



Characteristics of Pentecostal Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Pentecostalism has rapidly grown across the globe; and, because of its recent ascent into prominence, its theology, practices, and methods should be appraised critically. This article sets forth one perspective on Pentecostal biblical hermeneutics. The author proposes that the twentieth-century Pentecostal revival created a unique interpretive matrix from which emerged fresh interpretive strategies. Pentecostals inherited the methods of the nineteenth-century holiness movement, but they added to those methods a new approach that took into account the experience of Holy Spirit baptism, which resulted in a unique combination of hermeneutical characteristics.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, interpretation, Pentecost, Holy Spirit, hermeneutics

Introduction

Only recently, have Pentecostal scholars begun to reflect critically upon their practices of biblical interpretation, but distinctive hermeneutical approaches were present from the beginning of the movement. The dynamic Pentecostal revival created a unique interpretive matrix from which emerged fresh and innovative interpretive strategies. The old hermeneutical wine-skins were incapable of containing the new wine of the Holy Spirit that God was pouring out on all people. Early Pentecostals found themselves in a position similar to that of the early Church in the book of Acts. Before the Day of Pentecost, the disciples had operated under the assumption that Jesus the Messiah would restore Israel to its proper position in the world (Acts 1.6). The outpouring of the Spirit, however, gave them an alternative vision of God's plan, which was supported by a new understanding of Scripture. In the early church, we find 'a perplexing tension between a breaking into this world of the kingdom of God, in which Christian believers act as servants in God's redemption of the world, and the need to wait for God to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament according to God's own timing'.¹

Pentecost produced a radical transformation of the epistemology, worldview, and hermeneutics of the early believers. Before Pentecost, the disciples would have subscribed to the common worldview and interpretive assumptions of first-century Judaism (though Judaism itself was not monolithic). They also would have been influenced by the spread of Greek philosophy, which was not only ubiquitous in secular contexts but also was subtly interjected into Judaism through the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

¹ Gerald T. Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer,' *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 16 (1984), p. 139.



The hermeneutics of the apostles changed on the Day of Pentecost.² Although they continued to utilize many standard Jewish exegetical practices, their approach to biblical interpretation was altered by at least four new contextual factors: 1. the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus; 2. the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the Day of Pentecost; 3. the mission of the spreading the gospel, which demanded that the disciples go with haste into the world; 4. the eschatological nature of Jesus' kingdom, which required the disciples to wait patiently for the return of Jesus.³

In its radical re-ordering of reality, Pentecost might be compared to the divine encounters of the Old Testament prophets in their call narratives. The prophetic experience was an apocalyptic event that deconstructed previously held assumptions and created new theological perceptions and new possibilities for God's people.⁴ Just as Moses was reborn at the burning bush, just as Israel was transformed at Mt. Sinai, and just as Isaiah was reshaped by his vision, so also the early disciples were changed at Pentecost. The comparison between Pentecost and the prophetic calling is strengthened further by Peter's interpretation of Pentecost as the fulfillment of Joel's promise that servants, sons, daughters, old, and young 'will prophesy' (Acts 2.17). Therefore, the gift of the Spirit is the gift of prophecy; and, consequently, Pentecost creates a community of prophets.⁵ As John McKay has argued, the prophetic gift of the Spirit naturally leads to the prophetic interpretation of Scripture.⁶ The sermons in the book of Acts as well as the New Testament documents demonstrate the outworking of that prophetic hermeneutic.

Like the early church, the first Pentecostals inherited a set of interpretive presuppositions; but while the apostles had been shaped by the hermeneutical assumptions of Judaism, the early Pentecostal movement was indebted to the conservative hermeneutical approaches of the late nineteenth century. The Pentecostal movement emerged from a religious context that included the holiness movement, the healing movement, restorationist movements, revivalism, and millenarian movements,⁷ all of which carried ramifications for biblical interpretation. Pentecostals, for the most part, practiced the

² Cf. Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer,' p. 132.

³ Sheppard sees the tension between 'hurrying and waiting,' along with the 'passionate personal experiences of the Holy Spirit, as the two features that form the 'heart of the Pentecostal tradition' (Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer,' p. 140).

⁴ See Rick D. Moore, 'The Prophetic Calling: An Old Testament Profile and Its Relevance for Today,' *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 24 (2004), pp. 18-21.

⁵ See Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010).

⁶ John W. McKay, 'When the Veil Is Taken Away: The Impact of Prophetic Experience on Biblical Interpretation,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 5 (1994), pp. 24-32. Cf. Larry R. McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009).

⁷ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), p. 99. Cf. Jean-Daniel Plüss, 'Azusa and Other Myths: The Long and Winding Road from Experience to Stated Belief and Back Again,' *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15.2 (1983), p. 191. For the impact of millenarian movements on Pentecostalism, see Grant Wacker, 'Functions of Faith in Primitive Pentecostalism,' *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984), pp. 369-73.



common populist ‘common sense approach’⁸ that took the Bible at face value. They read the Bible literally,⁹ collapsing the distance between the original context of Scripture and

the context of the reader. Kenneth Archer identifies this early Pentecostal approach as ‘the Bible reading method’,¹⁰ a method that consisted in searching the Bible for all Scripture references to a particular subject and then synthesizing those references into a theological statement. It is a harmonizing and deductive method.¹¹

Also like the early church, the first Pentecostals found it necessary to revise their hermeneutics in light of their Pentecostal experience of the Spirit.¹² The baptism in the Holy Spirit was an apocalyptic inbreaking of God that altered their worldview. Jackie Johns writes, ‘At the core of the Pentecostal worldview is affective experience of God which generates an apocalyptic horizon for reading reality’.¹³ Consequently, the addition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit to the aforementioned context of beliefs and experiences produced more than an addendum to conservative theology and hermeneutics; it transformed every element and shaped them into a new whole, which has been called the ‘Full Gospel’ or the ‘Five-fold Gospel’.¹⁴ As the ‘central defining characteristic of the Pentecostal movement’,¹⁵ the Five-fold Gospel places Jesus at the center of Pentecostal theology and insists that Jesus is savior, sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, healer, and soon coming king. The Five-fold Gospel is ‘the theological grid’ that ‘provided a firm interpretive lens for the fluid Pentecostal community and their reading of Scripture’.

Spirit baptism and the resultant Five-fold Gospel did not entirely negate the previously held theological commitments and hermeneutical assumptions of the early Pentecostals, but the

⁸ Stephen R. Graham, ‘“Thus Saith the Lord”: Biblical Hermeneutics in the Early Pentecostal Movement,’ *Ex auditu* 12 (1996), p. 124.

⁹ Russell P. Spittler, ‘Are Pentecostals and Charismatics Fundamentalists? A Review of American Uses of These Categories,’ in Karla Poewe (ed.) *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 111-12. Cf. Wacker, ‘Functions of Faith,’ who observes that the practice of snake handling is a result of literalism (p. 366). Early Pentecostal interpretation is described as ‘precritical’ by Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 125; and by Timothy B. Cargal, ‘Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age,’ *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15 (1993), pp. 165, 170-71. Archer, however, prefers to describe Pentecostals as ‘paramodern’ (*A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, pp. 28-45), a term that Archer attributes to Jackie Johns (p. 45, n. 137). Sheppard, however, suggests the term ‘sub modern’ (‘Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer,’ p. 127).

¹⁰ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, pp. 99-127.

¹¹ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 102. Although a concordance was often used to gather the biblical references, the method was simplified by the use of ‘chain reference’ study Bibles that linked one verse to another through the use of marginal notation systems. The Bible reading method also formed the basis of reference works in which the Bible verses had already been collected into topical categories. One of the most popular of these was Orville J. Nave, *Nave’s Topical Bible: A Digest of the Holy Scriptures* (Lincoln, NE: Topical Bible Publishing Co., 1903).

¹² Cf. Steven Jack Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), pp. 1-9.

¹³ Jackie David Johns, ‘Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview,’ *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7 (1995), p. 87.

¹⁴ Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, pp. 6, 38. Some non-Wesleyan Pentecostals omit sanctification from the formulation, which results in a ‘Four-fold Gospel’ or a ‘Foursquare Gospel’.

¹⁵ M. Nel, ‘Pentecostals’ Reading of the Old Testament,’ *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28.2 (2007), pp. 526-27.



new formulation of beliefs and affections generated subtle (and not so subtle) alterations of older, established paradigms. Although early Pentecostals were by no means monolithic in their approaches, there was a 'fundamental' difference between

Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal hermeneutics.¹⁶ The hermeneutical paradigm that developed in early Pentecostalism can be described in a variety of ways, but I would suggest several significant characteristics.

First, early Pentecostals viewed the Bible as a single unified narrative of God's redemptive plan, whose central message may be summarized in the Five-fold Gospel.¹⁷ Herholdt explains:

Thus, the purpose of the Bible is to bring humanity into harmony with God's salvific purposes ... and here I mean salvation and a comprehensive sense of making all things new and whole. Consequently, interpretation of the Bible serves understanding, and understanding is part of the process of becoming whole ... Thus the interpretation of the Bible is part of a process that answers to the criteria of becoming whole and all that it entails.¹⁸

As heirs of the restorationist movements, the Pentecostals believed that the gift of the Spirit was an indispensable characteristic of the true Church that must be experienced in contemporary times. The doctrine of justification by faith had been restored by the Reformation; sanctification had been restored by Wesleyanism; divine healing had been restored by the healing movement; and belief in the return of Jesus had been restored by the millenarian movements. Spirit baptism was the last piece of the puzzle, completing the restoration of primitive Christianity and preparing the bride of Christ for his return. The twentieth-century restoration of Spirit baptism to the Church came in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that God would pour out both the 'early rain' and the 'latter rain' (Joel 2.23). The early rain fell on the Day of Pentecost and the latter rain began to fall during the Pentecostal revival and will continue to fall until Jesus comes.¹⁹

Second, viewing the Bible as one grand unified story led the Pentecostals to utilize intertextuality as 'a justifying mark of a faithful reading'.²⁰ The above-mentioned Bible reading method was a way of tracing Pentecostal themes from Genesis to Revelation. 'They found themselves called to work their way along the "figural pathways of a biblical text" so that for them the event of scriptural interpretation was itself always a kind of exodus, a pilgrimage, a journey into God'.²¹

Third, the Pentecostals' appreciation for the narrative quality of Scripture meant that they became a part of the story. Therefore, they no longer looked at the Bible from the outside;

¹⁶ Nel, 'Pentecostals' Reading of the Old Testament,' p. 525.

¹⁷ Like all conservative groups, Pentecostals assumed the inspiration and authority of Scripture. See Renea Brathwaite, 'Seymour on Scripture' (38th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies; Virginia Beach, VA; Feb. 29-Mar. 3, 2012), pp. 12-17.

¹⁸ Herholdt, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,' p. 425.

¹⁹ See Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, pp. 136-49; and Graham, "'Thus Saith the Lord": Biblical Hermeneutics in the Early Pentecostal Movement,' p. 127.

²⁰ Chris E.W. Green, "'Treasures Old and New": Reading the Old Testament with Early Pentecostal Mothers and Fathers' (41st Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Virginia Beach, VA, Mar. 29-Apr. 3, 2012), p. 15.

²¹ Green, "'Treasures Old and New",' p. 15.



instead, they entered the world of the Bible, and the world of the Bible shaped their world.²² At a time when modern scholarship (both liberal and conservative) excluded consideration of the supernatural and personal experience from the legitimate means for measuring truth claims,²³ the Pentecostals were testifying to ongoing experiences of the supernatural in the form of healings, miracles, and the charismata. According to Grant Wacker, 'Pentecostalism offered invincible certitude that the supernatural claims of the gospel were really true, not the old-fashioned gospel of the 19th century, but the awesome, wonderworking gospel of the first century'.²⁴ Furthermore, the Pentecostal experience altered their epistemology, giving them 'existential awareness of the miraculous in the Biblical world view'.²⁵

Fourth, the Pentecostal experience of the supernatural not only affirmed the truthfulness of the supernatural components of the biblical story, but it also suggested a broader approach to knowing the truth. The charismata often included an element of divine revelation, and Pentecostals soon realized that the same Holy Spirit who moved upon the prophets to write Holy Scripture (2 Pet. 1.21) could move upon them to reveal the meaning of Scripture as well. For Pentecostals, the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation goes beyond the reformed concept of 'illumination'.²⁶ According to Cargal, Pentecostalism's 'emphasis upon the role of the Spirit in interpreting/appropriating the multiple meanings of the biblical texts is an important contribution as the Western church seeks to reclaim its sense of mysticism and the immanence of the transcendent which was diminished by rationalism'.²⁷

Furthermore, Russell Spittler argues that even though both Pentecostals and Fundamentalists pursued a literal approach to the Bible, the Pentecostal criteria for truth was somewhat different. The fundamentalist approach is based on rationalism whereas, in the Pentecostal approach, religious experience is more valuable than human reason.²⁸ 'The truthfulness of Scripture', writes Kenneth Archer, 'was discovered relationally, personally, and experientially more so than "scientifically"'.²⁹ Like the early Church in Acts 15, the first Pentecostals included their own experiences as a means of discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Spittler writes, 'Fundamentalists and neo-orthodox Christians mount arguments ... Pentecostals give testimonies ... There is a

²² H.M. Ervin, 'Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,' *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 3 (1981), p. 22. Cf. McKay, 'When the Veil Is Taken Away,' who likens biblical interpretation to the production of a drama, which includes the actors on stage and the critics in the audience. Biblical scholars are equivalent to the drama critics, who examine but do not participate. Pentecostals, however, are like the actors, who get on stage and enter into the story (pp. 32-35).

²³ See Sheppard, 'Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer,' pp. 125-26. Sheppard argues that both liberals and Fundamentalists, 'because they both laid claim to the same historicism and theory of intentionality, represent' modernity (p. 126).

²⁴ Wacker, 'Functions of Faith,' p. 361. Cf. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 95.

²⁵ Ervin, 'Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,' p. 24. On the role of experience in Pentecostal hermeneutics, see Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy,' pp. 178-81; and Roger Stronstad, 'Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics,' *Paraclete* 26 (1992), pp. 14-30.

²⁶ See John Christopher Thomas, 'Women, Pentecostalism and the Bible: An Experiment in Pentecostal Hermeneutics,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 5 (1994), p. 49, 55; and French L. Arrington, 'Hermeneutics,' in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (eds.), *DPCM* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 382.

²⁷ Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy,' p. 186.

²⁸ Spittler, 'Are Pentecostals and Charismatics Fundamentalists? A Review of American Uses of These Categories,' p. 108.

²⁹ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 97.

³⁰ See Thomas, 'Women, Pentecostalism and the Bible,' pp. 41-56.



profound difference between the cognitive fundamentalist and the experiential Pentecostal'.³¹

Fifth, viewing the Bible as a lived story led also to a theological approach to narrative parts of the Bible.³² That is, biblical narratives were seen as examples that the Church should follow, and the book of Acts, in particular, became the ideal model for the true Church.³³ After all, if even the Old Testament stories are 'examples ... written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Cor. 10.11); and if all believers are to do the 'works' of Jesus (Jn. 12.14), who is our 'example' (1 Pet. 2.21), then surely the story of the early Church in the book of Acts must be a pattern that we should follow. 'These narratives are understood literally, and taken to be repeatable and expected, and Biblical characters' experiences are to be emulated. In this way Pentecostalism shares the primitivism of movements such as Montanism and the Anabaptists'.³⁴

Sixth, for Pentecostals, the biblical story has its beginning, center, and goal in Jesus Christ. Herholdt argues that 'Christ is the picture that serves to bring the pieces of the puzzle together into a coherent whole'.³⁵ This means that the Old Testament was read Christologically – sometimes through the lens of allegory or typology.³⁶ Chris Green explains:

Hence, the key to unlock a particular OT passage's hidden treasure is to discover how it speaks of Christ, how it casts him and his mission into relief ... Pentecostals of the first generation stood convinced that because Christ is the *import* of OT Scripture, the OT can and should be allowed to inform theological reflection and ecclesial practice.³⁷

Seventh, early Pentecostals believed that the work of the Holy Spirit is to restore the last-days Church to its primitive capacity, and that the activity of the Holy Spirit (including biblical interpretation) takes place within the context of the Church.³⁸ The presence of God was manifested in the community by signs, wonders, and gifts of the Holy Spirit; and God's presence legitimated the community as the people of God.³⁹ Most often, the setting for biblical interpretation was the act of preaching, while the congregation would respond with vocal and physical signs of affirmation (or with silent protest).

Eighth, the eschatological expectations of the early Pentecostals compelled them to an urgent pursuit of world evangelization. Pentecostals believed the end to be near – it was the 'evening light' (Zech. 14.6-7),⁴⁰ and the 'night is coming when no one can work' (Jn. 9.4). The message of the Bible was that all the world must be saved, sanctified, filled with the Holy Spirit, healed, and prepared for the return of Jesus, the soon coming King; and

³¹ Spittler, 'Are Pentecostals and Charismatics Fundamentalists? A Review of American Uses of These Categories,' p. 108. Cf. Ervin, 'Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option,' p. 33; and Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 97.

³² Cf. Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy,' pp. 182-84.

³³ Cf. Graham, "'Thus Saith the Lord': Biblical Hermeneutics in the Early Pentecostal Movement,' pp. 126-28.

³⁴ Nel, 'Pentecostals' Reading of the Old Testament,' p. 527.

³⁵ Herholdt, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,' p. 429.

³⁶ Brathwaite, 'Seymour on Scripture,' p. 21. Cf.

³⁷ Green, "'Treasures Old and New",' pp. 12-13.

³⁸ Cf. Herholdt, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,' p. 422.

³⁹ Cf. Nel, 'Pentecostals' Reading of the Old Testament,' pp. 533-35.

⁴⁰ The *Church of God Evangel*, the official periodical of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), began in 1910 as *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*, but the title was shorted to *The Church of God Evangel* in 1911.



time was growing short. Thus, for Pentecostals, the Bible functioned to form and equip the Church for its mission of evangelization, and it functioned as the content of their message to the world. Therefore, they would read the Bible 'with the end result in mind'.⁴¹

Early Pentecostals attempted to discern the implications of Spirit baptism and the Five-fold Gospel for biblical interpretation, and we must continue forward in that process of discernment. Our goal should be to produce a Pentecostal hermeneutic that is faithful to our theology and ethos and appropriate for our present context. The contributors to this volume have attempted precisely this kind of constructive approach. Their work has led to widespread agreement on the general contours of a Pentecostal hermeneutic. Scott Ellington summarizes the present consensus in terms of five distinctive accents in a Pentecostal reading of Scripture; that Pentecostal readings are narrative rather than propositional, that they are dynamic rather than static, that they are experience-based, that they seek encounter more than understanding, and that they are pragmatic, emphasizing transformation and application.⁴²

Chris Green expands the list to eight points of general agreement:

1. The work of the Spirit in making faithful interpretation possible, inspiring the readers to make gospel sense of the texts.
2. The authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures' final, canonical form.
3. The role of the worshipping community in the process of interpreting the Scriptures.
4. The need for confessional, theological readings concerned primarily with how the Scriptures work as God's address to God's people here and now.
5. Respect for the irreducible diversity of theological and literary 'voices' in the Scriptures.
6. Regard for the over-arching 'story' of the history of salvation as a hermeneutical key.
7. The priority of narrative, literary readings of a text over against historical-critical readings.
8. The significance of the history of effects for the contemporary interpretative process.⁴³

As Green acknowledges, most of the contemporary discussions regarding Pentecostal interpretation can be summarized under a triadic paradigm consisting of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the community of faith.⁴⁴ This threefold framework continues to be refined in light of changing contexts and global Pentecostal insights. Pentecostalism is a richly diverse movement with a variety of expressions, and each expression is deserving of its own particular version of Pentecostal hermeneutics.

⁴¹ Cf. Herholdt, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,' p. 430.

⁴² Scott A. Ellington, 'Locating Pentecostals at the Hermeneutical Round Table,' *JPT* 22.2 (2013), pp. 206-225.

⁴³ Chris E.W. Green, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord's Supper: Foretasting the Kingdom* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012), pp. 182-83.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Rickie D. Moore, 'Canon and Charisma in the Book of Deuteronomy,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992), p. 75, n. 1; Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, pp. 28-34; Thomas, 'Women, Pentecostalism and the Bible,' pp. 49-56; and Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, pp. 212-60.



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