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What Does it Mean to Read the Bible as A Pentecostal?*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and discuss some of the foundational principles and practices of biblical interpretation within the Pentecostal movement. It begins by pondering the traditional Pentecostal reaction to the Bible and their understanding of the role of Scripture for the Spirit-filled life, arguing that Pentecostals instinctively read the Bible to meet God in the text, interpreting Scripture ‘by encounter more than exegesis’. The second half of the essay explores how such a subjectivist, phenomenological model of reading can and does operate, and considers how the very nature of the Bible as a ‘generative’ and regenerative text invites personal and individual application, noting that the Pentecostal emphasis on community experience serves as a useful rejoinder to any egocentric isolationism and emphasising the importance for Pentecostals of action in response to our reading.

Keywords

Pentecostal hermeneutics, Bible, reading, biblical interpretation

I. Introduction

I have friends who have a plaque on their wall which I, being of Cambrian descent, have long admired. It reads: ‘To be born Welsh is to be born privileged; not with a silver spoon in your mouth but with music in your heart and poetry in your soul’. Those inspirational words have for me always reflected not only my Celtic ancestry but also my Pentecostal heritage.

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Pentecostalism was born, if not quite in the gutter, then perhaps not too far above it. Historically it has been a religion of the people, a faith of the under-class, and to this day, certainly in the UK but also in many other corners of the globe, the classic Pentecostal groupings share little of the prestige and wealth of some of the historic denominations.¹ Yet the movement more than compensates for any lack in that area in its ‘music’ and its ‘poetry’, the fire and passion that are evident in the way Pentecostals go about every aspect of their spiritual lives—be it mission and evangelism, music and worship, preaching and proclamation, or prayer and prophecy.

But Pentecostal fires never burn more fervently than when they encounter the kindling of the biblical text. When Walter Hollenweger famously dedicated his great study ‘The Pentecostals’ to the Pentecostals who taught him to love the Bible, and the Presbyterians who taught him to understand it, he was undoubtedly right to note the deep and passionate commitment to the scriptures which Pentecostals have always had (if perhaps a little unfair to us by insinuation in the second part of the inscription).² In fact I would suggest

¹ I should emphasise at the outset that the following observations arise from my reflection on the handling of Scripture in the British Pentecostal churches, and that increasing transatlantic experience is teaching me that, for all our similarities, there are significant and substantial differences between the cultures of Assemblies of God in the UK and the USA in this and many other regards. For instance, whilst I have heard American colleagues bemoan the lack of commitment to education that they sometimes feel handicaps their ministers, the US does now have an established and burgeoning academic tradition in the sphere of Pentecostalism, as the meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies demonstrates. Though the recent Research Assessment Exercise in the UK (published December 2008) highlighted Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies as an area of significant growth and development within British theological research over the last five years, still academic study of the Pentecostal movement in the UK is focussed essentially on the lifework of a few major scholars working out of really just two or three major centres, with a little support from the Bible and theological colleges. Standards of education and training in the ministry of AoG UK have been, for many years and by objective measure, the lowest required by any sizeable denomination or network in the British Isles (at least until a new training system was introduced during the last calendar year). It is important to note, therefore, that most of our ministers have had no professional training in exegetical methods and hermeneutics and essentially most frequently read the Bible without subjecting either the text or their reading of it to critical analysis. Also it is important to note that there is no British tradition of academic use of the text from a distinctively Pentecostal perspective at all. That alone results in a major difference of opinion and culture between the UK and North America in the field of Pentecostal biblical interpretation.

² Dedication to Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM, 1972), p. xvi. Hollenweger’s little apothegm might be taken as something of a slight upon the Pentecostal academic tradition. If that was his intention then perhaps it was always slightly unfair, and nearly forty years on it seems completely unreasonable. North American Pentecostal theologians in particular now carry considerable sway and influence in broader circles (take the recent

that we Pentecostals have always considered ourselves to have something of a special relationship with the sacred page, almost as if we have a unique affinity with the Bible and hold a significant position among the guardians of its truth.³ Perhaps more than any other Christian tradition, we have sought to identify our own experiences with those of the earliest church, described in detail in what we recognise as the historical narrative of the Acts of the Apostles, and we have believed, prayed and worked in the Spirit's power that we might see our own worlds turned upside down just as first century Palestine was. 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet' has become our rallying cry as we have sought to see the biblical text reworked and re-enacted in our lives and churches today.⁴

Reading the Bible, then, whether it be in public or private worship, is and should be a priority for every Pentecostal believer. In the UK at least, the tradition of reading as a Pentecostal is almost exclusively a devotional one.⁵ We do not yet have a formal Pentecostal academic tradition (and it might be argued that in Britain there are a number of sociocultural and educational factors which combine to make it highly unlikely that such a tradition could develop to anything like the same extent as it has done in North America). So it is not Pentecostal approaches to the academic discipline of hermeneutics which I wish to address in this discussion, but our everyday practice of reading Scripture—what Pentecostals feel, do, think and say when we have the Bible in our hands.⁶ This is still a developing field of study, as any literature search will highlight, but it is not difficult for any Pentecostal to write in such

cooperation between the SPS and the SBL, for instance) and have taken many helpful new insights to the bigger table, though the fact of our movement's historic aversion to the academy remains, and its effects are still felt in much of the world today. Even in the UK, there is evidence of an embryonic academic tradition developing among the Pentecostal colleges, which to my mind bodes well for our future as a movement.

³ Hollenweger argued, for instance, 'The critics of the Pentecostal movement who accuse it of neglecting the written word in favour of individual illuminations by the Spirit are ignorant of the role which the Bible plays in the Pentecostal movement. Pentecostals live with the Bible. They read it every day and know many passages by heart ... Many of them hardly read any books apart from the Bible' (*The Pentecostals*, pp. 321–22).

⁴ An observation that is mirrored by that of Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture & Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), p. 87: 'Pentecostalism's lived experience was coloring their understanding of Scripture and Scripture was shaping their lived experiences' (in discussing the early Pentecostals).

⁵ I include the use of the Bible in preaching as devotional here.

⁶ I hesitate to label the devotional usage of Scripture as hermeneutical, lest it be seen to imply rather more coherency and strategy than really exists in the process.

a field out of experience, because I am talking about something that we do routinely, day in and day out. Perhaps, as Keith Warrington has highlighted,⁷ there has been a decreasing emphasis on the function of the Bible in public worship for us in the UK, and if the Bible Society's research is to be trusted then it is clear that not as many Christians in general spend as much time reading the Bible as we like to think they would, but it is still true to say that both corporate and private Bible reading and study remain fundamental to our spirituality and are presented as priorities.⁸

Let me begin with some comments on how I believe we feel about the Bible before turning to the more practical concerns.

II. Philosophical Issues

What are we Pentecostals seeking to do when we read the Bible? What do we want or expect to happen? Fundamentally, I think, it is not about knowledge, nor should it ever be. Ordinarily Pentecostals read the Bible not to learn of the history of Israel, the development of the earliest Christian theology or even of the life of Christ, but to meet God in the text, and to provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak to our spirits. This is generally true of our preaching too. Tim Cargal is right to observe that 'most pastors of Pentecostal churches continue to employ a pre-critical, and indeed in some senses a fundamentalist, hermeneutic within their sermons and the Bible instruction of their Christian education programs'.⁹ I certainly observed this tendency when teaching homiletics to first year students at Mattersey!¹⁰

⁷ Keith Warrington, *Pentecostals and the Bible* (European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Conference, University of Uppsala [September 2007]), p. 29.

⁸ See for instance the society's report 'Taking the Pulse: Is the Bible alive and well in the Church today?' of February 2008, available at <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/l3.php?id=209> [accessed January 2009].

⁹ T. Cargal, 'Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy: Pentecostals and Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Age', *Pneuma* 15.2 (Fall 1993), pp. 163–87 (170). Cargal also notes, however, that many Pentecostal academics have ongoing involvement in local church ministry—this is certainly true in the UK as well (cf. p. 171).

¹⁰ It is, however, somewhat disconcerting that such a disjunction between church and academy in this area has been allowed to develop. Cf. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'Authority, Revelation, and Interpretation in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue' (*Pneuma* 21.1 [Spring 1999], pp. 89–114 [97–98]), who ascribes the 'growing divergence in the practice of biblical interpretation between Pentecostals in the parish and in the academy' largely to the adoption, for good or ill, of the historical-critical method by Pentecostal biblical scholars. Though this was perhaps

Within our tradition, the reading, interpretation and proclamation of Scripture have little to do with intellectual comprehension and all to do with divine self-revelation.

That means that we do not have to understand all we read for such an encounter with the deity to take place. In fact, I am not at all sure that Pentecostals should lay claim to anything that could be called a full understanding of the Bible, or even particularly think it desirable. Explain it, preach it, study it, sure. But hardly *understand* it, for that might mean grasping it, containing it, knowing it, and that might imply an attempt at grasping, containing and knowing the God it reveals, and thereby, in some measure at least, seeking to control and restrict him and his actions in the world and in our lives, to define him out of dangerousness. I do not think we could ever endure such a boxed and prepackaged deity; Pentecostalism requires a God on the loose, involving himself with the fine details of our earthly existence and actively transforming lives. I think Pentecostal theology, in both its systematic and more popular forms, requires a degree of uncertainty.

That might be thought a strange claim to make. Our proclamation, of course, can be incredibly confident and assured. Pentecostals are not known for being shrinking violets. Our fourfold gospel has never been that Jesus might be able to save us, would like us to consider receiving the baptism in the Spirit, will see what he can do to heal us and may consider returning at some stage. It announces who Jesus is, what he does, and that he does it every time (and that he will do it for you tonight before you leave this meeting if you will only permit him). When Pentecostals bring our shared experience to the text, we find the confidence we need support our faith from Scripture, and we have no doubts as to what we see there. If our experience has yet to match the model of biblical perfection, then on the whole we smile sweetly, consider ourselves a work of grace still in process, and believe to see that experience brought in line with the teaching of the Bible in God's good time.

But it is precisely our faith and certainty against all the odds which causes us problems. Why 'God's good time' is not now is in itself just one of the puzzles that we encounter daily. Our experience of that God and his indwelling Spirit has taught us something of the mystery of Godliness. We are confronted with practical theological challenges that do not afflict our sisters and brothers in

inevitable and probably necessary for the wider acceptance of our community at the academic table, it was also of questionable desirability. Certainly I would argue that whilst the methods of traditional biblical scholarship still serve a useful purpose, it is time for the discipline to move away from questions of historical context and authorial intent, and a new distinctively Pentecostal hermeneutic could well contribute to this process.

other groups in quite the same way. We, arguably more than any other Christian tradition, struggle with how those we lay hands on are not always healed even though our Lord Jesus himself promised us they would be (Mk 16.18). We appreciate that praying with our understanding has its deficiencies and inadequacies and our most heartfelt intercessions arise in the 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8.26, NRSV) of the Holy Spirit within us. The words we speak in other languages under divine inspiration need to be interpreted before even the speaker can understand them. And, most significantly, if sadly a little theoretically in many contexts, we operate our gatherings for worship on the assumption that God can, and will, do exactly what he wants exactly as he wants, and reject formal liturgical structure to provide him that opportunity. A meeting can never be truly Pentecostal unless he chooses to intervene; yet he does so on his own terms and not simply in response to any invocation or summoning ritual on our part. For all our apparent dogmatism, it seems to me that in reality, the unknowable and unfathomable are at the very heart of our religious experience. Indeed it might be argued that, in common with our heritage in the epic mystical traditions of Christianity, Pentecostals are hesitant to claim to encounter the Godhead in the comprehensible. It is almost as if we believe as a matter of course that our God is so far above and beyond our grasp that anything we can assimilate intellectually cannot be from him. As a result, we should and do seek to approach and read the text with an unremitting humility which confounds and yet inspires the profound certainty with which we expound it corporately.

Our common heritage, then, has taught us the miracle and the mystery of personal experience of God's presence, experienced and mediated through the biblical text among other ways, and, therefore, the value of knowing by perception over knowing by proof. As a result we prefer to interpret Scripture by encounter more than exegesis. So we read 1 Corinthians not to learn of some of the challenges Paul faced through his apostolic ministry and mission, or even particularly to better grasp the workings of the Holy Spirit through his gifts; but so that we might be inspired to fulfil our function in the Body of Christ; and, even more elementally, so that we might allow God the Spirit to say to us whatever he might want out of the words on the page. If he should choose to rearrange them into different concepts and reapply them into different contexts as he impresses them on to our spirits, then that is perfectly fine by us, and certainly not an infrequent occurrence in the experience of millions of Spirit-filled believers throughout the world as well as in my own. Pentecostals read the Bible as dialogue partners with it and with the inspiring Spirit; we bring our own questions, circumstances and needs to the text, and through it to the Lord, and allow him to bring his own agenda about as he

speaks to us. There is therefore little interest for us as spiritualising readers in the surface meaning of the text, and scant attention paid to the original intention of the author. Rather we seek to push behind the plain sense of the text to experience what Aquinas would have labelled its *anagogic* power, its capacity to edify and inspire. Are Pentecostals alone in adopting such an approach as this? Probably not; but I do think that to default instinctively to the method in such a way and prioritise it to such an extent is typical of our tradition to the extent that it might be considered a distinctive.

Clearly such a model is open to criticism. It will be considered subjectivist, experiential, self centred even; but then is there really any other kind of reading? Anthony Thiselton, hardly the doyen of radical liberalism, critiques forcefully the mindset of those who ‘seek to silence their own subjectivity, striving for the kind of objective neutrality which is ... an illusion’.¹¹ Objections have been raised to this perspective from within the Pentecostal academic community itself, though I have to say I find the work I have read from this perspective both unnecessarily defensive and singularly unconvincing. We need to reassert our confidence in an ideological approach to reading the biblical text, and acknowledge without shame the plain fact that our distinctive preconceptions invite us to a distinctive appropriation of the text—and that our readings are worth hearing by others. Here, as well, we start to find ourselves in interesting territory, for if we relate these concepts to the academic context it becomes apparent that we have rather more in common methodologically with the liberal progressive wing of biblical scholarship than the traditional evangelicals.¹² To me this can only be a good thing, for I consider that far and away the most interesting work being done in contemporary biblical scholarship is in non-traditional fields. It seems to me Pentecostal biblical scholarship should be at the forefront of innovation in the broader discipline. I might even go so far as to suggest that now that progressive scholars have embedded their many diverse methodological pebbles firmly and squarely in the forehead of the giant of grammatico-historical criticism, we should be the ones to lift the sword (of the Spirit?) to cut its head from its shoulders and finally do to death this monstrous alien construct from a generation gone by (though I would be doing so with my tongue at least heading in the general direction of my cheek).

¹¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, ‘The New Hermeneutic’, in I.H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 316.

¹² It is interesting to note an increasing tendency over the last 25 years or so for Pentecostals to be less comfortable with associating ourselves with evangelicals methodologically; this issue has been addressed by Gordon Anderson, Kenneth Archer and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen among others.

So, in terms of their interpretative philosophy, Pentecostals stand alone in our suspicion of ever treating the Bible as a book just to learn from. Instead we want engage with it and utilise it as a resource for divine encounter. We read the Bible not, as I have emphasised, to grasp it; but so that God might grasp us through it. And once his Word has taken hold in our hearts by that means, it becomes fire in our bones. It seems to me this is the very heart of the Pentecostal philosophy of Bible reading. Let us then consider how that philosophy appears to be outworked among individual believers.

III. Practical Issues

When we read the Bible, we are reading it out of precise and particular contexts and for a specific and distinct purpose. And we do not read it purely for entertainment and leisure, but because of what encountering the divine in the text does in, through, for and to us. Our philosophical engagement with and commitment to the text is expressed practically for most Pentecostals in what I might call ‘agendad reading’—reading with an intended result and a goal in mind. That purpose is demonstrated and outworked in the questions that we bring to the text as we read it. And whilst what I will now seek to identify as the typical Pentecostal questions may well be asked out of other groups and traditions as well, their combination, prioritisation and emphasis all contribute to the designation of a distinctively Pentecostal approach.

To call it a methodology would certainly be exaggeration and oversystematisation. I am not that sure it is even always conscious. But I think there is a Pentecostal culture of Bible reading. It is creative, positive, but also in a sense adversarial, in that it approaches the text not as a construct which might be understood and appreciated in its own right, but as a resource to be mined for specific treasures. I remember being taught at Bible college as a first year student that the best way of writing notes on my daily devotional Scripture readings was to ask myself three questions:

- What did this mean to its original readers?¹³
- What does this mean to me?
- What should I do about it?

¹³ Perhaps this question was something of a concession to the more academic context in which we were reading, but even then, note that the emphasis was on the reception of the text rather than its authorship. We were never asked to consider what Paul meant, for instance, but what his readers heard him say (which could be quite different, as any communicator will know).

With the benefit of hindsight, this was an extremely useful induction into the Pentecostal way of reading. Though this was, I assume, entirely unintentional, it is striking to note how similar the model these questions suggest is to the analysis of hermeneutics that J. Severino Croatto offers. Having initially considered the original context of a text, Croatto argues, ‘all interpreters condition their reading of a text by a kind of *preunderstanding* arising from their own life context ... [and then] the interpreter *enlarges* the *meaning* of the text being interpreted’.¹⁴ I believe that Pentecostals are infinitely less interested in the first of those three areas, that of original context, but the contextual preunderstanding (what does this mean to me?) and the enlarged meaning phases (what do I go and do about it?) are both of fundamental importance to us. Let me expand on them briefly.

A. What does this mean to me?

It seems to me that this straightforward query is indeed the starting point of most private Bible study, particularly among Pentecostals. The experiential (expressionist?) nature of our tradition certainly invites, and to a large extent expects it. After all, if Pentecostalism is truly an expression of ‘primal spirituality’, is not a measure of primal exegesis appropriate?¹⁵ The truth is, of course, that the significance of a passage to its readers is inherently of more interest to them than any meaning it might have had for others. Allan Anderson has highlighted that in an African Pentecostal context, ‘it is meaningless to discuss the interpretation of the text by itself’.¹⁶ It only has value as it becomes personalised and directly related to the specific location of the reader. That does not mean that Pentecostal readers have adopted a neo-orthodox approach to the nature of the text as the Word of God. It does, however, suggest a more phenomenological approach. The Bible on the shelf is still God’s word; it is just not God’s word to me at that time. I would like to suggest this is a strength of our model. The Bible unread is the Bible powerless, devoid of transformative influence. If we do not encounter God within it then it is little more than a cultural artefact of principally antiquarian significance—interesting but ultimately (and in every sense) meaningless. (I also like the Kierkegaardian

¹⁴ J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Orbis, 1987), p. 1.

¹⁵ The famous phrase of Harvey Cox in *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

¹⁶ Allan Anderson, ‘The Hermeneutical Processes of Pentecostal-type African Initiated Churches in South Africa’, *Missionalia* 24.2 (1996), p. 1.

aspect of this principal, for what it is worth; the need for passionate appropriation of the text's meaning for myself if it is to have any meaning at all.)

Clearly such a model can result in selective reading. If my primary concern is with what a passage means to me, then quite naturally it will be the passages that I find most meaningful with which I will want to spend most of my time. The result, potentially, is increased dependence on a few key texts for my spiritual growth and development and increasing isolation from the message of Scripture as a whole—and, in the worst case scenario, the production of a customised, individually-specified canon within the canon, of the texts that are most inspirational to me and thereby 'most inspired' in my thinking. Systematic expository preaching which shows the relevance of the whole body of Scripture might be a powerful vaccination against such thinking, and can also introduce listeners to new texts which can evolve into favourite texts.¹⁷

Additionally it is important to note one further significant implication of this individualised approach. If the focus of my interpretation is what God wants to say to me through a passage, then I have to accept that he might not be saying quite the same to you. There is no such thing as a universal interpretation.¹⁸ This is the inevitable result of moving the locus for the production of meaning out of the conceptualisation of authorial intent and into the private sphere of the reader's encounter with the text. What makes the difference for individual readers? Our extratextual experience and our context in life.¹⁹ The text has meaning to us in different ways because we approach it from different perspectives. Yet that is precisely what makes it worth reading, and rereading. Our growing and diversifying experience means that even at a cultural level, without taking the spiritual into account, there is more to be drawn from the text each new time we encounter it.

In this regard we need to realise that we read both out of our context in the world, and into our context as Pentecostals. This is essentially what Archer is addressing when he talks of Pentecostals as 're-experiencing' the text.²⁰ He argues that the early Pentecostals 'believed Scripture inherently possessed the

¹⁷ I am indebted to Lee Roy Martin for the observation that the Church of God for quite a few years now has encouraged its adherents to read the Bible through each year as part of a corporate Bible reading programme.

¹⁸ Mark E. Roberts, 'A Hermeneutic of Charity: Response to Heather Landrus', *JPT* 11.1 (2002), pp. 89–97 (96).

¹⁹ I offer a rather more detailed explanation of the significance and value of reader-response approaches to the Bible in the introductory chapter of Andrew Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

²⁰ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 168.

ability to speak meaningfully in different social settings than the one from which it originated' and therefore removed it from its original context in their thinking to read it in their own.²¹ In a new location, many biblical texts find new significance and meaning. In this way, as Gail O'Day has identified, we see that 'Scripture is not a repository of authority once fixed in the past, but authority and life are generated in the present as Scripture is proclaimed and heard'.²² For many years, the Statement of Fundamental Truths of British Assemblies of God pointed to Isa. 28.11 (KJV 'For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people') as scriptural support for the doctrine of speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Clearly it is nothing of the sort in its context in Isaiah; it is not talking of glossolalia, let alone of any evidence of the Spirit's outpouring. However, for Pentecostals, this is a perfectly legitimate recontextualisation of a divine promise. As Archer highlights, 'Pentecostals found biblical parallels with their life experiences and would incorporate these into their testimonies'. He continues:

Early Pentecostals did not place a lot of emphasis on explaining the historical context of Scripture, nor were they concerned with the author's original intention. They used Scripture in such a way as to allow for slippage between what it meant and what it means. They read the Bible as the Word of God and attempted to understand it presently. The horizons of past and present were fused, or from a critical perspective, confused.²³

That is precisely what happened here. Admittedly with some support of the reapplication of this text by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, the formulators of our fundamental truths read Isaiah's words anew in their own context and saw them as evidence of the key Pentecostal distinctive. Essentially they knew a real-world situation for which they sought a biblical explanation. That they found one confirms our assessment of the nature of Pentecostal biblical interpretation; that they sought it in the first case re-emphasises neatly for us just how dependent our tradition has sought to be on the scriptures. O'Day highlights for us, however, that the capacity for such recontextualising interpretations is actually a feature of the biblical text itself and not exclusively a Pentecostal formulation. She talks of the 'generativity' of the Bible, its capability for producing new meaning in new contexts, observing, 'In the reading

²¹ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 96.

²² Gail R. O'Day, "'Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing": A Scriptural Hermeneutic of Biblical Authority', *Word and World* 26.4 (2006), pp. 357–64 (357).

²³ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 181.

and rereading of Scripture, something new is created. Scripture does not remain static while the contexts around it change. Scripture generates new life and meanings for itself in a community's appropriation of it.²⁴

So we read as individuals addressing specific individual circumstances and contexts. But the isolationist nature of individual focussed readings emphasises forthrightly their incompleteness and their dependence upon other readings of the tradition. The more we read from our own perspective, the more we realise how much we need the insights of others. Pentecostalism is by no means an isolationist or solitary faith. We have a sense of being in our great task together. The missionary task that began when the believers were 'all together in one place' (Acts 2.1) continues today in the expression of the abiding presence of Jesus whenever even two or three are gathered in his name (Mt. 18.20). Pentecostals across the world recognise their shared experience and commission. When Pentecostals read the Bible, we do it with a sense of commonality, cohesion and togetherness. Our reading and readings arise from and within a community, and a community of faith, in every sense of the latter word, at that.

It is precisely this community of faith—which I consider has its similarities with the Fishian and Clinesian 'interpretative community' models but also some differences—which facilitates the uniting of a myriad of contrasting individualised, contextualised applications of meaning in an arena of mutual coherence and significance.²⁵ Because we are in the task of understanding and applying the Bible together, we can accept diversity of interpretation and rejoice in the way the Spirit reapplies to transformative effect the words he initially inspired into the lives of our brothers and sisters. Reading, for all I want to argue for its inherently individual nature, must become reading *together*, and as it does so its community-forming nature emerges, and we sense that we belong together because of our shared reading experience. As Robby Waddell has highlighted, we have learned that belief, but *our* belief, belief arising in and out of community, is the key to comprehension.²⁶

Acceptance of a reading by the community as valid does not on its own mean that it has in any sense broader value or truth, however. The traditional

²⁴ O'Day, 'Today this Word is Fulfilled', p. 359.

²⁵ Clines outlines his approach to this issue most clearly in D.J.A. Clines, 'A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation', republished in Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 172–86.

²⁶ Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation* (JPT Sup, 30; Blandford Forum: Deo, 2006), p. 118.

Pentecostal explanation as to how we might discern the meaning of the text is that it is the task of the Holy Spirit himself to ‘lead us into all truth’. Archer highlights that, in our thinking, it is ‘The Holy Spirit [who] enables the interpreter to bridge the historical and cultural gulf between the ancient authors of the Scriptures and the present interpreter’.²⁷ This is true at both an individual and a communitarian level. When we see ourselves in the text we credit the Spirit for placing the mirror in front of our eyes; when we arrive at a consensus on a valid reading, or accept and are inspired, blessed or encouraged by the experience of an individual who shares their story with the congregation, we put that down to his working among us. The Spirit is the ultimate arbiter of meaning and significance, ‘the self authenticating key in the hermeneutical process’.²⁸ Whilst Pentecostals in general subscribe to the Rabbinic ‘seamless robe’ model of Scripture which allows any two texts to speak to each other with no real understanding of the critical and contextual issues involved, we do not accept the Bible on its own as entirely internally explicable.²⁹ We need, and actively invoke, the empowering and inspiration of the Spirit in making those connections. When that truly happens, as Catholic charismatic Andrew Minto notes,

The collaboration between the Holy Spirit and believer-interpreter results in a living faith-knowledge of the very spiritual, paschal realities of which the text speaks. As such, this collaboration makes the act of divine revelation a completed act of communication. What God communicates through Christ in the Holy Spirit is now obtained as knowledge on the part of the believer.³⁰

Here it seems to me that we need help from the work of systematicians. Whilst Pentecostals almost universally assume the role of the Spirit in guiding our interpretation, there is a notable weakness in the literature in terms of how this process is understood and defined. How does the Spirit truly guide us in interpretation? How do we listen? Truly critical engagement with biblical scholarship from other perspectives by Pentecostal interpreters, which is clearly increasing, will require us to define this process and put our answers into the broader public sphere for scrutiny, so I suggest there is much work to

²⁷ Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, p. 196

²⁸ Anderson, ‘The Hermeneutical Processes’, p. 3.

²⁹ Cf. Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation*, p. 127: ‘In a postmodern world, Pentecostals no longer need to acquiesce to the evangelical doctrine *sola scriptura*, because the revelation of God is not transmitted to new generations by Scripture alone but by the work of the Holy Spirit’.

³⁰ Andrew L. Minto, ‘The Charismatic Renewal and the Spiritual Sense of Scripture’, *Pneuma* 27.2 (2005), pp. 256–72 (262).

be done in describing the process of what is sometimes labelled ‘pneumatic interpretation’ instead of merely advocating it as a model.³¹

B. What should I do about it?

Finally, some brief comments on what Pentecostals would call the need to be ‘doers as well as hearers’ of the Word (Jas 1.22). If meaning starts with me, then it is only correct that the responsibility for implementing that meaning as practical application should also end there. Truly Pentecostal interpretation always requires reading with an end in mind. There is no abstract exegesis; what ever treasures that, together, we uncover are there to be shaped into agendas for action. From the Day of Pentecost onward, our preaching has sought to draw a response from our listeners and motivate action as much as it invites acceptance. For us, the application is vital in that it connects the text to ‘real world’ issues and affords us the opportunity to read and appropriate it for transformative ends. As Gordon Anderson has observed, ‘Pentecost links rational discourse with powerful demonstrations and emotional responses. It moves preaching from the sterile pulpit and lecture hall of rationality and transforms it into prophetic witness in the very untidy arena and marketplace of street level experience’.³² Pentecostal biblical interpretation is at its best when formulated ‘on the hoof’ and most meaningful when it confronts real-world situations with the Word of God. Generally, therefore, it offers a practical rather than a theological response. And perhaps, in conclusion, this is why our tradition has become one of action more than reflection. Confronted with the power of the Word of God we love so dearly in such a way, no one with any sort of Pentecostal blood in their veins could hold back from offering the Lord our Spirit-inspired service. Ultimately, as Andrew Minto has noted, ‘It is not method, nor scholarship, nor cutting-edge, creative interpretation that will renew biblical studies, but God’s own work’.³³ Pentecostal readers of the Bible learned this in terms of their personal reading and study many generations back, and, still today, seek to take what they have received from God in their interaction with his Word and reinterpret it for, and reapply it into, the new contexts they encounter day after day, living biblical truth out as it lives in them. And long may they continue to do so.

³¹ Cf. Howard M. Ervin, ‘Hermeneutics: A Pentecostal Option’, *Pneuma* (Fall 1981), pp. 11–25 (17).

³² Gordon Anderson, ‘Pentecost, Scholarship, and Learning in a Postmodern World’, *Pneuma* 27.1 (Spring 2005), p. 122.

³³ Minto, ‘Charismatic Renewal’, p. 272.