

The motivation behind Archer's hermeneutical project

Bible | 26/11/2018 @ 15:00

In the previous article, I was answering a question on the difference between hermeneutical approaches of Craig Keener and Kenneth Archer. It was explained that while Keener is a practicing charismatic, his hermeneutical approach is leaning towards classical evangelicalism with its emphasis on the original meaning of biblical text. Archer, on the other hand, follows a different strand of philosophical hermeneutics that originates in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

Now to be sure, Gadamer and Ricoeur are exquisite and complex thinkers. It is not possible to summarize their work in just several paragraphs and still do justice to them both. It should also be pointed out that there are important differences between them and that they were not alone in that "literary turn" that was occurring in literary and biblical studies in the second half of 20th century. It was, however, important to mention them to demonstrate why did some Pentecostals (e.g. Archer) deem it adequate to build on Gadamer's and Ricoeur's work in their attempt to break free from evangelical ways of biblical interpretation.

What was then Archer's overall motivation?

I've concluded the previous article saying that Archer was not just trying to adopt Gadamer wholesale, but to devise a hermeneutic that would be genuinely Pentecostal. His "Spirit, Scripture, Community" model basically says: Grammatical-historical exegesis is fine, but it might ignore shared spiritual experience of Pentecostal community and the role of Spirit in illumination.

The difference between Archer's approach and grammatical historical approach is very clearly visible on the question of women in ministry. It is again extremely simplistic but basically correct to say that for many conservative evangelicals who employ historical approach this was a simple question. Women are not allowed to be in ministry, because Paul forbids that in several passages. But what if we have Pentecostal women with spiritual gifts of prophetic speech and word of wisdom (e.g. Aimee Semple-McPherson whatever one thinks of her was a good preacher and had some very bright moments in her ministry). Here the shared experience of the Spirit in community comes handy as an important exegetical factor. We may now say: Well, there are women in ministry clearly empowered by the Spirit. Therefore while we shall not deny Paul's instructions in the Word of God, we shall make such exegetical decisions that will deemphasize the universal power of those instructions. Instead, we shall emphasize biblical teaching on equality of all believers in the Spirit as the members of the body.

With speaking in tongues it was similar. The experience of speaking in tongues convinced many Pentecostals that what they are experiencing now is that what Christians experienced in Acts 2, 8, 10 & 19. But before that experience, before Azusa and Topeka, such interpretation was only theoretical and certainly not popular. Pentecostal predecessors in Wesleyan holiness movements did know "Spirit baptism" and some of them even distinguished between "sanctification" and "Spirit baptism", but no one would make that connection between Spirit baptism and tongues before it became a shared experience.

But is Archer not simply reader response critic?

The literary approach of Gadamer / Ricoeur might lead to reader response approach. But let me add several things concerning reader response approach.

(1) Firstly, one should distinguish **popular Pentecostal reader-response methods** from **academic postmodernism**.

The popular reader response approach is something that many Pentecostals naturally do. Everyone who loves the Bible but lacks basic training in Bible backgrounds will be constantly tempted to see in the text what is not there. Jacqueline Grey gives a number of good examples of these practices in her book *Three's a Crowd* (see the [book](#) and my [review](#)). I'm no fan of reader response approach. But sometimes I feel that untrained readers who really read with their hearts and through their

actual pains sometimes accidentally do grasp the text's real meaning. This is probably what one can stumble upon in emerging churches. Sometimes it's bad, but sometimes it at least has some merit in turning people's attention to the Bible.

Then there are **academic postmodern approaches** that are reader oriented, but often also influenced or guided by historical data. There are academicians, literary critics, critical theorists, postmoderns, who embrace this approach for some ideological reasons. The fuss around Marxism and the connected intellectual decay on US universities (and not just US, it's in Europe, too) is clearly present in biblical studies as well. You've got postcolonial readings of the Bible, queer readings, feminist readings, marxist readings, etc. These people should not be regarded as direct offspring of Gadamer / Ricoeur and that "literary turn" in philosophical hermeneutics. It is difficult to assess their contribution, because of the hate and bitterness that spreads all over their scholarship. Most often they are real haters. They just hate the so called "power structures" (for which they blame heterosexual white men :-)) and they intend to destroy them. However, apart from this stupid fuss, I've also seen a good feminist scholarship and I really like liberation readings. Mostly these readings begin with grammatical historical approach and then focus on those parts of the text that yield some results in favor of their agenda. Sometimes they are pushing their case too far. But they are often making a good point: Once you read the story in its historical setting, you must relate to it somehow. In other words, you must respond as a reader. But is that not something that evangelical preachers often practically do, just in a sensible fashion and without that postmodern hysteria? Of course, some postmodern readings are really crazy. A good book with examples of postmodern readings is [The Postmodern Bible](#) by George Aichele et al.

Perhaps in a sense there is a similarity between Archer's approach and these postmoderns. They both want to fuse horizons between history and the present. But whereas the postmoderns have their ideologies and agendas, Archer presupposes an unifying supernatural element within Pentecostal community. Of course, his agenda is then too, after all, an agenda. But it is different from the postmodern agendas.

(2) Secondly, I don't think that Archer would be particularly happy about popular reader response approaches. I would say that he would emphasize the need of some grounding in objectivity, e.g. in historical approaches at least as a basic guide of the interpretive process and the need of **community** of interpreters, not any number of individual interpretations or one spiritual guru who claims to utter the holy truth. I would say that he would still emphasize externality and objectivity of interpretation over against individual subjectivity. When the **Spirit** acts in the **community** and when the **community** decides, it is binding for the community. I would say that Archer would say something like this:

I don't like grammatical historical approach, because it just discovers historical meaning that is irrelevant for today. My approach to biblical hermeneutics is concerned with meaning-making. I make meanings, I don't just dig in the dirt like a biblical archaeologist. But unlike these postmoderns and reader response guys, I do think that some meanings are better than others. How do I tell which ones? Because I believe, as a good Pentecostal, that the **Spirit** firmly guides his **community** in proper interpretation of the **historically conditioned Word of God**.

This approach has its pros and cons. Its advantage clearly is that it acknowledges presence of the Spirit in the Church. It is radically anti-cessationist, meaning that it consistently doesn't buy into that "canon was formed, Spirit ceased to act" rhetoric, which is IMHO quite unwarranted. Its disadvantage is that it must rely on very firm common sense in the particular community. What if, for example, practicing homosexuals claimed to speak in tongues, prophesy and wield a gift of wisdom. Would we simply surrender just as we did with women's ministry? This, I contend, will be a huge issue for Pentecostals in the upcoming decades.

(3) Thirdly, I would say with a tongue in cheek that all the rigorous evangelical scholars are reader response critics on some level, because they arrive at their interpretive conclusions by making a number of decisions, some of which are more natural than others. Historical biblical scholarship has one major feature: It is an immense field of study, where 5 scholars wield 6 opinions. In order to arrive at a conclusion, e.g. whom did Paul really mean to silence in 1Cor 14:34f, one must filter dozens of plausible explanations and pick one that somehow fits his mental structures and/or preconceived opinions. Now there is a difference between a scholar making patient decisions and an emerging church dude blabbering about his feelings. I would rather hear the former than the latter. But on some level they are both making more or less intuitive decisions. (And the poor scholar who spent his lifetime learning biblical languages might eventually be proven wrong, so what is the point anyway? :-))

Good thing about the malign reader response approach is that it is not difficult to discern. If something clearly contradicts any sensible historical meaning of Scripture and only coheres with someone's personal agenda, it is probably a wrong and malign reader response reading. It usually doesn't take a PhD in biblical studies to see that. Bad thing about this is that it

seems that in some parts of the church it is increasingly difficult to blow the whistle on someone's interpretation. I don't know much about emerging church, but in my Central European context, this is the ache of many churches that are trying to be cool and seeker sensitive. People just don't care anymore what the Bible says. And if you do care, if you point fingers and have opinions, you're depicted as a hater who hinders church growth. It really takes a lot of wisdom and patience to be biblical and to teach Bible in this environment. I know, I know, there are stupid busybodies that forbid table games and chewing gums and child tattoos quoting the Bible, twice in every sentence. That is not what I want to do :-). I would just like laypeople to get back to the Word and really think about it, read it, practice it.

<https://selah.cz/bible/the-motivation-behind-archers-hermeneutical-project/>