



Pentecostal Experience and Hermeneutics

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Writing about the Holy Spirit a century ago, the German theologian Hermann Gunkel contrasted the experience of the Spirit between the so-called primitive church of apostolic times and the church of his own day. Of the experience of the Spirit in the Apostolic Church he observed: “At issue are concrete facts, obvious to all, which were the object of daily experience and without further reflection were directly experienced as effected by the Spirit.”¹ But what was true of the primitive church’s daily experience of the Spirit was not true of the church in Gunkel’s own day. He admits:

We who live in a later age and do not as a matter of course have analogous experiences on which to draw can only grasp the primitive, apostolic view of the Spirit by proceeding from his activities as reported to us and by attempting to conceive the Spirit as the power calling forth these activities.²

Thus, Gunkel sees the church of his day to be handicapped in its ability to understand the apostolic witness to the Holy Spirit because it lacked any analogous experience of the Spirit.

In the century between the time when Gunkel wrote and the present the modern Pentecostal movement was born, and in the 20th century millions of Christians now as a matter of course do have analogous experiences on which to draw for understanding the primitive church’s experience of the Holy Spirit. Concerning the Pentecostal movement and its understanding of the apostolic witness to the Holy Spirit, the Baptist theologian, Dr. Clark H. Pinnock writes:

We cannot consider Pentecostalism to be a kind of aberration born of experimental excesses but a 20th century revival of New Testament theology and religion. It has not only restored joy and power to the church but a clearer reading to the Bible as well.³

Now, in writing that Pentecostals have restored a clearer reading of the Bible, that is, Acts, to 20th-century Christendom, Pinnock is not saying on the one hand that the Pentecostal’s charismatic experience, which he labels the baptism in the Holy Spirit, makes him a better interpreter of Acts in areas that are of necessity a matter of academic research; e.g., the correctness of the titles which Luke gives to various officials, matters of Roman law, chronology, geography, etc. On the other hand, Pinnock is saying that the charismatic experience of the Pentecostal — ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance, being led by the Spirit — enables him to understand Luke’s record of the activity of the Holy Spirit in Acts better than the non-Pentecostal.

On this twofold issue of Pentecostal experience and Pentecostal theology, it is not surprising that Pinnock’s conclusions have not carried the day. Indeed, it is precisely here — Pentecostal experience and theology — that, with the exception of those rare outsiders such as Pinnock, Pentecostals run afoul of their critics.

This issue of Pentecostal experience, which is a stigma and stumbling block to many non-Pentecostals, needs to be addressed. In his “Introduction” to his book, *Showing the Spirit; A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*, D.A. Carson gives the caricature which many noncharismatics draw of charismatics and presumably also of classical Pentecostals. He writes:

The charismatics, they (non-charismatics) think have succumbed to the modern love of “experience,” even at the expense of truth.

Charismatics are thought to be profoundly unbiblical, especially when they evaluate their experience of tongues to the level of theological and spiritual shibboleth. If they are growing, no small part of their strength can be ascribed to their raw triumphalism, their populist elitism, their promise of short cuts to holiness and power . . . [they are] devoid of any real grasp of the Bible that goes beyond mere prooftexting.⁴

Though Carson distances himself from this caricature it is, nevertheless, pertinent to our subject because it portrays Pentecostals as both in love with “experience,” and also as “profoundly unbiblical.” Similarly, another scholar asserts: “The Pentecostal tends to exegete his own experience.”⁵ Further, from John Calvin to Benjamin B. Warfield and their contemporary successors, those in the Reformed tradition have adopted a cessationist theology of the charismata.⁶ Leon Morris is a typical contemporary exemplar of this tradition. He writes:

The early Church knew quite well what all these gifts were. They exulted in the exercise of them. But, in view of the fact 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.⁷

The arguments against contemporary, that is, 20th century Pentecostal experience cut both ways. 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 and the experience of earlier generations of non-Pentecostals. And if one is to exegete his experience, there can be no question about which experience Pentecostal or non-Pentecostal — is the better experience to exegete, for it is the unanimous witness of the Gospels, the Acts, and the Pauline epistles that Jesus, the apostles, and the Early Church generally were all charismatic in their ministry.

So great is the antipathy toward charismatic experience in many sectors of the contemporary church that Pentecostals, from the turn-of-the-century beginnings of the movement, have been forced to address the “stigma” of their experience. At times many Pentecostals have flaunted the emotional dimension of their experience, no doubt primarily because so many non-Pentecostals stridently denied its legitimacy. More productively, others have articulated the theoretical place of Pentecostal experience in a consistent Pentecostal theology and hermeneutic.

For example, representing the classical Pentecostal viewpoint, William G. MacDonald describes Pentecostal theology as an “experience certified theology.” Responding to the criticism that Pentecostalism has an overemphasis on experience in the form of emotionalism, he asks: “Does this holy experience result in an experience-centered theology?” He answers: “Hardly. The better way to label it is this: Christcentered, experience-certified theology.”⁸

In the essay, “The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics,” William W. Menzies develops Pentecostalism as an “experience-certified theology” more fully. For Menzies:

If a biblical truth is to be promulgated, then it ought to be demonstrable in life. This is precisely what the modern Pentecostal revival has been reporting to the larger church world.⁹

Thus, according to Menzies the verification level of Pentecostal experience is not only legitimate, but it is a necessary element in a Pentecostal hermeneutic, in the threefold chain: (1) Inductive level, (2) Deductive level, and (3) Verification level. According to MacDonald and Menzies, then, experience is the final element in theology and hermeneutics, certifying or verifying the theological enterprise. While it is valid to assign to Pentecostal experience a certification or verification function, it is an inadequate or incomplete description of the place of experience in Pentecostal hermeneutics for — and this is the thesis of this article experience also enters the hermeneutical enterprise at the beginning of the task; that is, as a presupposition, and not merely as a certification/verification.

Thus, if Pinnock’s observation, with which we began this article, is correct, namely, that Pentecostals have restored a clearer reading of the Bible (i.e., Acts) to the church — and a growing number of Christians are coming to similar conclusions — then it is primarily because Pentecostals bring a valid experiential presupposition to the interpretation of Acts rather than because they do superior historico-grammatico exegesis of Acts. In other words, their charismatic experience is an experiential presupposition that enables them to understand the charismatic life of the Apostolic Church, as Luke reports it, better than those contemporary Christians who lack this experience.

Presuppositions and the Hermeneutical Task

In a justifiably famous essay written several decades ago, Rudolph Bultmann asked: “Is exegesis without presuppositions possible?”¹¹ The answer to this question for Bultmann, and indeed as it must be for all exegetes, is a resounding no. It is not possible to do exegesis, theology, hermeneutics, historical studies, etc. in independence of and apart from the influence of presuppositions. The illusory pursuit of presuppositionless exegesis has been aptly called “the Principle of the Empty Head.”¹² Nevertheless, though there can be no biblical interpretation without presuppositions, Oscar Cullmann gives a timely warning, namely:

The fact complete absence of presuppositions is impossible must not excuse us from striving for objectivity altogether, going so far as to regard such striving primarily as an outmoded standpoint, and making a necessary fact into a virtue.¹³

What is true for exegesis is equally true for hermeneutics. Presuppositions have as integral a place in the theory and practice of hermeneutics as they do in exegesis. This is true for all kinds of presuppositions, including appropriate experiential presuppositions.

1. The Validity Of Experiential Presuppositions

As stated earlier, my thesis is that charismatic experience in particular and spiritual experience in general give the interpreter of relevant biblical texts an experiential presupposition which transcends the rational or cognitive presuppositions of scientific exegesis. Furthermore, this charismatic experience results in an understanding, empathy, and sensitivity to the text, and priorities in relation to the text that other interpreters do not and cannot have.

Admittedly, to state this thesis as badly as I have done no doubt smacks of that elitism which so many non-Pentecostals find abhorrent about Pentecostalism. Yet I do not intend for it to be elitist, nor would it be right to take it in that way. As provocative and inflammatory as this thesis might be to many non-Pentecostals, its validity is not only demonstrable, but it is also legitimized by the place of experiential presuppositions in many other aspects of Christian scholarship.

Though they may use different terminology, those scholars who reflect upon the exegetical and theological enterprise invariably insist upon the necessity of at least one experiential presupposition, namely, saving faith. For example, concerning biblical exegesis Oscar Cullman writes:

When it comes to interpreting the witness of faith, this, of course, means that I must know from my own experience what faith is.¹⁴

Similarly, Protestant evangelical theology has always insisted that theology must be done from a position of Christian experience, Hence:

The creative task of theology is first of all, the task of the redeemed, who, through the prior grace of God, have returned to the Father by the Son, and through the inner working of the Holy Spirit have been put into tune with the mind of Christ.¹⁵

Now, while no one will deny that a non-Christian may do first-rate linguistic, historical, and related studies which can be of great, even indispensable help to the Christian exegete or theologian, it is proper to affirm that only the redeemed, only those whose faith is the same as the apostles, can do biblical exegesis and theology. In other words, saving faith is the necessary experiential prerequisite or experiential presupposition for understanding the biblical message, exegetically and theologically.

Biblical scholars and theologians not only affirm saving faith as an experiential presupposition but often make similar claims for various specialized and additional dimensions of experiential knowledge. For example, concerning the study of topography, Sir William Ramsay, classicist, archaeologist, and New Testament scholar, writes:

Topography is the foundation of history. No one who has familiarized himself with Attic history in books and afterwards ascended Pentelicus and seen history spread forth before him in the valleys and mountains and sea that have moulded it will ever disbelieve in the value of topography as an aid to history. . . . If we want to understand the Ancients, especially the Greeks, we must breathe the same air as they did and saturate ourselves with the same scenery and the same nature that wrought upon them. For this end correct topography is a necessary though humble servant.¹⁶ While in this quotation Ramsay is writing specifically about understanding Attic history, his proposition is equally applicable to the history of Asia Minor of New Testament times, in which he specialized, and even to the history of the Palestine of Old and New Testament times.

In another area of biblical studies — the interpretation of the parables — as a further example, a firsthand knowledge of the contemporary peasant culture of the Near East, and other tools, “must be used in addition to the standard critical tools of scholarship.”¹⁷

There is no need to multiply further examples. Whether we are considering exegesis, theology, history, the parables, or any other aspect of biblical scholarship, there are appropriate and legitimate experiential presuppositions that give their possessor a better understanding of the Bible than those who do not possess them.

Not only are there a variety of appropriate and legitimate experiential presuppositions that have their place in the formal and academic study of the Bible, but there are also those that have their place in a more popular understanding of the Bible.

In general terms, the Christian who has experienced the miraculous, whatever his theological tradition might be, will understand the biblical record of the miraculous better than those whose world view either denies the miraculous altogether and therefore explains the biblical record in rationalistic terms or else restricts it to the past and rejects its applicability to the present.

More specifically, the Christian who has been healed will understand the record of Jesus’ healing ministry or that of the apostles better than the one who has never experienced it.¹⁸ In other words, he knows by experience that it was the power of the Spirit of God, operating through Jesus Christ, rather than psychosomatic suggestion. Similarly, the one who has witnessed demonic possession knows the New Testament is describing a spiritual condition rather than epilepsy or some form of mental disorder. Moreover, the one who has seen a little food multiplied into much food knows the report of Jesus feeding the 5,000 involves much more than that others simply followed the example of the boy, each one sharing his own meal with his neighbor, so that all were fed.

What is true for these examples is also true for Pentecostal experience, The Christian in this century who has been filled with the Spirit and ministered in the power of the Spirit will understand Luke’s charismatic history and theology, on both the academic and popular levels, better than those who have not.

To sum up, it is abundantly evident that Pentecostals are not alone in bringing experiential presuppositions to the interpretation of the Bible. Every Christian brings the experience of saving faith to his Bible reading. In addition, some bring a specialized experiential knowledge, whether it be of topography or culture, or any number of relevant experiences. Finally, some Christians bring the experience of the miraculous to their study of the Bible. All of this — and much more could be added — in principle legitimizes the Pentecostal practice of bringing his charismatic experience as a pre-understanding or presupposition to the interpretation of Luke-Acts. Therefore, unless there is conclusive evidence that the charismatic experiential presuppositions of the Pentecostal lead to a wrong understanding of Luke-Acts, then the comparable role of experiential presuppositions by other Christians in their interpretation of the Bible must also be conceded to Pentecostals.

Of course, the charismatic experiential presuppositions of the Pentecostal do not in themselves guarantee a better understanding of Luke-Acts any more than does the mere application of traditional Protestant principles of interpretation. That is, just as the principles of Protestant biblical interpretation can, and often do, lead to a rationalizing of the text at the expense of its contemporary spiritual dynamics, so the experiential dynamics of the Pentecostal are susceptible to subjectifying the text at the expense of its objective historical particularity.

Therefore, since neither traditional Protestant biblical hermeneutics nor Pentecostal experiential presuppositions in themselves and independently of each other can lead to the best understanding of Luke-Acts, then it is incumbent upon every interpreter to unite, as in a marriage of equal but complementary partners, both the cognitive presuppositions of traditional Protestantism and the experiential presuppositions of Pentecostalism.

2. Cognitive and Experiential Presuppositions

The Bible is the written record of God's past revelation. Nevertheless, the interpreter experiences it not merely as a historical document, but as a contemporary word from God to us. The understanding of this historical-contemporary word, then, involves both cognitive and experiential presuppositions; that is, the understanding of the Bible is as much pectoral as it is cerebral. On the one hand, the cognitive dimension is necessary in order that the interpreter may understand languages that are not his own, cultures which are radically different from his culture, and the history of other peoples which is not his history. On the other hand, whereas experience can never be the basis of theology, experience is the contemporizing of history. Thus, the understanding of the Bible generally, and Luke-Acts particularly, involves a hermeneutical cycle.

In this cycle the record of the experience of the divine by God's people in the past addresses the experience of God's people in the present, and the present experience of the divine informs the understanding of the past. In this way the divine word as a historical document becomes a living Word — a Word that, like God himself, is, was, and is to come. Thus, the record of the past historicizes experience, and the present encounter with that record contemporizes history.

Cognitive Presuppositions

For better or for worse, many kinds of presuppositions influence every interpreter. His national position living in the Americas, for example, determines if he is more susceptible to the seductive influence of either the prosperity gospel or to liberation theology. At the personal level the interpreter's temperament, such as whether he is more of an optimist or a pessimist, will influence the proportion that themes such as hope or trial find in his theology. At the religious level, evangelicals hold a variety of presuppositions in common; namely, a belief in the supernatural, the historical Protestant theology, specifically, the triumvirate: faith, grace, and Scripture alone. At the cognitive level, the canons of Protestant grammatico-historico exegesis are the principles by which evangelicals interpret the Bible.

Whether the interpreter is Lutheran, Calvinist, Methodist, or Pentecostal, he follows a similar set of hermeneutical principles. These include what are commonly called general principles of hermeneutics, such as the priority of the biblical languages, the accommodation of revelation, progressive revelation, etc. They also include specific principles, which apply to the various genre to be found in the biblical literature: historical narrative, law, poetry, epistle, apocalypse, etc.

However, because the subject of this lecture is an analysis of the place of experiential presuppositions in the Pentecostal's understanding of the Bible, and further since evangelicals, to a greater or lesser extent, hold these cognitive principles in common, it is not my purpose here to do more than alert the listener to the place of cognitive presuppositions as the necessary context and complement to experiential presuppositions.

Experiential Presuppositions

As we have already demonstrated, it is not the case that Pentecostals have experiential presuppositions, and that non-Pentecostals do not. Neither is it the case that non-Pentecostals have cognitive presuppositions whereas Pentecostals do not. Rather it is the case that every interpreter, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal alike, brings both cognitive and experiential presuppositions to his interpretation of the text. Since both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal evangelicals stand in agreement on the fundamental cognitive presuppositions, the primary issue for the interpreter is which range of experiential presuppositions he brings to his interpretation of the Bible.

Though there are a growing number of exceptions, non-Pentecostal evangelicals often bring negative and hostile experiential presuppositions to the interpretation of the biblical data on the charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit, such as is reported in Luke-Acts or discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In contrast, Pentecostals bring positive and sympathetic experiential presuppositions to the interpretation of these and other relevant texts.

Negative Experiential Presuppositions

Though the rapid and extensive growth of Pentecostalism has caused many non-Pentecostals to adopt a more neutral, or even sympathetic attitude toward Pentecostalism than is consistent with their own theological and ecclesiastical tradition, many non-Pentecostal evangelicals, particularly in the Reformed tradition, continue to color their interpretations of texts relevant to the Pentecostalism with experiential presuppositions that are negative and hostile. These fall into two not always mutually exclusive camps: (1) those who adopt a minimalist position on biblical and contemporary charismatic experience, and (2) those who adopt a rejectionist position.

The Minimalist Position

With a somewhat softened antipathy toward charismatic experience, many interpreters adopt a minimalist position on charismatic experience. This finds a variety of expressions. For example, interpreters sometimes label this experience as abnormal¹⁹ and urge Christians to be content with normal growth into Christian maturity. Along similar lines, charismatic experience such as “tongues,” it is asserted, was, “always associated with spiritual immaturity, not with spiritual maturity and stability. ... It was a gift for the immature rather than the profound.”²⁰

Others, while accepting the legitimacy of Luke’s charismatic theology, regard it as secondary rather than primary.²¹ Further, others emphasize the statistical scarcity of those passages where Luke reports the charismatic activity of the Spirit. Thus, “the few historical accounts in Acts, in comparison with other Scriptures, provide a flimsy foundation indeed upon which to erect a doctrine of the Christian life.”²²

In the same way that the criticism against the Pentecostal’s exegeting his experience cuts both ways, so these criticisms designed to minimize charismatic experience, both biblical and contemporary, also cut both ways.

First, since it is the consistent testimony of the New Testament that Jesus, the disciples, and their converts, both Jews and Gentiles, were charismatic in experience, then this is normal, not abnormal, Christianity. Indeed, based on the New Testament standard (and what better standard is there?) it is contemporary non-Pentecostal/noncharismatic Christianity and not Pentecostalism which is abnormal.

Second, if tongues is always associated with spiritual immaturity and not with profundity, then tens of millions of Pentecostals will be content to identify themselves with the apostle Paul — who regularly spoke in tongues in his own spiritual immaturity.

Third, when Luke’s writing is interpreted on its own terms, Luke describes the activity of the Spirit in relation to charismatic activity, or service alone, rather than in terms of salvation or sanctification. Therefore, this charismatic activity must be interpreted to be primary to Luke’s theology, rather than secondary.

Fourth, the appeal to statistics totally disregards Luke’s narrative strategy, whereby he selects programmatic episodes for his narrative history. Moreover, such an objection to the Pentecostal’s appeal to those few narratives in Acts is self-defeating. If theological truth is a matter of statistics, then the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, which is explicitly reported by Matthew and Luke alone (along with a few other isolated references), must be assigned a minimal place in New Testament Christology. Moreover, if a significant theological truth cannot be established on the basis of up to five references, then, all other considerations aside, doctrines such as infant baptism and predestination must be dismissed out of hand.

Further, on the basis of statistics alone, the doctrine of justification by faith, since it is taught only in Romans and Galatians, must be displaced by other themes, such as union with Christ (*en xristou*) as the center of both Pauline and Lutheran and Reformed Theology. Clearly, the theological importance and validity of doctrines such as the Virgin Birth, infant baptism, justification by faith, and Pentecostal theology can never be reduced, as is done by opponents of Pentecostal theology, to the statistical frequency of the biblical data upon which these doctrines are based.

With equal clarity, each of these minimalist stances that are adopted against Pentecostal theology and experience stand discredited. The fact that these criticisms cut both ways, specifically, that they can be turned against their proponents

to favor rather than to minimize Pentecostalism, shows that they are specious and spurious — indeed, that they are nothing more than a case of special pleading rather than legitimate criticism.

The Rejectionist Position

Within non-Pentecostal evangelicalism many competent biblical scholars still reject Pentecostal theology. To a Pentecostal it appears that this position carries with it a resolute contempt for charismatic experience, both biblical and contemporary. This contempt for charismatic experience is usually justified on the basis of a dispensational interpretation,²³ in which the virtual disappearance of charismatic experience throughout church history is applied to the nature of biblical revelation. In other words, when the canon was complete, the written word allegedly displaced the need for that charismatic experience which was characteristic of the apostles, who were the living word. Thus, the claim by every Pentecostal that he has received a charismatic empowering, and by virtue of his experience has a clearer understanding of the biblical data on the charismatic experience of Christians in New Testament times, is to be rejected out of hand.

To illustrate this “rejectionist” position, we can turn once again to Leon Morris, a highly competent and widely respected biblical scholar, as a typical representative. Writing about 1 Corinthians 12:28, for example, Morris observes that, concerning the apostles and prophets, “we need not feel that their main functions are hid from us,” adding, “but it is not so with all the gifts.”²⁴ Of these gifts, such as helps and governments, he observes: “We know nothing about these gifts or their possessors. They have vanished without leaving a visible trace.”²⁵ Concerning the gift of tongues he writes: “We are somewhat in the dark about this gift.”²⁶ Responding to people today, that is, the Pentecostals who hold that some of the charismata are a necessity for Christians who are loyal to the New Testament, he observes: Historically all the gifts disappeared quite early in the history of the church. ... And, as we have pointed out already, some of the gifts disappeared so completely that to this day we do not know what they were. Even the gift of “tongues” comes under this heading. ... We cannot feel that the Spirit of God would have allowed this state of affairs to develop and to continue if the gift were so important.²⁷

Additionally, he affirms: “We must regard them [the charismata] as the gift of God for the tiny of the church’s infancy.”²⁸ Moreover, the needs of the church today “do not necessarily require the charismata of New Testament days”²⁹ Furthermore, as “spectacular gifts,” “the Spirit is at work in ministry of the church.”³⁰

Clearly, Morris restricts the charismata to an alternative to these appointing the regular New Testament times, of the Pentecostals and charismatics is what the Christians of apostolic times experienced, and asserts that the charismata are neither desirable nor necessary in the contemporary church. The spiritual and theological cost of this position is very great. It is, moreover, devoid of any genuine exegetical basis. In addition, it is proved false by the fact in this century several hundred million Pentecostals and charismatics have experienced tongues and the full range of New Testament charismata.

Most damning of all, it simply exegetes his own negative experience. For centuries Reformed Christendom has placed Protestant Christianity under the tyranny of its negative experiential presuppositions. Unhappily for Morris, and all who believe as he does, the gifts of the Spirit are so important that the Spirit of God has not allowed the state of affairs, so cherished by Morris, to continue. In part, and in this context, the Pentecostal revival is the Spirit’s answer to the negative experiential presuppositions of Reformed theology.

In terms of the charismatic experience, then, Reformed theology is a theology of denial, whereas Pentecostal theology is a theology of affirmation.

Positive Experiential Presuppositions

In terms of charismatic experience, whereas many non-Pentecostals subscribe to a theology of denial, Pentecostals subscribe to a theology of affirmation. This is because Pentecostals bring positive, sympathetic, and affirmative experiential presuppositions to their understanding of appropriate biblical texts. To a greater or lesser extent the Pentecostal has been filled with the Spirit, has spoken in other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance, has been led by the Spirit, has ministered in the power of the Spirit, has exercised one or more of the charismata in his ministry in the church and to

the world. When he works back from his positive charismatic experiences to the text, he understands with Luke that these experiences are normative Christianity, that this is Luke's primary rather than secondary emphasis, that Luke's reports of the charismatic activity are not incidental or isolated, but are programmatic and paradigmatic and that, for Luke, it is an eschatological reality, that is, for this age until it is consummated by the coming of Christ.

To sum up, in the interpretation of Scripture — as much in hermeneutics as in exegesis and even in application — cognitive and experiential presuppositions coexist like a marriage of equal and complementary partners. In contrast to an all too common practice in Protestant hermeneutics, what God has joined together in the nature of man must not be torn asunder in biblical studies.

Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Modest Proposal

Thus far I have discussed the validity of experiential presuppositions in biblical hermeneutics. For the discussion to be complete, however, I need to move on from analysis to synthesis. Though I do not presume to speak for the Pentecostal movement, the following is a proposal of what I, as a Pentecostal, believe to be the essential elements of a Pentecostal hermeneutic.

As I see it, a Pentecostal hermeneutic will have a variety of cognitive and experiential elements. On the one hand, it will be experiential, both at the presuppositional and verification levels. On the other hand, it will also be rational, respecting the literary genre of the relevant biblical data and incorporating historico-grammatico principles of exegesis. Not only will a Pentecostal hermeneutic be both experiential and rational, but it will also be pneumatic, recognizing the Spirit as the illuminator as well as the inspirer of Scripture. While the definitive Pentecostal hermeneutic necessarily lies in the future, the hermeneutical program which follows advances Pentecostal hermeneutics one step closer to that goal.

1. Pentecostal hermeneutics and experiential presuppositions

As we have already seen, when it comes to charismatic experience Pentecostalism is a theology of affirmation rather than a negation. Of necessity, therefore, a Pentecostal hermeneutic will have experiential presuppositions. At the irreducible minimum these will be two: (1) saving faith, and (2) charismatic experience. In other words, just as the Pentecostal understands the overall record of faith, i.e., the Bible, from his experience of faith, so he understands the more limited record of the charismatic activity of the Spirit, i.e., Luke-Acts, from his charismatic experience of the Spirit. Thus, in a positive way the Pentecostal moves back to the Bible from his experience, which is both saving and charismatic.

To include charismatic experience as one element in Pentecostal hermeneutics is not to open a Pandora's box of subjectivism or emotionalism. On the one hand, the objective reality of the Bible remains inviolate. On the other hand, though they are, in one sense, inseparable, experience and emotion are not identical. Though it may or may not be expressed in emotional terms, charismatic experience is a spiritual reality and not an emotion. The fact that some Pentecostals have sometimes sought the experience for the sake of the emotion and that some non-Pentecostals have rejected the experience because of the emotionalism must not be allowed to prejudice anyone against this spiritual experience.

Further, in defending the legitimacy of charismatic experiential presuppositions, I am not implying that they guarantee sound interpretation. In other words, by virtue of his charismatic experience the Pentecostal is not an infallible interpreter. This is because experiential presuppositions do not stand alone, do not stand in independence from either cognitive presuppositions or historico-grammatico principles. Rather, experiential presuppositions are but one, albeit important and complementary, element of hermeneutics; Though they do not guarantee sound interpretation they give an important pre-understanding of the text.

This pre-understanding guards the interpreter from the all-too-common tendency for Western man to reduce the spiritual reality of the Bible to rationalistic propositions. It also makes it more likely that the interpreter will recognize charismatic emphases in the text which non-Pentecostals/noncharismatics might miss. Finally, in appropriate cases it actually gives a better understanding of the text. For example, someone who has been filled with the Spirit and has spoken in tongues understands what tongues-speaking is better than the interpreter who has never spoken in tongues.

2. Pentecostal hermeneutics and the Pneumatic

Having completed the task of inspiring Scripture during the Apostolic Age, the Holy Spirit did not then simply abandon His Word to the custody of the Church, becoming, as it were, a *Deus absconditus*. Though the church is the custodian of the Word, the Word remains God's Word, not simply in the sense that it has its origin in God (*theopneustos*, 2 Timothy 3:15), but also in the sense that it is spiritual (*pneumatikos*, Romans 7:14). Because it is spiritual, the task of interpretation, and therefore hermeneutics, necessarily transcends the human; it transcends the creatureliness and finitude of human experience, intellect, and knowledge. As Paul writes: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (*pneumatikos anakrinetai*, 1 Corinthians 2:14).

Because Scripture is spiritual, and because it must be spiritually appraised, it can only be understood with the contemporary help of the Spirit. This ever-present and immanent Spirit bridges the temporal gap between inspiration (in the past) and interpretation (in the present). Though Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, is writing about revelation through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10), and I am speaking about the interpretation through the Spirit, the interpreter (he who is spiritual, *pneumatikos* — 1 Corinthians 2:15), because of the Spirit, can say with Paul: "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Therefore, just as there is no revelation that does not bear the stamp of the Spirit, so there can be no interpretation worthy of the name which does not bear the imprint of the living Spirit upon it. In other words, just as Scripture, in terms of its inspiration, is self-authenticating, that is, it commends itself as the Word of God, so biblical interpretation, in spite of the finitude of the interpreter, should also be self-authenticating, that is, it should commend itself as sound, not simply because interpreters may share similar methodology, but because it is spiritually appraised.

3. Pentecostal hermeneutics and literary genre

After several centuries of developing awareness of the literary genre of the Bible, biblical scholars are now sensitive, both hermeneutically and exegetically, to the full range of the literary genre that is to be found in the Bible. For it to be worthy of the name, therefore, a sound Pentecostal hermeneutic will be genre sensitive. In particular, and in common with hermeneutics generally, a Pentecostal hermeneutic demands that 1 Corinthians be interpreted as an epistle and that Luke-Acts be interpreted as historical narrative. Of course, this means that Luke-Acts is to be interpreted as historical narrative according to the canons of biblical, Jewish-Hellenistic, and Greco-Roman historiography, and not according to the canons of contemporary historiography. Positively, a number of considerations follow from this.

In the first place, Luke-Acts is to be interpreted as a literary unit. Luke's prefaces (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-5) leave the interpreter no option.

In the second place, the interpreter must recognize that different episodes in the narrative have different functions. In Luke-Acts episodes may have an exemplary, typological, programmatic, or paradigmatic function. This being so, the interpreter will not, for example, make an exemplary narrative normative for contemporary Christian experience, but he will make a paradigmatic narrative relative for Christian experience.

In the third place, interpreters must concede that historical narrative can have a didactic purpose. What was generally true for Jewish-Hellenistic and Greco-Roman historiography is claimed by Luke for his two-volume history of the origin and spread of Christianity (Luke 1:1-4). In other words, in the history he wrote, Luke purposed to instruct his patron, Theophilus (and, by extension, every reader of Luke-Acts), just as surely as Paul, through the letters he wrote, purposed to instruct his readers.

Negatively, a number of considerations also follow. First, Acts is not to be interpreted independently of Luke, that is, as if Luke was a different literary genre than Acts, or as if Acts was written from a different theological perspective than Luke. Second, Luke's narrative is not merely episodic, and therefore merely descriptive in purpose. There is nothing novel about insisting that Luke-Acts must be interpreted as historical narrative. Both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals agree on that. What is novel is the observation that Luke intended to instruct the church about normative Christianity, which is in part evangelistic and charismatic. Pentecostals have always been more certain about this than have most non-Pentecostals.

4. Pentecostal hermeneutics and the rational

If charismatic experience and the illumination of the Spirit constitute the experiential and the pneumatic elements of a Pentecostal hermeneutics, then respect for literary genre and Protestant biblical hermeneutics constitute the rational element of a Pentecostal hermeneutic. Now, in affirming the place of charismatic experiential presuppositions in a Pentecostal hermeneutic, I am not shifting the foundation of exegesis and theology from divine revelation to an experience. Further, in affirming the place of the pneumatic, I am not saying the Spirit gives the interpreter knowledge independently of study and research. Moreover, in affirming the place of literary genre in hermeneutics I am not giving form ascendancy over content. Charismatic experience, the illumination of the Spirit, a sensitivity to literary genre each has its essential and proper place in hermeneutics, but individually and collectively, that place can never be more than complementary to the place of grammatico-historical exegesis and the hermeneutical principles upon which it is built.

Because man is a creature made in God's image, understanding the Bible is always a matter of the mind — of the human intellect. It is this human rationality that distinguishes man from other creatures, and it is in the Word that the human mind encounters the divine mind. Thus, interpretation must necessarily be a matter of rationality as well as experience and spiritual perception. If non-Pentecostals sometimes inflate the place of rationality in understanding the Bible at the expense of experience, Pentecostals must not fall into the opposite error, namely deprecating the rational in favor of the experiential. In theory the Pentecostal is as committed to the rational element in hermeneutics as every other evangelical.

Of equal importance, the Pentecostal needs to be as committed in practice as well as he is in theory. In other words, because his mind is just as important as his experience, the Pentecostal must be committed to serious and sober biblical studies. This is a commitment to diligent and disciplined study, to honing analytical and synthetic skills, to exegesis and theology. Thus, the rational element in Pentecostal hermeneutics is demanded by the nature of man, is the necessary complement to the experiential and the pneumatic elements in hermeneutics, and guards against the excesses of religious enthusiasm.

5. Pentecostal hermeneutics and experiential verification

Christianity is not merely a historical religion, such as Israelite religion, but it is a present spiritual and experiential reality. This is as potentially true for charismatic experience as it is for saving faith. As we have demonstrated, in Pentecostal hermeneutics charismatic experience gives the interpreter a preunderstanding of the relevant biblical texts, such as Luke-Acts. Just as importantly, however, charismatic experience also completes the hermeneutical task. In other words, just as the practice of hermeneutics results in sound exegesis and theology, so sound exegesis and theology will be integrated into contemporary experience; that is, doctrine in its fullness, including Pentecostal theology, becomes a matter of Christian experience.

Therefore, Pentecostal hermeneutics has a verification level as well as inductive and deductive levels, and Pentecostal theology is an experience-certified theology.

In conclusion, a Pentecostal hermeneutics has five components: (1) charismatic experiential presuppositions, (2) the pneumatic, (3) genres, (4) exegesis, and (5) experiential verification. The five components include the experiential, the pneumatic, and the rational dimensions. Thus, a Pentecostal hermeneutic is a holistic hermeneutic, which differs from Protestant biblical hermeneutics at two significant points; namely, charismatic experiential presuppositions and experiential verification.

Endnotes

1. Hermann Gunkel, *The Influence of the Holy Spirit*, trans. by Roy A. Harrisville and Philip A. Quanbeck II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p.13.

2. Gunkel, *Influence*, p.14.

3. Clark H. Pinnock, "Foreword," to *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*, by Roger Stronstad (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), p.viii.
4. D.A. Carson, *Showing The Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p.12.
5. Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, edited by Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p.122.
6. Jon Mark Ruthven, "On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic of Benjamin B. Warfield," Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University Graduate School, 1989.
7. Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God: The Bible's Teaching on the Holy Spirit* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), pp.64,65
8. William G. MacDonald, "A Classical viewpoint," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, edited by Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976) p.6.
9. William W. Menzies, "The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on hermeneutics," in *Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in Honor of Howard M. Ervin*, edited by Paul Elbert (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985), p.13.
10. It is a great irony of Pentecostalism that a movement which is founded upon a particular interpretation of Acts has produced so little exegetical scholarship on Acts. For example, F.F. Bruce's newly revised commentary on Acts in the *New International Commentary* series lists no commentaries by Pentecostals in his select Bibliography. In fact, in the English language only the two commentaries by Stanley M. Horton in the *Radiant Commentary Series* and the *Complete Biblical Library*, and the more recent commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, by French L. Arrington (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988) merit serious consideration.
11. R Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" *ET in Existence and Faith*, ed. and tr. S.M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp.289ff
12. Quoted from Graham N. Stanton, "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Method*, edited by I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p.66.
13. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, trans. by Sidney G. Sowers (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p.67.
14. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, p.67.
15. Philip Edgecombe Hughes, *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p.25.
16. Quoted from W. Ward Gasque, *Sir William M. Ramsay: Archaeologist and New Testament Scholar*. Baker Studies in Biblical Archaeology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), pp.18,19.
17. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary and Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, 1980), p.43.
18. Healings are too commonplace to need documentation. For a report on demonic activity see the article, "I See the King of Hell," by Harrison Forman in David V. Plymire, *High Adventure in Tibet* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1959, p.2-9. For an example of the multiplication of food, specifically vitamins, see Corrie Ten Boom, *The*

Hiding Place (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 1971), p.184. A portion of Corrie's experience of the multiplying vitamins is worth quoting in full: "And still, every time I tilted the little bottle, a drop appeared at the tip of the glass stopper. It just couldn't be! I held it up to the light, trying to see how much was left, but the dark brown glass was too thick to see to see through.

"There was a woman in the Bible," Betsie said, "whose oil jar was never empty." She turned to it in the Book of Kings, the story of a poor widow of Zarephath who gave Elijah a room in her home. The jar of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of Jehovah which he spoke by Elijah."

"Well — but — wonderful things happened all through the Bible. It was one thing to believe that such things were possible thousands of years ago, another to have it happen now, to us, this very day. And yet it happened, this day, and the next, and the next, until an awed little group of spectators stood around watching the drops fall onto the daily rations of bread."

19. John R.W. Stott, *The Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964), p.33,48-49,68.

20. Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), p.66.

21. James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Reexamination of the New Testament Teaching of the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today*, *Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series*, 15 (London; SCM Press Ltd, 1970), p.54; Stott, *Baptism and Fullness*, p.71.

22. Frank Farrell, "Outburst of Tongues: The New Penetration," *Christianity Today* (September 13, 1963), p.5.

23. A.M. Stibbs and J.I. Packer, *The Spirit Within You: The Church's Neglected Possession*, *Christian Foundations* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p.33; Leo Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.63ff.

24. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.63.

25. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.63.

26. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.64.

27. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.65,66.

28. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.63.

29. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.64.

30. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*, p.66.

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