



## *Pentecostal Hermeneutics*

### *Part Two*

*By: Gordon L. Anderson*

What constitutes a proper Pentecostal hermeneutic? A good way to understand this is to answer the six questions identified in Part I of this article. By way of definition, however, it can be said that a legitimate Pentecostal hermeneutic argues that the constituent elements of the standard hermeneutical structure are composed differently than the ways other evangelicals see them. What makes a Pentecostal hermeneutic both unique and yet proper is that it incorporates different but legitimate methodological, personal, historical, and theological presuppositions in its interpretative work. More specifically, the Pentecostal response to the six key questions are:

#### 1. Exegetical Method

This question has already been addressed under “What a Pentecostal Hermeneutic Is Not” (Part 1). Simply stated, at the level of exegetical method, Pentecostals follow the same basic historical-grammatical methods as do other conservative evangelical interpreters. In fact, because in the model I am proposing here, issues of personal and historical experiences along with theological biases are addressed separately from questions of method, I contend that at this basic level of exegetical method (discovering what a text meant), all interpreters take the same approach when they do their work correctly. In this connection Krister Stendahl’s position is enlightening and helpful.

This descriptive task can be carried out by believer and agnostic alike. ... Both can work side by side, since no other tools are called for than those of description in the terms indicated by the texts themselves. The meaning for the present — in which the two interpreters are different — is not involved, and thus total cooperation is possible, and part of their mutual criticism is to watch whether concern for meaning or distaste for meaning colors the descriptions where it should not.’

With respect to philosophy of language and the question of how logic and language function in a Pentecostal hermeneutic, it should also be clear that a good Pentecostal hermeneutic argues for the uniformity of language and logic. Pentecostals reject the pluralism that ensues when the language and logic of the Bible are taken to be culture specific. The Bible is objective and it speaks a clear and uniform message to all peoples at all times and in all cultures. It is obvious that application of the message may vary from place to place, but that does not indicate that the Bible has a variety of meanings. Rather, it shows that the fixed and objective meanings of the Bible have a variety of applications. Further, there is no special insight provided by a “pneumatic” interpretation. Words have the same meaning and logic has the same function for Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike.

#### 2. Role of the Holy Spirit (The Pneumatic)

All conservative interpreters contend that there is a pneumatic dimension to interpretation. The Holy Spirit must illuminate the understanding of the interpreter. I have already argued that a Pentecostal hermeneutic does not claim that the Holy Spirit gives some kind of special insight unavailable to non-Pentecostals, contrary to what seem to be the claims of some Pentecostal writers. As with exegetical method, Pentecostals agree with other evangelicals. In this case, however, there are two different schools of thought. One follows Cornelius Van Til and argues from a strongly presuppositional framework.<sup>2</sup> The strong version of this position says that the human mind, unaided by the Holy Spirit, cannot intellectually grasp the revelation of Scripture.

The other position on the role of the Holy Spirit is outlined by Daniel Fuller. He says the human problem in understanding Scripture is one of will, not intellect.<sup>3</sup> In this case the Holy Spirit changes the will so the person welcomes and embraces the Word of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-14). I agree with this claim and contend that the nonbeliever and believer both understand the basic claims of Scripture.

Whether a Pentecostal follows Van Til or Fuller, the important point is that the Pentecostal sense of the pneumatic does not differ from evangelicals in spite of the fact Pentecostals emphasize the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and the church. For example, Stronstad's explanation of the role of the Holy Spirit would cause no trouble for any conservative evangelical.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the reason for the disagreement over the role of the Holy Spirit is that there is a great deal of confusion on two important points. The first problem is to confuse understanding the text with believing and embracing its claims. The Bible and its basic claims are understandable to nonbelievers by virtue of reason, the *imago dei*, common grace, and the very nature of language and its logical structures.

The Bible is a written communication, using words which have meaning. Nonbelievers can understand the basic meanings and claims of Scripture. Nonbelievers reject these meanings as false, but that does not mean they do not understand them.

This is what Paul means when he says unbelievers do not accept the things of the Spirit of God, finding them to be foolish (1 Corinthians 2:14). If a person does not believe the dead can be raised, or miracles can happen, then the biblical accounts of these events are foolishness. In fact, the claims could not be rejected unless they were at first sufficiently understood. On the other hand, believers believe and embrace the basic claims of Scripture, resulting in the acceptance of the theological conclusions that follow. Language, the definitions and meanings of words, understanding, and the logic of the passages are the same in this regard for both the believer and nonbeliever. Paul is arguing that believers understand and through the work of the Holy Spirit embrace the Bible's claims but that nonbelievers understand and reject them. What differs is that the Holy Spirit has changed the will of the one, but the other remains hostile toward God.

The second problem is to confuse a word's meaning with its meaningfulness or significance, or to confuse what it means, with the impact that meaning may have. It is important to distinguish these concepts. What is often called meaning is, rather, the significance, emotional impact, or meaningfulness a word or phrase has for an individual.<sup>5</sup> I can understand the words, "There was a train wreck in which 25 people were killed." But if someone I know was in the wreck, then that sentence has different "meaning" for me. Often, then, we use the one word "mean" when we try to communicate two different concepts. I can say to you about the train wreck, for example, "You do not understand what this means!" I am not claiming that you cannot comprehend the words of the report that a train has wrecked, but that you cannot understand the impact the report has on me. It was my friend who was killed, and this has unique "meaning" for me. On the one hand we both understand the meaning of the sentence reporting the wreck. But on the other hand, for only one of us does the report have a second kind of meaning. I distinguish then between the meaning of a word (definition, understanding the concept, etc.), and the meaningfulness of it (significance, emotional impact, etc.). It takes the work of the Holy Spirit, making a person alive to God, to make the Bible meaningful in this second sense.

This distinction helps explain the problem of the extent to which believers and nonbelievers understand Scripture. Nonbelievers do not accept the basic claims and premises of Scripture, so the Bible is foolishness to them. In addition, while nonbelievers understand the meaning (sense one) of the words, they do not understand the meaning (sense two), that is, the meaningfulness or significance of the passages. That Jesus died for sins, or that Paul was poured out as a drink offering for believers' faith has both meaning and meaningfulness for a believer. These claims only have meaning for the nonbeliever. They only understand the words.

The claims of the new hermeneutic and reader-centered literary criticism, understood in the sense of the reader's response to the text by virtue of his/her life situation and consequent presuppositions, can be quite helpful with regard to this point, as long as it is clearly understood that the reader's response (what it means to him/her, or its impact) does not alter what it means.

### 3. Genre

In a good Pentecostal hermeneutic the narratives are seen as didactic and are used to build theology. Many evangelical scholars argue that the propositional literature in the Bible should have priority over the narrative, even to the extent that unless there is propositional teaching on a subject the narratives should not be used. Gordon Fee, a Pentecostal scholar, has supported this view. In his most recent publication, Fee writes a postscript to a chapter on hermeneutics and historical precedent in which he tries to clarify his position, making it appear that the differences between himself and Stronstad and Menzies, for example, may not be so great as they had previously appeared to be.<sup>6</sup> Many, however, feel his position overstates the case for the priority of the didactic literature.<sup>7</sup>

Roger Stronstad has done a convincing job of showing that the narratives have significant didactic value. He argues that Luke's historiography is "historical-theological" in intent and that "Luke never intended to give his readers a simple description of events."<sup>8</sup>

William Menzies argues that an appropriate method of doing theology must include induction, where theological conclusions are drawn from the narrative literature of the Bible; deduction, where the conclusions are deduced from the propositional literature; and verificational, where life experience validates theology.<sup>9</sup> In this scheme the narratives have doctrine-building value.

Another Pentecostal scholar, J. Rodman Williams, takes an even stronger position than Menzies or Stronstad on the value of the narrative literature. He contends that the narrative literature should have priority over the propositional.

"A proper methodology entails, wherever possible, giving priority to the narrational and descriptive over the didactic. ... Actually, it is a combination of the two, the narrational or descriptive and the didactic, with the former having priority, that is the best hermeneutical procedure."<sup>10</sup>

It may seem that Williams is simply trying to grab the high ground from the propositionals, but there are good reasons to consider his claim.

First, by what authority should it be accepted that the narrative literature is in some way inferior for building doctrine? Much of the Bible, which we believe to be divinely inspired, is narrative, and it functioned didactically for its original audience. It seems that the urge to set aside this literature in favor of the propositional rises from a western, analytical preference for didactic material from which it is a simple matter of logic to deduce conclusions. But such a preference may not represent the only method God used in His revelation. Most of the world for most of its history has depended on narration (history, myth, legend, etc.) to teach cultural and religious values. The Bible was not written exclusively for the modern western mind. It could prove to be a big mistake to impose a preconception as to the value of the narrative literature on the work of building theology.

In addition, the narratives, if true, provide the first step in the empirical deductive process of establishing truth. Prior to making this point it must be noted that conservatives believe the Bible is the inspired and true Word of God, which means that the narratives are not merely myths, legends, or fairy tales. They are true accounts. This is a critical point. The acts of God described in the Bible cannot be summarily dismissed as some are inclined to do. Conservatives do not follow Bultmann's urge to impose on the texts modern scientific presuppositions about the possibility of miracles.

This being the case it is instructive to consider the model of science and the empirical method of establishing truth. In logic, one takes premises and deduces conclusions from them. In science, one makes observations, reduces them to sentences, uses those sentences as premises in an argument, and deduces conclusions from them. In historical inquiry one takes the reports of another's observations, reduces those observations to sentences, and uses those sentences as premises in a deductive argument.

To be sure, in each of these three operations there are significant problems. In logic, one is pressed to know if the premises are true. In science, one is pressed to know if the observations are accurate and if the sentences drawn from them are true. In historical inquiry, one faces the problem of the accuracy of the reported observations as well as the consequent problems identified for both logic and science. But, since the Bible is considered by conservatives to be a

true record, the sentences in the narratives are true and do not present the problems faced, in this respect, in ordinary historical inquiry.

If the Bible says something happened, then it did, and from that we have at least a minimal piece of theology that must of necessity be drawn from it; i.e., that God did a certain thing at least once. From this one event we may not be able to conclude that He always acts this way, but on the other hand, it is not appropriate to immediately conclude that He acted this way on only that one occasion. In fact, it would be better to conclude that, since God acted in a certain way at some time, He always acts this way, until it can be conclusively demonstrated that the event in question was truly unique. The assumption should be that what God did, God does, until it is proved otherwise.

Pentecostals see God acting continuously throughout the Church Age in the same way as He did in the Book of Acts. The burden of proof lies with those who argue that God no longer acts in the ways He did in the past. The work of drawing theology from the narratives is difficult, but they constitute a valuable body of information on how God has acted, and therefore, how He acts. This provides significant input for theological understanding.

Third, and in a similar vein, we need to reexamine the whole idea of the theological intent of the authors of the historical materials. Roger Stronstad has made a strong case that Luke, in the Gospel and in Acts, intended to teach theology, as well as to write history. This argument enhances the value of the narratives, but it might, in fact, concede too much. It is not necessary that an author have the intent of making any particular case when describing a situation for the description to have value in establishing theological truth.

Law courts provide an interesting example of how this principle works. When attorneys question witnesses as to the facts of a case, the testimony given does not have to intend to establish any particular position with respect to the guilt or innocence of the accused. The facts, as they are interpreted by the judge or jury, establish the case. The intent of the witnesses has no impact on the report.

Historical inquiry provides another example. When historians examine documents, a diary for example, they do not find the document to be valuable only when they can demonstrate that it was the intent of the author to make some particular case or to interpret events in any certain way. The document is valuable for the facts it reports. The interpretation of those facts is done by the historian. In the same way the narratives reveal a good deal about God and how He works in the world. The interpretation of the narratives is done by interpreters and theologians. It overstates the case to insist that the authors of the narratives must have intended to establish theology when they wrote their descriptions for their descriptions to have theological merit. Stronstad does show, in fact, that Luke did intend to teach when he described events, but this is not the only point on which the merit of the narrative materials hang.

#### 4. Personal Experience

When commenting on the hermeneutics of Pentecostals it is by now commonplace to quote Gordon Fee's observation that Pentecostals tend to exegete their experience rather than the text.<sup>11</sup> This is meant as a criticism, but it points out something of vital importance to all interpreters. Pentecostals are not unique in this regard. All interpreters do it. While I take serious exception to much of what the new hermeneutic claims, it is correct in pointing out that the reader is hindered or assisted by the extent to which his experience is similar to or different from the biblical materials. This works against those who have not experienced those things the Bible records, but it helps understanding among those who have had similar experiences.

Ernst Fuchs uses the term *einverständnis* to identify a common or mutual understanding, or an empathy with the text shared only by those who, as Anthony Thiselton puts it, "are grounded in a network of shared attitudes, assumptions, and experiences."<sup>12</sup> Pentecostals have a greater *einverständnis* with some portions of the text because they have uniquely experienced some of what the text records.

Roger Stronstad makes this point quite well when he claims that two personal experiences inform the Pentecostal hermeneutic. First, there is the experience of salvation which is common to all Christians. Second, there is the charismatic experience that is unique to Pentecostals.<sup>13</sup> Pentecostals read the Book of Acts with a sense of familiarity, empathy, and understanding that can only come from having experienced what the text describes. It is interesting to note that

Reformed theologians argue that one cannot really understand the Bible until one has experienced salvation (presuppositionalists make the strongest case in this regard). Similarly, Pentecostals argue that a full understanding of some passages of Scripture cannot be gotten apart from experiencing some of the things the Bible describes.

It is in this vein that Pentecostals include personal experience in the hermeneutical process. They are willing to admit that their understanding of Scripture is formed, in part, by what they have experienced. This does not elevate experience above the text. It simply means that as an expression of Christianity which emphasizes and appreciates the personal and experiential dimension of a relationship with God, Pentecostals rather unabashedly admit they reflect upon their own experiences as they study the text. I suggest that those who claim they do not include their own experiences in the process of interpretation take a closer look at just how their own personal lives and experiences inform their hermeneutics.

## 5. Historical Experience

Pentecostals intentionally and critically use experience in the interpretation of the Bible. Roger Stronstad has effectively argued that all interpreters do this, in spite of their claims that it should not be done. He quotes Leon Morris: “The early Church knew quite well what all these gifts were. They exulted in the exercise of them. But, in view of the fact that they disappeared so speedily and so completely that we do not even know for certain exactly what they were, we must regard them as the gift of God for the time of the Church’s infancy. They did not last very long, and in the providence of God evidently they were not expected to last very long.”<sup>14</sup>

Stronstad says, “When Leon Morris admits that the charismata died out in the Early Church he is, as surely as every Pentecostal is accused of doing, exegeting his own experience. ...<sup>15</sup> I modify this claim a bit and point out that Morris is making a historical observation and is using it to try to understand Scripture. He does not say that since he has not personally experienced these events they cannot be valid today. It is interesting to note that even those who claim historical experience should not be used to establish doctrine use historical experience to support their claims when it suits their purposes. They then find Scriptures that can be interpreted in light of the conclusions drawn from experience to buttress their case and make it appear, to the uncritical eye, that the Bible teaches their doctrine. Judging the canon of Scripture as that which is “perfect” (1 Corinthians 13:10) is an example of this process.

The difference between Pentecostals and others is that they use real life experience with an awareness and admission of the fact and the belief that it is an appropriate step in a legitimate hermeneutic. This is connected to their appreciation of the historical narratives and an ecclesiology which sees God functioning throughout the Church Age in the same way as He did in the first century.

Stronstad places experience at the beginning of the hermeneutical process as a presupposition and at the end as a verification. William Menzies places experience at the end of the process as verification. Neither of these writers clearly distinguishes between personal and historical experiences as I do. There are obvious dangers in placing experience at the beginning as strict cessationist or fanatical charismatic interpretations illustrate, but this should not preclude their use if the experiences have been critically examined and evaluated. When they are found to be real events, not just the testimony of something that cannot be verified, they should have a formative effect on theology. On the other hand, if it could be shown, for example, as Morris claims, that there have been no charismatic gifts since the first century, then that should be taken into account.

I cannot do so here, but it can be demonstrated that the problem of cultural and historical context in interpretation, along with the problem of enculturation, indigenization, or syncretism in proclamation, is tied to this issue of the extent to which experience fashions understanding. Historical experience has a significant impact on hermeneutics. The Pentecostal understanding of healing and the role of women in ministry, for example, is shaped in part by the claim of Pentecostals that they have experienced healings and that they have seen women significantly used in ministry.

Support for an appreciation for historical experience and for the new and unique comes from A. Boyce Gibson who says that a thoroughly Humean epistemology means that anything that happens for the first time must be discredited.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Wolfhart Pannenberg says, “Theology must take a burning interest in this side of historical work. It is characteristic of the activity of the transcendent God ... that it constantly gives rise to something new in reality, something



never before present.”<sup>17</sup>

Christians must be careful not to fall into the Pharisees’ trap recorded in John 9. A miracle took place in front of them and they rejected it because they had no theological categories for it. It is frightening to consider that these kinds of people would rather plot the death of the miracle-worker than reconsider their theology.

Could something like that happen now? One wonders if in our day a professor from a cessationist-minded seminary might be fired if he testified to a healing. Remember, John clearly shows that the works of Christ were a sign to unbelievers. Signs and wonders were the evidence of apostles, Peter was convinced that the Gentiles could be baptized when he saw and heard that they had received the Holy Spirit. C. Peter Wagner changed his theology after he got healed.

Those who argue against the use of experience must bear the burden of proving their case. In doing so they run the risk of turning theology into the logical analysis of only the ancient didactic literature to establish a set of mental constructs, rather than understanding and proclaiming how it is that someone can know and experience God today. Revivals are characterized by a willingness to be influenced by experience. John Wimber, Fuller Seminary with its signs and wonders class, and the new Pentecostal evangelicals are evidence of this. This has obvious dangers, as the history of revivals illustrates, but it is also dangerous to eliminate experience in the formation of doctrine. The theology of revivals and frontier missions is often different from that of the home front and the ivory towers of the academy. We must remember this and learn from it.

#### 6. Theological Presuppositions (Doctrinal Acceptance)

A Pentecostal hermeneutic, like all others, necessarily includes certain theological positions which have a formative effect on the interpretation of Scripture. There are many kinds of Pentecostals, but among most of them there is one important position that significantly affects interpretation. This is the view that there is a continuity of the ways in which God works in the world from the time of the Resurrection to the Second Coming.<sup>18</sup> This view informs much of the Pentecostal thought. Pentecostals believe in a baptism of the Holy Spirit that empowers people for service, as in the Early Church. Along with this they believe that God does miracles today and that the Holy Spirit as the Baptizer is the agent in the life of the believer by which these miracles occur.

In this respect Pentecostals are nondispensational. This might come as a surprise to some since so many Pentecostals have adopted the time frames (eschatology) of formal dispensationalism. It is not, however, the eschatology of dispensationalism that is the primary issue, but rather the ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church. Formal dispensationalism teaches that the kingdom of God was offered to the Jews. When they rejected it Jesus took it back to heaven with the plan of revealing it after the Second Coming at the end of the Church Age. This results in a Church Age without, or with very little (a problem for the dispensationalists to figure out), of the Kingdom present.

Pentecostals reject this. They see the Kingdom as very much present, with the evidence of power and miracles, but not yet complete. There still remains the full operation of the Kingdom in the Millennium which follows the Second Coming. The fact of the present kingdom of God is an important doctrine for Pentecostalism, in spite of the fact they do not all agree on the extent to which the Kingdom is currently present. Some, the Kingdom Now variety, contend for a present Kingdom that makes them look much like post-millennialists. This is not the majority view, but it is still in the sphere of those who believe in the current presence of the kingdom of God. Based on this, they believe in the continuity of the supernatural in the Church Age.

The effects of this position are significant for Pentecostal hermeneutics and the contribution it makes for other interpreters. God acted in history, and we can read the events (narrative literature) to see what God is like. Moreover, we can expect God to act in the same way today. Therefore, when we experience God’s acts today we are not surprised. It confirms our presuppositions and continually informs our theology.

#### Conclusion

Pentecostals, and others who interpret the Bible as they do, structure the six basic elements of a standard hermeneutic rather differently than do other evangelicals, but as I have tried to demonstrate, there are good reasons for doing so, and

the results may prove to be closer to the true meaning of the text than that which could otherwise be gotten through the use of more traditional methods.

In general, it seems Pentecostals have developed a method of interpretation that incorporates some of the legitimate concerns of postmodern literary criticism, including the new hermeneutic and reader centered literary criticism, while retaining a high commitment to the truth and authority of the Bible and its relevance to the church today.

The intended meaning of the original author is still considered to be primary, and the meanings gained through historical/grammatical study are seen as objective and universally authoritative. However, a proper understanding of those meanings cannot be gotten without dealing appropriately with the other five parts of the hermeneutical structure. A Pentecostal hermeneutic helps in this process.

#### Notes

1. "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press), 422.
2. Reformed scholars who follow Van Til contend that people cannot understand Scripture until they are born again. They believe the mind is so disrupted by the Fall that until the sin and salvation issue is settled, they do not have the spiritual life necessary to correct the noetic influence of sin.
3. Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, edited by W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 189-98.
4. Roger Stronstad, "Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics," *Paraclete* 15, (Winter 1992): 25.
5. E.D. Hirsch effectively argues for the distinction between meaning and significance in *Validity and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
6. *Gospel and Spirit, Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 100-04.
7. Both William Menzies and Roger Stronstad have argued persuasively for the value of the narrative literature. See Menzies, "The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics," *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, edited by Paul Elbert (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985) 1-14; and Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984).
8. Stronstad, 9.
9. Menzies, *Methodology*.
10. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990) 182.
11. "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent — A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *Perspectives in the New Pentecostalism*, edited by Russell Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 122.
12. *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 343-44.
13. "Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics," 25.
14. Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God: The Bible's Teaching on the Holy Spirit* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), 64-65.
15. "Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics," 15,16.
16. Boyce Gibson, *Theism and Empiricism* (London: S.C.M., 1970) 268.

17. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1 (London: S.C.M., 1970), 48.

18. See Mark McLean, "Toward a Pentecostal Hermeneutic," *Pneuma* 6 (Fall 1984).

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Gordon L. Anderson, Ph.D., is president, North Central University, Minneapolis, Minnesota