' meaning. It must also investigate the process by which the text creatively sets in motion certain developments amongst particular communities.

⁴³ Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 186.

⁴⁴ H. N. Malony and A. A. Lovekin, *Glossolalia Behavioural Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p. 383.

⁴⁵ Margaret Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 1989), p. 184.

⁴⁰ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 517.

⁴¹ Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, p. 161.

⁴² Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 39.

The Larger Text

Pentecostals are increasingly recognizing the role of their traditions and communities in shaping their beliefs.⁴⁶ Pentecostal scholars are recognizing that the study of the text needs to be broadened to include the inter-textual connection that exists between the biblical texts, the ritual 'texts' enacted in worship and the relational 'texts' of the faith community.⁴⁷ A trans-contextual basis is needed that enables the comparative evaluation of contextual criteria of interpretation and the purposes 'for which each set of criteria gains its currency'.⁴⁸

The Pentecostal belief in a baptism in the Holy Spirit, distinct from conversion and evidenced by tongues, is an example of this. Fee says that it 'came less from the study of Acts, as from their own personal histories, in which it happened to them in this way and therefore was assumed to be the norm even in the New Testament'.⁴⁹ The expectations of the faith communities and their social settings inevitably guided Pentecostal interactions of the text.

In recent times, the task of Pentecostal hermeneutics has been widened to consider the way in which biblical texts have been used to serve the interests and values of different subgroups within communi-

ties and to maintain and challenge dominant power structures.⁵⁰ *Studies of Pentecostalism* by Margaret Poloma confirms that *glossolalia* provided a motivation for evangelism and support for the Pentecostal protest against modernity.⁵¹ *Glossolalia* was a symbol and practice that was useful in promoting individual, social and racial equality.⁵² Nevertheless, Poloma cautions that while charismatic expressions such as tongues are a factor in the rise and revitalization of religious movements, 'it seems to depart quickly once it has completed the task of institution building'.⁵³ The observed decline in emphasis on tongues among Pentecostals in recent years has been accompanied by an increase in racial, sexual and other forms of inequality.⁵⁴ There is a need for Pentecostal beliefs and practices to be regularly reviewed and renewed in order to survive the pressures of typification, patterned role expectations and institutionalisation.⁵⁵

Conclusion

As Pentecostalism has grown it has had to re-evaluate its hermeneutical methods. Many Pentecostals have been attracted to modern, historical-grammatical approaches. The reception has not been entirely favourable. Other more recent schol-

⁴⁶ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 69.

⁴⁷ M. W. Dempster, 'Paradigm Shifts and Hermeneutics: Confronting Issues Old and New', *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:2 (1993), p. 129; Cargal, 'Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy', p. 163.

⁴⁸ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, p. 69.

⁵⁰ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 7.

⁵¹ Poloma, *At the Crossroads*, p. 3.

⁵² Poloma, *At the Crossroads*, p. 3.

⁵³ Poloma, *At the Crossroads*, p. 232.

⁵⁴ Poloma, *At the Crossroads*, p. 232.

⁵⁵ Poloma, *At the Crossroads*, p. 185.

ars favour post-modern developments. These too have their own set of difficulties. Some Pentecostal scholars suggest that a more attractive solution is found in the post-critical method of Paul Ricoeur. His method combines the historical analysis of the text with a self-critical examination of the reader's response. This approach appears to unite the divergent Pentecostal developments. The unity of the Pentecostal movement can be preserved only if the shared hermeneu-

tical methods preserve the values of Pentecostalism, while encouraging dialogue with others and stimulating a self-awareness of the way in which the biblical texts are read. The emerging hermeneutics of Pentecostalism must invite the same Holy Spirit who inspired both Scripture and scholarship to interpret the text anew in relation to contemporary contexts and needs. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the text is at work in the lives of those who interpret and evaluate it.

The Sleep of Death

*Forlorn Saturday, sad Sabbath, gloomy day of rest;
When Jesus entered into that all too final respite
From which there is no waking.*

*Night by night we participate in that little rehearsal,
And gently enter that shadowy interlude which stretches unending
before us.
But morning's light calls us from that netherworld between life and
death,
To recreate the awakening that was His,
And stride into life renewed, assured of the victory that awaits us.*

*From Becoming . . . (poetry reflecting theology) by Garry Harris,
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